
The Art of Comparison: Remarriage in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has been read many different ways. It has been read as either a response to or an imitation of both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. It has been read as a pseudo-biography of Branwell Brontë. It has been discussed as a feminist novel in which Brontë critiques the domestic ideology that subordinated women.¹ Critics who focus on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (hereafter *Tenant*) as domestic and social criticism often examine Helen's abusive first marriage as a subversion of the domestic ideal and then contrast Arthur Huntingdon with Gilbert Markham, Helen's second husband.² The presence of remarriage in the novel is significant and it has not been examined sufficiently as a social practice in relation to both Helen's talent as an artist and her "ownership" of her paintings. Marriage laws in nineteenth-century Britain restricted women's opportunities to obtain a divorce, to retain custody of children, and to keep all of their property after marriage. Wives like Helen had only limited opportunity under common law to own their property, and this adversely affects Helen's ownership of her artwork and her self-definition as an artist. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Brontë constructs remarriage as a comparative and competitive practice that restricts Helen's rights and talents. Helen's artistic ability plays a pivotal role in her relationships with both Gilbert and Arthur. Her alternating freedom to paint and inability to do so on her own terms not only complicate Helen's definition as wife, widow, and artist, but also enable Brontë to criticize the domestic sphere as established by marriage and re-established with remarriage.

When Brontë introduces readers to her young and unmarried heroine by means of Helen's journal, Helen is already defining herself as an artist. She is with her aunt and uncle at Staningley, her head a-whirl with the social scene of London, and she finds solace in her drawings. She writes that her "head is so haunted with the recollections of the last few weeks that I cannot attend to them. My drawing suits me best, for I can draw and think at the same time; and if my productions cannot now be seen by any one but myself and those who do not care about them, they, possibly, may be, hereafter" (123). Importantly, the first time Helen writes

of herself it is in connection with her art. Moreover, she anticipates an audience for this artwork, which foreshadows her later need to sell her works. Admittedly, the audience she alludes to here is the owner of the “one face I am always trying to paint or to sketch” (123): Arthur Huntingdon.

The role Helen’s artwork plays in her courtship with Arthur has been discussed in a number of ways. Many of these discussions place Helen’s paintings within the larger framework of Brontë’s view of art as a representation of truth and the struggle to conceal the truth, such as Helen’s true feelings and later her true location.³ For instance, in keeping with the Victorian view that art reveals individual emotions⁴ and the idea that Brontë uses art to express truth, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyze Helen’s art as a means by which her “guilt about the impropriety of self-expression has caused her to efface her private drawings just as it has led her to efface herself” (81). Both Helen’s early portraits of Arthur and her nature scenes reveal her private and true feelings for him, feelings that will lead her to overlook his true character and lose herself to marriage.⁵

Nevertheless, in addition to revealing Helen’s true desires, the self-expression of her artwork also defines her as an artist. That she puts so much of herself into her paintings and drawings attests to this self-definition. Her self-definition as an artist should not be overlooked by focusing on the paintings only as a courtship device or an emotional outlet. For instance, Helen devotes considerable space in her journal to describing a painting that Arthur interprets as an expression of her love for him. It depicts loving turtledoves as viewed by a young girl, and is set against a woody background. While it may indeed depict Helen’s emotional state, she also uses it to position herself as a painter, for she writes, “I wanted to finish the picture. It was one I had taken great pains with, and I intended it to be my master-piece” (150). Helen considers herself an artist with an *oeuvre* in which she will have a masterpiece. Furthermore, even Arthur, while appraising her work, acknowledges this ability, calling her “the artist” (151).

After her marriage to Arthur, however, Helen has less time for painting as she now manages the household at Grassdale Manor. She notes that “the reading and answering of my letters, and the direction of household concerns afforded me ample employment for the morning; after lunch, I got my drawing, and from dinner till bedtime, I read” (200). Whereas before her marriage, longer journal passages were devoted to describing her paintings or to her exchanges with Arthur over a painting, now a short phrase—“I got my drawing”—suffices. Soon, their son, little Arthur, is born and a brief phrase notes that “another year is gone” (232). Once she has assumed the role of wife, Helen rarely refers to herself as an artist. Very few references to Helen’s artistry adorn her journal, other than the briefest mention of

“my books and pencil” (235), until she concocts her plan to sell her artwork in order to finance her escape. Up to that point, her journal details her crumbling marriage and her new responsibilities as a mother and housekeeper. She reads, she visits the poor, she interacts with her guests, but there are no longer any developed references to her as an artist. Helen has embraced the nineteenth-century ideal wherein the wife takes on the responsibilities for running a household and nurturing others—the children, the poor, the husband—rather than herself. As Elizabeth Langland notes, this domestic ideal “endorsed public management behind a façade of private retirement” (*Nobody's Angels* 63), keeping the wife occupied with duties that left little time for more leisurely activities like painting.

As a wife, Helen also comes to recognize her husband's true character as a violent and reckless man who holds most people in contempt. Arthur's increasing verbal abuse of her, his wild parties with no consideration for her feelings, his excessive drinking, and his blatant extra-marital affair are now the subjects for Helen's journal. Not only are Helen's emotions repressed with her unhappy marriage, but also her talents, for she has less time to devote to them. Her roles as wife, mother, and household manager do not readily accommodate her self-definition as artist. Brontë thus constructs marriage as a practice that excludes or dominates other forms of expression.

As this domestic figure, Helen seemingly embodies the accepted social role for middle-class white women in nineteenth-century Great Britain at the expense of her role as artist. Wives, or “domestic angels,” were held to be the biologically weaker sex yet paragons of moral virtue and duty.⁶ So, although relegated to the domestic sphere, women's role as moral guardians typically gave wives a measure of power in this sphere. As Nancy Armstrong notes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, wives were not passive angels in the house: they were actively making order out of chaos, overseeing a household, and practicing frugal domestic economy (73). In *Tenant*, however, despite the domestic discourse that surrounds their courtship, in marriage Helen lacks this domestic authority with Arthur. She has no power to pursue her own art, an obvious variation of Arthur's name. Admittedly, during courtship and early in the marriage Arthur uses domestic language, calling Helen his “angel monitress” (188) and declaring her influence over him; however, his later horrific treatment of Helen undermines this ideal, showing Helen's lack of power over her own pursuits and establishing a basis of comparison between Arthur and Gilbert. This comparison lets Brontë demonstrate how the domestic sphere and its concerns can stifle artistic abilities as she brings in two additional complications: a marriage to an abusive husband and a possible second marriage. Helen's role as an artist and her artwork also will figure prominently in

her second courtship, affecting a comparison between marriage and remarriage, first and second husband.

Brontë's discussion of Helen's artwork facilitates the comparison of marriage and remarriage (which unfolds as Gilbert courts the already-married-not-quite-widowed Helen Huntingdon/Graham) and sets up a triangle of power relations between Gilbert, Helen, and Arthur. When Gilbert intrudes into Helen's life after her escape to Wildfell Hall, comparisons naturally emerge between him and Arthur. For example, Gilbert's notice of Helen's artistic talent as well as her paintings reminds Helen, and Brontë's readers, of her first husband and the restrictions on her artistic freedom that she endured as a wife. On one occasion, Gilbert rummages through Helen's paintings and finds one of Arthur. During Arthur's courtship of Helen he too snatched up a drawing of himself and later rifled through her works looking for others. Helen protested, telling Arthur, "I *insist* upon having that back! It is mine, and you have no *right* to take it" (152). Receiving the portrait back, she destroyed it, causing Arthur to sulk and to flirt with Annabella Wilmont. The disagreement ended with Helen and Arthur's reconciliation and their engagement.

In asserting her right to possess and destroy the drawing, Helen exerted a measure of control over her art with Arthur. In their reconciliation, and in their ensuing engagement, Arthur seemingly allows Helen to negotiate for this control, both as an artist and as his future wife. During this phase of their relationship, legally Helen may claim her paintings as her own property. Indeed, Arthur does return the drawing to her. After her marriage, however, such personal property becomes Arthur's. As Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon explains, under the law, "what was her personal property before marriage, such as money in hand, money at the bank, jewels, household goods, clothes, &c., becomes absolutely her husband's, and he may assign or dispose of them at his pleasure" (119). Arthur's possession of Helen's paintings after marriage is now sanctioned by the common law regarding marital property of which Bodichon speaks. As Lee Holcombe more emphatically states when commenting on this common law practice of *feme covert*, "married women controlled no property, their husbands exercising control instead" which reduced wives to "a subordinate and dependent legal status, deprived of the legal rights and responsibilities of men and unmarried women" (4). Helen does not have the same recourse as an artist as she did prior to marriage. Although equity provisions exist whereby Helen could establish "separate property" in trust for her use, clearly no such trust is in place for Helen.⁷ These marital laws later enable Arthur to destroy Helen's paintings, an ironic echo of her destruction of the drawing. Rather than affirming Helen's ownership and her artistry, Arthur's destruction denies her

artistic talent, her ownership of her artwork, and her earnings from it, all while asserting his control.

Gilbert's uninvited handling of Helen's paintings recalls these exchanges between Arthur and Helen, and this echo denounces Gilbert's actions as those of a potentially controlling husband. As suitors, neither Arthur nor Gilbert has the legal right to handle or possess Helen's paintings that they will have as husbands. Gilbert's presumptuous decision to do so emphasizes the tenuous position Helen occupies as a woman artist and warns against remarriage where such disregard for her ownership will be, once again, legal. Brontë hints that remarriage to Gilbert may not hold any greater promise for Helen's self-definition and freedom as an artist than did her first marriage.

As a result, the paintings help Brontë to develop the competition and comparison that define remarriage as a social construct. Gilbert's uninvited handling of the portrait closely parallels Arthur's, constructing a comparative triangle between Gilbert, Arthur, and Helen. René Girard discusses such a model of power between two lovers and an objectified beloved in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. His triangular model suggests that power relations exist not just between the beloved and each of the lovers, but also between the two rivals (7). Girard's model can be adapted to explore the competition and comparison involved with remarriage, for, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, a triangular model can be a "sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment" (27). In *Tenant*, Helen negotiates with her suitors in an attempt to define herself as an artist with rights to both her talent and her earnings, while Gilbert must negotiate to define himself as an acceptable second husband amid comparisons to and contrasts with Arthur. For example, Gilbert's response to Helen's request to do nothing more with the portrait differs significantly from Arthur's: he does sulk, but when Helen admonishes him to "let not the sun go down upon your wrath, Mr. Markham" (45), he complies. Helen must evaluate how Gilbert will esteem her and her control of her artwork. His response favorably contrasts with Arthur's, contextualizing Gilbert and Helen's relationship with Arthur and Helen's courtship and marriage.

While the social context for nineteenth-century courtship and marriage, like Helen and Arthur's, can be established through a consideration of laws and other nonliterary texts such as marriage manuals, few sources discuss remarriage specifically. The nineteenth-century social practice of remarriage is instead defined in the shadows of the previous marriage, much as Helen's remarriage to Gilbert will be. This comparative and competitive element of remarriage surfaces in the

few marriage manuals that actually discuss the practice, including William A. Alcott's *The Moral Philosophy of Courtship and Marriage*. In his chapter titled "Are Second Marriages Desirable?" Alcott declares that "in defending second marriages . . . it was by no means my intention to encourage the practice extensively, but only on occasions, as a matter of duty" (72). Like Juan Luis Vives centuries before, Alcott alludes to Saint Paul on the importance of eschewing selfish motives such as love and wealth in order to do one's duty to God and any parentless children. The need to repair and to restructure a fractured domestic sphere, one lacking either parent but particularly the mother, is the paramount objective of remarriage—not love. Remarriage emphasizes the loss of the previous wedded and domestic state, making manifest the limits to this domestic ideal: it can be undermined by death, so is not as absolute as it may seem. Nevertheless, remarriage attempts to reconstruct the domestic sphere and its responsibilities.

For Helen, then, remarriage does not necessarily represent an opportunity to experience love anew, but rather the possibility of losing the freedom to own and practice her art that she has reclaimed since leaving Grassdale Manor. In turn, this makes Gilbert's quest to marry Helen more competitive in that he must not only win her heart, but also do battle with the loss of legal authority and ownership that remarriage will bring her.

When Gilbert and Helen first meet she has not left the domestic sphere in the conventional way, for she is an escaped wife rather than an actual widow. As an escaped wife, Helen redefines herself as a widow in several ways that allow her to regain the control of her art, and herself, which she lost in marriage. Most notably, her choice of "widow" circumvents some of the common laws obstructing wives' rights: a widow, if permitted by her husband's will, can control her own personal property, such as her paintings; a widow may support her underage children and act as the guardian of their inheritance; a widow is free from the shackles of an oppressive husband without obtaining the impossible divorce.⁸ As Holcombe explains, when it comes to real property, such as land, "if a wife survived her husband, her real property remained hers legally and it reverted to her control absolutely" (21). In other words, once widowed, Helen's later inheritance of her uncle's estate will be hers to do with what she will. Moreover, although personal property, such as her artwork, is absolutely the husband's within the marriage, a widow can reclaim these possessions if it does not run contrary to the husband's will (Holcombe 23-24).

Brontë emphasizes the distinct legal rights of widows opposed to wives with Helen's new role as widow. Helen's construction of herself as a widow—"she is in mourning—not widow's weeds, but slightish mourning"(12)—allows her, with-

out ever saying a word, to use such cultural signifiers of clothing and child to gain a position with more recognized authority from which to paint and sell her paintings than she had as a wife. Little Arthur helps his mother construct herself as a widow, for it is unthinkable and would be unconscionable to believe Helen to be an unwed mother, a divorcee, or a fugitive. After all, the role of fugitive mother is a dangerous one, for “if a mother kept her children from their father, he could enforce his right to possession of them . . . in a court of common law, which would take no account of the fact that the father’s character was bad and the mother’s unblemished” (Holcombe 33). Once Helen has escaped to Wildfell Hall, no one questions her rights, as a “widow,” to her child, *Arthur*, or to her art.

As self-defined widow and artist, Helen now paints for far more utilitarian purposes than self-expression of inner emotions, as the titles for her paintings suggest. She paints to survive. JoAnna Stephens Mink sees Helen’s artistry as part of her emergence as a literary hero, using her paintings in a “non-feminine” way—to earn money (11). This shift in the purpose of Helen’s art underscores its relation to remarriage. Helen is able to pursue her painting because she has defined herself as an independent woman, a widow, one who may acceptably engage in earning wages, especially to support a child. Melinda Maunsell declares that “Helen Huntingdon is both revealed and concealed by her artistic hand; providing her with an acceptable means of expression within her social construction, the artist’s hand also offers a form of independence, a possibility of earning a living, in a period when a woman had virtually no independent power base in any sphere” (48). As Mink notes, “Only after success in supporting herself and her son does she enter into a happy marriage with Markham” (14-15).⁹ It should also be said that only after defining herself as a widow, and thus reclaiming herself as an artist before her future husband, does she remarry, once again legally relinquishing her artistic earnings and other property.

As an ersatz widow, Helen has the freedom to become a wage-earning artist. She can pursue an occupation outside the domestic sphere because she is no longer socially defined as a wife working exclusively in the home. Her position as artistic widow, though, invites Gilbert’s interest since she has also constructed herself as eligible for remarriage, for re-entry into the domestic world. As an interested suitor, Gilbert continues to admire Helen’s artistry, and his observations draw attention to Helen and her questionable agency to paint and sell art as her own. When Gilbert asks “why have you called it Fernley Manor, Cumberland, instead of Wildfell Hall, —shire?” (43), Helen can only reply with “desperate frankness” that “I have friends—acquaintances at least—in the world, from whom I desire my present abode to be concealed” (43). Her paintings reveal the truth of Helen’s situ-

ation even as she attempts to conceal it: just as her early sketch let Arthur know of her love, so too the painting of Wildfell Hall, deceptively labeled “Fernley Manor,” attests to her desperate role as widow. While this exchange illustrates Brontë’s use of art to reveal and conceal, it also develops her critique of women’s position in society by bringing remarriage into consideration. Gilbert’s question and Helen’s desperate answer emphasize her precarious marital situation as a wife on the run from one man and a “widow” drawing the attention of a second suitor. Thus, the truth of Helen’s artwork reveals more than her inner desires; it also complicates her constructed roles as a widow and artist, belying her true position as an escaped wife. Through the complications of Helen’s artistic talent, and her resulting paintings, Brontë points out the limits of the domestic ideal with its confining roles for women.

Helen’s artwork frames the discursive definition of her marital role as “wife” and sets up additional comparisons between Arthur and Gilbert that construct remarriage practice in the novel. In Helen’s first marriage, she returns to her artistic work as a means of exerting some agency in her oppressive marriage: she sells the paintings to fund her escape. She writes in her journal that she would “find out a picture dealer in some distant town; then, through her [Rachel’s] means, I would privately sell what pictures I had on hand that would do for such a purpose, and some of those I should thereafter paint” (337). Helen reclaims her artistic talent as her own, distinct from her husband’s possession of her art, and of her. Common law, however, gives Arthur the legal right to destroy the paintings and to take her money upon discovering her scheme. In fact, Helen’s attempt to dispose of what is legally Arthur’s property could be considered fraud, prompting Helen to ask him “have I attempted to defraud you?” (351).¹⁰ He tells her, “you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself by the labour of your hands” (351). In thwarting her attempt, Arthur now denies her the definition of artist and redefines her as a subordinate and dependent wife.

In effect, he reduces her from wife to a prisoner in her own home, telling her that “you’ll find nothing gone but your money, and the jewels—and a few little trifles I thought it advisable to take into my own possession” (351). Elsewhere, Helen states, “I am tired out with his injustice. . . . I am no angel, and my corruption rises against it” (256). She looks “forward to a speedy emancipation” (347). This language, like her artistry itself, rejects the “angel” ideal of the domestic sphere and its powerless position for Helen as a wife. Arthur’s ultimate construction of her as dependent wife motivates Helen to reclaim herself as an artist by posing as

a widow. Thus, Brontë illustrates how marriage and common law regarding marital property restrict women's agency, particularly with regard to their talents.

Remarriage, too, has the potential to re-establish not a domestic ideal but this restrictive redefinition of widow as wife rather than artist. Just as Helen's artistry and paintings enabled her to challenge her position as dependent wife, so too they continue to affect the growing attraction between her and Gilbert, complicating her position as escaped wife posing as a widow. On the one hand, comparisons between Gilbert and Arthur involving the paintings make Gilbert and remarriage less than desirable. As mentioned above, by asking about her title of "Fernley Manor," Gilbert unwittingly alludes to the reality of Helen's status as escaped wife and her fraud. This allusion reinforces a connection between Gilbert and Arthur, for both use the paintings as part of their courtship. On the other hand, remarriage for Helen at this juncture is also undesirable because it is legally impossible. Gilbert's attentions, his interest in convincing her to remarry, threaten to expose the fragile image of "widow" that Helen has drawn for herself.

Gilbert, for his part, realizes Helen is resistant to his attentions, but, like Arthur, dismisses her feelings: "I attributed it, not so much to any dislike of my person, as to some absolute resolution against a second marriage formed prior to the time of our acquaintance, whether from excess of affection for her late husband, or because she had had enough of him and the matrimonial state together" (67). As we know, and as Gilbert learns from Helen's journal, aside from the fact that she is still married, her distaste for remarriage is due not to love for Arthur, but due to his horrible treatment of her. Yet Brontë has Helen remarry, seemingly for love. Gilbert and Helen's reconciliation at Staningley Hall after Arthur's death is fraught with emotion. Their exchange over the rose, which Helen must explain "was an emblem of my heart" (466), gives rise to emotions of joy and fervent desire in both Helen and Gilbert. This is not, however, an unproblematic return to the domestic ideal.

For one thing, Gilbert is now more aware of the comparisons between himself and Arthur, and he feels a new sense of competition as well. He hesitates, yet again, with his offer of marriage. Despite the love he feels for Helen, and that he hopes she feels for him, the social practice of remarriage for duty stops him, for he must consider Helen's duty to her son, and, to a lesser extent, to her aunt. What is Helen's duty as a widow to her son and to her other relatives? Is it to remarry and provide the typical domestic scene, or is it to guard over her son's interests and her newly acquired property by not remarrying and subjecting herself to a new husband and his control? Arthur's death has left Helen wealthy, and her *real* status as a *bonafide* widow is far from the penury she endured when posing as one at

Wildfell Hall. With a wealthy widow's rights to property and children under the law, Helen is the guardian for her son's estate, has inherited her uncle's estate, and may claim one-third of Arthur's for herself.¹¹ Given this notable contrast in Helen's social station, Gilbert worries he will appear to be a gold-digger. After all, with the legal rights granted by her husband's death, Helen might not readily relinquish the power and independence of widowhood in order to remarry and resume a legally subordinate position as a wife.

In addition to worrying about the economic and legal aspects of Helen's remarriage, Gilbert has also considered the emotional aspect. As noted above, before reading her journal, he wondered about her excess love for her first husband; at Staningley he hesitates so much that Helen must propose to him. Contextualizing the emotional insecurity involved with nineteenth-century remarriages proves difficult, for not many marriage manuals discuss remarriage at all, much less the emotional side of it. As acknowledged in *Marriage and Remarriage in Populations of the Past*, "there are special difficulties in the study of remarriage" (Sogner and Dupaquier 2). With direct consideration of remarriage so limited in nineteenth-century marriage manuals and other nonliterary texts, contemporary accounts of remarriage, with a greater focus on emotion, give us a sense of the issues and the vocabulary with which to further approach the practice. For instance, in a more modern account of remarriage, Robert DiGiulio lists six "ghosts" which haunt the new spouse in remarriage, resulting in this new spouse having "fears of comparing unfavorably" (143). These "remarriage ghosts" contextualize the second marriage in terms of the first. This late twentieth-century concept certainly seems present in this nineteenth-century novel, underpinning Gilbert's worry that he "was already forgotten," or at least that all that Helen had seen and suffered "must eventually efface from her mind all traces of her passing love for me" (433). Gilbert also questions his worthiness to be Helen's new husband because he wished for Arthur's death. He berates himself for such a wish, declaring, "it almost seemed as if I had brought them [Helen's trials] upon her myself, by my own secret desires; and whether I looked at her husband's suffering or her own, it seemed almost like a judgment upon myself for having cherished such a wish" (430-431). Gilbert's doubts resonate with the more modern accounts of the emotions surrounding remarriage explored in twentieth-century texts. For instance, Jessie Bernard, like Gilbert, observes that one of the difficulties in remarriage after a widowhood is "that the partner's first marriage was not terminated voluntarily" (199).¹² Gilbert, despite Arthur's horrid behavior, worries, and his language reveals the competition and conflict inherent in remarriage with its legal, social, and emotional implications.

It is well Gilbert does worry, for Helen's remarriage raises another problematic issue, aside from the competition and comparison associated with the practice. The legal effect of remarriage on Helen's newly acquired wealth and ownership of property, including her artwork, is significant. Upon a widow's remarriage, unless her fortune is in trust for her or her children, the new husband claims it all as custodian for his wife's property. Gilbert, however, tells Helen to "do what you will with your own" (469). A similar and more famous disavowal of property rights is J.S. Mill's renunciation of his rights to control Harriet Taylor and her property:

I declare it to be my will and intention . . . that she retains in all respects whatever the same absolute freedom of action and disposal of herself and of all that does or may at any time belong to her, as if no such marriage had taken place; and I absolutely disclaim and repudiate all pretension to have acquired any rights whatever by virtue of such marriage. (124)

Gilbert may not squander Helen's wealth as Arthur did, but he is not so magnanimous as Mill. Even in cases of love, wealthy widows make desirable brides because they and their property now belong to the new husband.¹³ Gilbert's language is replete with the possessives Arthur also used when claiming both Helen as his "angel monitress" and her paintings as his own. Gilbert calls her "My darling angel—my *own* Helen" (467) and exclaims that "then you will be mine" (467). This language echoes Arthur's, undercutting what might seem like Brontë's discursive endorsement of traditional domestic roles. If Gilbert's language mimics Arthur's, will his behavior be any different?

In reassuring Helen that he has no designs on her property, Gilbert states, "I am willing to make any reparation in my power" (470). That Helen must make a petition, that Gilbert already has power to grant it (despite his lower social status in terms of rank and fortune), and that Aunt Maxwell, too, must appeal to him for a home, though Staningley Hall was once her husband's estate—all these factors point out the restrictions placed on widows when remarrying, an action that reinscribes limits on the widow within the new domestic sphere. A widow relinquishes control of her property and newfound legal status when remarrying. There is no overt evidence from these passages that, despite Gilbert's offer, Helen establishes provisions for separate property for herself in trust. Therefore, under common law, Helen's paintings are no longer her own. Will she also lose her artistic freedom now that she has given up ownership of her paintings as a wife once more?

Under common law, Helen's paintings are now Gilbert's. Like Arthur, he may now rifle through them as he wants without being labeled impertinent. He might now, like Arthur, control Helen's access to her artwork. Gilbert might step into this role, completing the comparison between himself and Arthur; however, we

are given no clear sense of how much Gilbert is like Arthur in action or in temperament as his long letter to Halford quickly comes to a close. It seems, then, that Brontë abandons her social criticism by not giving a more complete picture of Helen's second marriage to her readers. As has been suggested by Langland, among others, Brontë contains her social criticism at the end of the novel, for she is telling "the woman's story . . . within and authorized by a respectable man's narrative" ("The Voicing of Feminine Desire" 111).¹⁴ In other words, Brontë's criticism of the domestic ideal and her implicit support for legal change—including divorce—ran contrary to more conventional views, as indicated by both her own preface to the second edition and her sister's denunciation of the novel. In order to offer this social attack to a less than receptive audience, Brontë, it has been said, veils it, framing Helen's narrative within Gilbert's letter to Halford.

Nevertheless, despite this structural resolution, the abrupt conclusion of *Tenant* only superficially resolves the criticism of remarriage and its effects on women's talents and ambitions. First, Gilbert ends by mentioning Halford and Rose's impending visit: "the time of your annual visit draws nigh, when you must leave your dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating relaxation and social retirement with us" (471). While one assumes that this visit is not the ordeal for Helen as were Arthur's soirees, it does cast Helen, once again, into the role of hostess. During her marriage to Arthur, letter-writing and other duties kept her from her painting. Hosting guests will surely do the same in this second marriage as it did in her first.

Furthermore, little Arthur has not been the only child requiring Helen's attention during her years of marriage to Gilbert, for Gilbert has written Halford that they are blessed "in the promising young scions that are growing up about us" (471). With little Arthur now married to Helen Hattersley (presenting us with hope for a better marriage of a Helen and an Arthur than the first), it is reasonable to conclude these "scions" are Helen and Gilbert's children. When little Arthur was born, Helen, in one sentence, noted the passage of an entire year in her journal. Now that Helen has more than one small child to look after, it seems safe to conclude that her role as an artist has been subsumed, even in happy circumstances, by her role as wife and mother. We, as readers, cannot know for certain, since Gilbert's account of Helen relates only to him and the children rather than any pursuits she may have in her own right. This is *his* letter and he is a self-centered character. But the skimming over of the last twenty years is troubling, for while it tells us little of Helen's life, it also does little to resolve concerns over the previously mentioned comparison between Gilbert and Arthur: does Gilbert's behavior, like his language, duplicate Arthur's violent control of Helen? Remar-

riage re-establishes Helen in the domestic role as wife, but has she married a second husband who will deliberately deprive her of opportunities to paint?

Throughout the novel, Gilbert, like Arthur, has expressed impatience and exasperation—with his family, with Eliza Millward, and, most notably, with Helen's brother, Frederick Lawrence. When Gilbert suspected that Lawrence was Helen's suitor, out of indignation and out of a sense of jealous competition, he struck Lawrence a vicious blow. Gilbert himself writes of it, saying,

impelled by some fiend at my elbow, I had seized my whip by the small end, and—swift and sudden as a flash of lightning—brought the other down upon his head. It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead. (109)

Not knowing whether or not he has killed Lawrence, Gilbert, by his own account, leaves him to "his fate" (109).

Even if viewing Gilbert's actions as ones in Helen's interest and motivated by love, we cannot escape the fact that the description of his violence here rivals any of Arthur's exploits. With the abrupt end to the narrative, this comparison between Arthur and Gilbert remains unresolved, connecting the two husbands in yet another manner. Since Lawrence and Gilbert agree to keep this encounter from Helen, she unwittingly remarries a man with a capacity for violence not unlike her first husband's. Gilbert's violent behavior thus problematizes the new domestic sphere established at the end of the novel, reminding the reader of the violence at Grassdale Manor. His attack on Helen's brother creates a secret bond between Gilbert and Lawrence, and later Gilbert and Halford which effectively excludes Helen (and, for that matter, Rose) from such intimacy. While this comparison is not to say that Gilbert is violent toward Helen, or will keep her from her pursuits, Brontë does ascribe the propensity to his character. In a sense, Brontë's manipulation of these secret bonds emphasizes the patriarchal power that operates in both of Helen's marriages, and serves as another indication that Helen and Gilbert take on traditional roles, a role that for Helen would leave little time for painting.

The language which ends Gilbert's letter, and the novel, may re-establish the domestic sphere, but Brontë continues to challenge the idealism of this model. The lack of mention of Helen's art, abandoned to other pursuits these past twenty years, and Gilbert's questionable character paint another grim picture regarding the fulfillment of women's artistic talents, even in remarriages for love. As mentioned above, Brontë frames her social critique with Gilbert's letter. To "frame," however, means not just to design or put into words but, more literally, to enclose an object—such as a painting—within a structure so as to support that object.

With her narrative maneuverings, Brontë frames Helen's paintings as well as her own social criticism of marriage, remarriage, and the domestic ideal in the nineteenth century. The domestic realm, whether established with marriage or re-established in remarriage, does not support women's self-definition as artists nor does it provide a structured setting for the unfettered expression of their talents. In addition to considering Helen's paintings as a revelation of her inner state or as representative of an artistic shift from aesthetic to utilitarian purposes, we should frame both her paintings and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as works that call for more support of married and remarried women's legal rights and artistic opportunities in nineteenth-century Britain. ✨

Notes

¹ See, among others, Gordon; Langland, *Anne Brontë*; Gérin; and Elizabeth Hollis Berry. Also see Berg; Laura Berry; Jacobs; Frawley; Chitham, *A Life of Anne Brontë*; Shires; O'Toole; and Carnell.

² For example, Juliet McMaster favorably compares Helen's second husband to her first by asserting that "the difference between Gilbert and Arthur is that Gilbert can recognize her responses and is willing to adapt himself" (364).

³ See, among others, Chitham, "Religion, Nature and Art in the work of Anne Brontë"; Langland, "The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*"; and Alexander and Sellars.

⁴ See Altick 282.

⁵ See Berg, who concludes that Brontë expresses "distrust if not actual scorn for the type of self-expressive art" (15) lauded in *Jane Eyre*, and that this self-expression leads to Helen's unhappy marriage.

⁶ As Patmore's domestic epic of that title attests, "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure" (111). For more information on the domestic angel, see Langland, *Nobody's Angels*; and Armstrong.

⁷ For more information see Holcombe 39.

⁸ See Helsing, Sheets, and Veeder. See also Hammerton, and Wolfram.

⁹ Inga-Stina Ewbank interprets the novel as feminist in this obvious sense (84).

¹⁰ It should be noted that equity laws allowed married women to freely dispose of their contractually established separate property but not until 1881, well after the timeline of Brontë's novel. For more information, see Holcombe 42-43. For more information on legal fraud, see Holcombe 18.

¹¹ Holcombe notes that historically, in Britain, widows could receive “free-bench rights,” or a life interest in one-third of her husband’s lands at the time of his death, a considerable reduction of revenue in some instances (20-23).

¹² For more information see also Gentry, Rosenman, and Shulman; Kohn and Kohn; and Lopata.

¹³ See Macfarlane, and Smith.

¹⁴ See Jacobs, Gordon, and O’Toole. See also Kostka.

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