

Actions Louder than Words: Reading Narrative Silence as Literary Creation in the Brontës

Sabrina Aguzzi

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

August 2018

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to interrogate how women's silences in Victorian literature, and in the Brontë canon more specifically, are calculated to facilitate female expression through diverse modes of creative and expository narrative. As a response to second-wave feminist scholarship and its emphasis on female silence as oppressive, this thesis considers the role of metafiction in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), in order to refocus attention from their heroines' subdued dialogue to more forceful, and often covert, forms of narrative control. Each chapter centers on a separate heroine, spanning the works' mid-century publication dates (1847-1848), in chronological order. The first chapter juxtaposes *Jane Eyre* as a largely silent character in volumes I and II, against her position as narrator, pseudo-author, and inevitably, editor, in the creation and publication of her autobiography – roles that develop in the third volume. Chapter 2 centres on Catherine Earnshaw's narrative authority through the haunting, as well as enchanting effect of her journal in *Wuthering Heights*. The third and final chapter then investigates Helen Graham's censorial command over her life story as a counter-narrative, opposite the community's gossip, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Ultimately, this project examines the protagonists' interactions with books, letters, and journals and the way that those actions capitalize on the (often understated) power of silence in order to incorporate gendered perspectives and social criticisms into the mid-century novel, and by extension, the greater public's consciousness.

Le but de cette étude est de comprendre le silence des femmes victoriennes, particulièrement dans le canon des Brontës, non comme obstacle, mais bien comme élément calculé pour faciliter l'expression féminine. Afin de répondre aux préoccupations soulevés par la deuxième vague féministe quant à la dimension oppressive du silence, le rôle de la métafiction sera considéré dans les livres suivants – *Jane Eyre* (1847), de Charlotte Brontë; *Wuthering Heights* (1847), de Emily Brontë; et *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), d'Anne Brontë – ce qui permettra de valoriser le contrôle narratif exercé subtilement par leurs héroïnes, en dépit de leur silences qui témoigneraient d'une subjugation oppressive. Chaque chapitre se concentre sur une héroïne différente dans chacune des oeuvres, selon l'ordre chronologique de leurs dates de parutions, entre 1847-1848. Dans le premier chapitre, le silence du personnage de *Jane Eyre* dans les volumes I et II est juxtaposé au rôle qu'elle développe dans le troisième volume, en tant que narratrice, auteure, et éditrice de son autobiographie. Le deuxième chapitre met en évidence l'autorité narrative de Catherine Earnshaw par le biais de son journal enchanteur dans *Wuthering Heights*. Le troisième et dernier chapitre se penche sur la commande censoriale que dispose Helen Graham dans *The Tenant of Wildfell*, pour opposer les rumeurs de la communauté quant au récit de sa vie. Ultimement, ce projet examine la manière que les protagonistes capitalisent sur le pouvoir mal compris du silence en se servant de livres, de lettres et de journaux, pour incorporer des perspectives féminines et des critiques sociales dans le roman victorien ainsi que par extension, dans la conscience du public.

Acknowledgements

This thesis project would not have been possible without the supervision of Professor Tabitha Sparks, whose patience, persistence, and constant support inspired my own hard work – even while on separate continents. Without her expertise on Victorianism, as well as her compelling lectures (especially over the last five years of my academic career), I most likely would not have become the first person in my family to pursue graduate studies. I am eternally indebted to her mentorship, which in turn, fueled my passion for writing.

I also wish to thank the McGill English Department for the Mary Keenan Scholarship and additional research funding, along with Professor Robert Lecker for hiring (and re-hiring) me as a research assistant throughout graduate school. It is crucial that I acknowledge the financial support and research experience offered to me during my time at McGill, both of which have enabled me to complete my personal project.

In addition, I want to thank my parents for doing the absolute most to provide me with such a stellar education; my family and friends for withstanding my occasional absences and still offering me their comfort. Lastly, I extend my gratitude to my best friend and partner in all ventures, Michael Ceccato, for not only listening to my obsessive chatter about the Brontës and proof-reading my many drafts, but for his kind encouragement, always.

In a few words, I dedicate this thesis to the female writers who have inspired me to pick up the pen: those who have worked silently, secretly, as well as those who, in Elena Ferrante's words, have begun to write 'without ellipses.'¹

¹ ie. Ferrante's "Even When Dialogue Imposes an Ellipses, I Avoid It" (2018) in *The Guardian*.

Introduction

For generations, feminist criticism of Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), Emily Brontë (1818-1848), and Anne Brontë (1820-1849) has focused on a conventionalized study of Victorian women's oppression. In "'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall': Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender" (1990), Carol A. Senf epitomizes this tradition by disclosing the various forms of abuse by which Victorian men overpower and silence women within the communities, social spheres, and domestic spaces of the Brontë novels.² Responding to late twentieth-century (second-wave) feminist scholarship, this project illustrates the ways in which heroines in *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) contest their restricted dialogue and alleged "inability to assert [their] own values" (Senf 453) through diverse modes of creative and expository narrative. While the Brontës' portrayal and positioning of female characters addresses the controlled and heavily scrutinized roles of women in Victorian England, the three novelists ultimately, and often subtly, redirect their heroines' vulnerable representations to express forms of creative agency.

This reassessment of the Brontë canon primarily challenges the reading of silence as submissive and reconfigures the female protagonists' limited verbal expression as secondary to their authorial creation and the editorial control they wield over their narratives. In particular, the heroines in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* participate in the narration of their stories to compensate and even substitute for articulate social protest, contrary to the internalization of the period's constrictive gender politics that many critics describe.³ For instance, all three novels incorporate metafictional techniques, such as complex framing devices

² See Senf, "Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender," *College English* 52.4 (1990): 446-456.

³ Refer to Chapters 7 and 11 in *The Brontës* (2002) ed. Patricia Ingham, for Sharon Marcus's "The Profession of the Author" and L.M. Jacobs's "Gender and Layered Narrative."

informed by the heroines' own compositions, as mediums that allow them to exert control over their respective narratives and redirect expression from verbal language and dialogue to instances of literary creation. Through an investigation of these narrative tactics, it becomes possible to avoid strictly biographical readings of the sisters' sensational mythologies.⁴

More specifically, all three novelists employ letters and journals as mutually cathartic and creative tools to convey women's stories, experiences, and criticisms. The texts' competing narratives, formed through these mechanisms, stress the heroines' dominant perspectives. The Brontës' implementation of metafictional devices thereby mitigates the silences of female characters and updates Senf's interpretation of "male authority shap[ing] women's lives" (447). Senf, in turn, follows Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal argument about women's writing as 'imitative,' initially posited in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).⁵ The juxtaposition of narrative silences with the heroines' tangible and symbolic forms of creation highlights non-spoken forms of proto-feminist protest, which both complicate and feminize the nineteenth century's dominantly patriarchal literary marketplace. Even more, it reveals how female writers influence other female writers, in fiction as in the practice of publication in mid-century England.

Essentially, the Brontës' subversion of the novel form affords a protective, though not distancing function, by which they can assess the limitations of patriarchal systems through their heroines. The following three chapters trace the novels' evolving dialogue about women's position in society, as well their contribution to the history of the novel, over a period of only twenty months during which *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

⁴ This objective reflects a recent shift away from biographical Brontë criticism in contemporary literary studies. See Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2002) and Tabitha Sparks' critique of Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor* (1857) in Chapter 9 of *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016), ed. Diane L. Hoeveler and Deborah D. Morse.

⁵ Refer to Chapters 8, 9, and 10 in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) for Gilbert and Gubar's assessment of the Brontës' masculine style, vocabularies, formal plot devices, and Romantic 'visions,' often credited to male precursors, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Bunyan, and Milton. See also Amy J. Robinson's "Journeying Home: *Jane Eyre* and Catherine Earnshaw's Coming-of-Age Stories" in *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016) ed. Diane L. Hoeveler and Deborah D. Morse, for further commentary on the Brontës' "masculine archetypes" (67).

were published. Each chapter then centers on a separate heroine, spanning the works' mid-century publication dates (1847-1848), in chronological order. Through an analysis of *Jane Eyre*, *Catherine Earnshaw*, and *Helen Graham*, alongside a brief study of the Brontës' own pseudonymous identities as the Bell brothers, this project works to dismantle inherited myths about the sisters' uncontrollable creative impulses, and finally, resituate their writing as an outlet for highly calculated, yet indirect, social criticism at the cusp of modernity.

**‘Reader, I Mastered the Narrative’:
Sympathy and Self-Division in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847)**

Of the three Brontë novels published between 1847 and 1848, *Jane Eyre* is the only text with one consistent female narrator. On the title page of the book’s first edition, Charlotte Brontë credits the heroine as the author of her own life story, presented as an autobiography.⁶ She juxtaposes the largely silent Jane in volumes I and II, against her position as narrator, ‘authoress,’ and collaborative editor (with Currer Bell), in the creation and publication of her tale – roles that come to fruition in the third volume. This chapter assesses Brontë’s mastery of the pseudo-autobiography as a metafictional device to convey sympathy, fortify specific reader responses, and validate the narrative’s supposed authenticity. The plot’s corrective process then culminates in the reform of Jane and Rochester’s relationship, as a marriage of equals, and in *Jane Eyre*’s overall success as an unconventional novel. Through the development of her narrative voice, the protagonist effectively reclaims her silences, reconciles facets of her split identity, and finally asserts creative control over her literary production.

Autobiographical Metafiction and the Sounds of Silence

Despite the story’s first-person point of view, Carol Senf’s interpretation of narrative silence applies to Rochester’s initial suppression of Jane’s discourse.⁷ Prior to his reform, the narrator stresses his complicity, alongside John Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, and St. John Rivers, in silencing women as a feature of societal abuse. At various points in Jane’s life, these characters disrupt her journey, or more specifically, the series of events that constitute the text’s source

⁶ See C. Brontë 59 for the original cover page with the full inscription: “*Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, Edited by Currer Bell, In Three Volumes.”

⁷ ie. Senf’s “Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender,” *College English* 52.4 (1990): 446-456.

material. At Thornfield Hall, an architectural microcosm of England's patriarchal institutions, Rochester literally tries to "become [Jane's] whole world" (C. Brontë 361), concomitant to the way that he dominates and entraps Bertha Mason in the estate's attic. Before Jane even encounters Bertha in the course of her narrative, she transcribes Rochester's dismissal of his wife to his brother-in-law, Richard Mason: "Never mind [your sister's] gibberish [...] think of her as dead and buried – or rather you need not think of her at all" (294). This abolition of Bertha's speech, as a symbolic erasure of her existence, discourages Jane's ability to speak candidly. Although Rochester "does not wish to treat [Jane] like an inferior" (205) or an "unearthly thing" (339), he struggles to interact with her as a "human being with an independent will" (338) – an identity that Jane only later reclaims. In a position of servitude as a governess, she often "lost [her] voice in his presence" (328), which underscores the power imbalance that must be rectified before the couple can marry.

Unlike the traditional marriage plot novel, Brontë's development of Jane Eyre's individual subjectivity is the novel's main theme. In *Feminist Metafiction and the Evolution of the British Novel* (2002), Joan D. Peters examines feminist narratology as "the pervasive influence of women's narrating acts on the transformation of the novel as a literary genre" (2).⁸ The heroine's "narrational empowerment," as Peters describes it, "has the added advantage of genuinely problematizing issues of gender in a text" (195). By promoting the "idea of narrating as dialogue" (96), the autobiography grants Jane an outlet to communicate with her readers and also implant the novel's central power dynamic within its formal organization. It is worth mentioning that Peters' definition of 'narrating acts' encompasses the protagonist's authorial role, or the act of writing her life story, in parallel to the audience's commitment to reading it.

⁸ See Peters' "Introduction" and Chapter 3 "Finding a Voice: Toward a Woman's Discourse of Dialogue in *Jane Eyre*," in *Feminist Metafiction and the Evolution of the British Novel* (2002).

The pseudo-autobiography, as a metafictional medium, performs a mutually political and protective task in its transference of ‘direct experience’ – a wholly artistic endeavour reliant on the reader’s ability to imagine, react, and respond. Metafiction, according to Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013), is “fiction that includes within itself a commentary” on the constructedness, or fictionality, of its own narrative (1).⁹ It is not unusual for the narrator of a metafictional work to present it as factual, which in the context of the literary novel, ironically illuminates the text’s creative properties. The writer (here, Brontë), akin to the pseudo-author (Jane Eyre), rhetorically “unite[s] shared language” with the reader, who then “approaches that same language,” and brings to it all of their ‘baggage,’ or subjective “experience[s] of life, of literature, and of language” to detect, extract, and even generate new meaning in the text; an exchange that triggers “the autonomous fictional world into being” (41-44). It is this self-reflexivity or meditation on the seemingly incompatible antinomies of the text (in this case, the role of ‘biographical fiction,’ or ‘silent expression’) that heightens its real capacity for social impact.

By generating a prototype of the modern woman in mid-century England – an ambitious yet sympathetic exemplar who overcomes the sufferings of her hostile social climate – Brontë maps a path towards structural reform in the novel, as a reflection of her society. Victorian writers, as cultural contributors, challenge and partake in an ideology that is “always in the making” (Poovey 3).¹⁰ The heroine’s command over her fictional territory then conveys an optimistic vision for the future, attached to an ethics of gender equality. Not only does the act of critical study empower the protagonist’s silence, it animates, or energizes, her dynamic presence

⁹ See Hutcheon’s “Introduction” and “Process and Product: The Implications of Metafiction for the Theory of the Novel as a Mimetic Genre” in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 1-47.

¹⁰ For more on Victorian ideology, see Chapter 1 “The Ideological Work of Gender” in Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988): 1-23.

in the text. Due to middle-class women's literacy and ample leisure time, they were the predominant fiction readers in nineteenth-century England (James 46).¹¹ As narrator, Jane's sensitive self-portrayal, occasionally in the third person, strengthens the bond, or trust relationship, that she develops with her predominantly female reading community; a "gender-driven and increasingly dialogic interaction" (Lundberg 297).¹² She corroborates with her audience to validate women's social strife, and so legitimizes the problems of her patriarchal milieu.

However, similar to Senf, Gilbert and Gubar perhaps inadvertently undermine Jane's unspoken authority.¹³ While they claim that she "never articulates [a] rational desire for liberty" (348), the heroine's search for freedom is implied in all that she does to push the plot forward. Jane does not vocalize a radical call for equality, but self-consciously enacts this ideology within the narrative. In each phase of her life, she encounters a series of obstacles: "oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield), and coldness (at Marsh End)" (339). Jane's mobility, from one setting to the next, not only exhibits her personal potential, or determination to survive and *recount* her survival, but the flexibility of the novel form to "adapt to social change" over time (Waugh 9).¹⁴ In other words, the protagonist is not a passive bystander to the twists and turns of her life. She is the pivotal participant who explores the novel's possibilities and confines the audience to her dominant perspective. As Diane L.

¹¹ See Louis 38-48 in *English Popular Literature* (1976).

¹² ie. Patricia Lundberg's "The Dialogic Search for Community in Charlotte Brontë's Novels" in *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 20.3 (1990): 296-317.

¹³ Consult Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

¹⁴ See Patricia Waugh's "What is Metafiction?" in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Consciousness in Fiction* (1984): 1-21.

Hoeveler infers, the text can only be read, or experienced, as Jane's "self-narrated and self-constructed vindication" (38).¹⁵

Novelists, through their narrators, "convince the reader of the reality of their fictive worlds during the reading act" (Hutcheon 92).¹⁶ The metafictional techniques of reader addresses and authorial claims to truth similarly support Jane's honest and sympathetic characterization of herself. While she generally "inhabits a sphere of withheld speech" (Kreilkamp 123), she also authenticates "a rewarding subjectivity around textual practice" to put forth the illusion of proximity to her readership (138).¹⁷ Jane's wordplay, such as her "struggle to express what [she] resolved to conceal" (C. Brontë 329), is significant. As Peters puts it, the audience is made "privy to her immediate thinking" (90), or at least, an impression of it, so that she can pander to them "without disrupting the continuity of the tale" (96). More specifically, the dramatic declaration that she loved Rochester "more than [she] could trust [herself] to say – more than words had power to express" (C. Brontë 348) tells the readers that they exclusively "share [in Jane's] confidence" (363). This is how she indirectly solicits and "rhetorically initiate[s]" a sense of "'genuine' narrator-reader contact," and in so doing, delicately exploits her audience's trust (Peters 96).

The authorial decision to divide the Bildungsroman into three sections clarifies a larger process of maturation embedded within the narrative structure. Beyond the orphan's quest to find her family, the story measures her attempt to fulfill a particular, artistic agenda, and therefore, traces Jane's journey towards individual agency and equality with her male counterparts. While the Brontë heroines and other fictional "non-speakers" have consistently "been viewed as

¹⁵ Refer to Hoeveler's "The Brontës and the Gothic Tradition" in *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016): 31-48.

¹⁶ See Hutcheon's "The Language of Fiction" in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 87-103.

¹⁷ ie. Ivan Kreilkamp's "Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship" in *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005): 122-154.

powerless” by early feminist critics (Laurence 158), Patricia Laurence, like Peters, treats their silence as a precondition for effective narration.¹⁸ The period’s social and political constraints inevitably hinder Jane’s outward expression, so she alternatively “narrate[s] the inwardness” that is essential to her experience (156). At times, the protagonist’s silences actually enable her creative actions, and on a most basic level, she reads and writes in a state of quiet concentration. With her nose so often buried in a book, Jane’s silence is not simply the marker of “passivity, submission, [or] oppression, but [of] enlightened presence” as a learned subject (156).

In light of this, Brontë postulates the role of private libraries and women’s access to them within the domestic sphere as paramount to Jane’s success. It is no coincidence that Jane initially develops her skills as a storyteller in collaboration with other fervent, female readers. The heroine’s friendships with Helen Burns and Miss Temple stem from their shared love of literature, tied to their investment in narrative. For instance, when the protagonist tells Miss Temple “the story of [her] sad childhood,” the teacher recommends that she “say whatever her memory suggests true but [to] add nothing and exaggerate nothing,” as though providing her with editorial notes (C. Brontë 135). Jane *ergo* adopts a stoic, “disciplined, and subdued character” (150), required for the story’s semblance of objectivity. In her own words, she infuses “less of gall and wormwood [...] into the narrative” to make it “sound more credible” (135). Helen Burns, meanwhile, teaches her a lesson about human complexity (118). Without their feedback, Jane may have never been able to represent such multidimensional characters, or to separate “the criminal [from] the crime” (121), a distinction imperative for her forgiveness of Mrs. Reed, as well as her eventual marriage to Mr. Rochester.

¹⁸ See Laurence’s “Women’s Silence as a Ritual of Truth” in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism* ed. Hedges and Fishkin (1994): 156-167.

The protagonist's earliest interest in literature presupposes the narrative of progress that she later enacts. In particular, Brontë's allusions to *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) anticipate Jane's experience as "a most desolate wanderer" after she leaves Thornfield (79). By looking at the relationship between fictional scenarios and Jane's own life, Brontë relays the novel's functional application to conflict and possibly remedy social issues. From the beginning, Jane harnesses literary language and intertextual references to evaluate the moral disposition of other characters in her story. One key instance is when she likens her cousin John Reed to "a murderer," a "slave-driver," and brutal "Roman emperor" – comparisons drawn directly from the texts that she reads (67).¹⁹ In contrast, John's interest in the library is purely materialistic. He reduces Gateshead's opulent bookshelves to symbols of his aristocratic status, including the estate that "belongs" to him, as the family heir (67). When he hits Jane with a book, for example, he exploits the material properties of its hardcover, whereas she 'fights back' through her learned language. As Janet Freeman summarizes, "the child who hid [to] read in silence about far distant places [now] uses words from her reading to defend herself" (689).²⁰

Once the heroine leaves Gateshead, her orphaned status symbolically ruptures the Reeds' aristocratic lineage, which gives way to both the formation of a new family dynamic and literary genre. Jane Eyre manipulates the autobiographical form to advertise John Reed's tyrannical character as an indisputable fact. She not only exposes all of the "wicked and cruel" ways that he "bullied and punished" her (C. Brontë 66-67), but quite literally wields control over his image by documenting his "disgusting and ugly appearance" (66). Even more, Jane keeps her initial vow to "let everybody at Lowood know" Mrs. Reed's "bad, hard-hearted, [and] deceitful" character, the "first victory [she] had gained" in her life (96-97). She blatantly criticizes her aunt, who "was

¹⁹ Here Jane references Oliver Goldsmith's *History of Rome* (1769).

²⁰ ie. Freeman's "Speech and Silence in *Jane Eyre*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 24.4 (1984): 683-700.

blind and deaf on the subject” of her son’s offenses (66), much like the indulgent mothers denounced in Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1846) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). In fact, Jane dramatizes Mrs. Reed’s cruel deathbed confession in a short “revenge” narrative (322). The lie that Aunt Reed tells about Jane’s alleged death at Lowood is two-fold. Not only does it foreshadow the inheritance as a plot device, it juxtaposes Mrs. Reed’s false account with the narrator’s commitment to the truth. Upon the heroine’s brief return to Gateshead, she gestures toward her personal growth, opposite the Reeds’ stasis, in the way that “a sneer [...] had no longer that power over [her] it once possessed” (312). While her “unchanged and unchangeable” aunt was “reserved to consider [her] bad to the last” (314), Jane relishes in “full and free forgiveness” (324), a comparison that deliberately impacts the Reeds’ reputation, even after death. By writing about their “sunk and degraded” nature (316), Jane tarnishes their family name, while at the same time, championing her own charitable character and corrected lineage, eternally in print.

Manipulation, Persuasion, and Protection: The Power of the Pseudo-Author

Jane’s narrative success relies on her covertly painting a persuasive picture. The readers “implicit in the text” become “an element of the narrative situation” and so bear witness to the heroine’s struggles and subsequent triumph, as she renders them (Hutcheon 139).²¹ While relating her time spent as a beggar, for instance, Jane recognizes “how doubtful must have appeared [her] character, position, tale” (C. Brontë 419), and thereby, assumes a mode that is highly self-referential. The protagonist announces that “it is not pleasant to dwell on these

²¹ ie. Hutcheon’s “Composite Identity: The Reader, the Writer, the Critic” in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 138-152.

details” (420), yet ironically unpacks them over a series of pages.²² Through Jane’s hollow display of reluctance, she casually contrives sympathy for her character, without demanding it. She even goes so far as to implore that the “reader not ask” for any “account” of those impoverished days (421), as the “recollection was too distressing [...] to be willingly dwelt on” (420). The notion that Jane would not want to share her struggles contradicts the self-involved exercise of writing her autobiography. Such statements also reaffirm that, as narrator, she is very much preoccupied with the plausibility of her tale. In order to disprove any possible doubts, she then elaborates on the Rivers’ innate perception of her as trustworthy: “Never once in their dialogues did I hear a syllable” of “suspicion or aversion to myself” (432).

The novel may read like a journal, but it is something else entirely. According to Patricia Lundberg, Jane Eyre “wants the readers’ approval [and] is willing to manipulate [their] responses to gain it” (302). In addition, she defends her censorial approach to editing through the selective emphasis on “events [that] possess some degree of interest” (C. Brontë 149); value judgments that only she, as the story’s pseudo-author, casts through its creation. As Jane mentions, certain occurrences are “too unrefined [to] merit record” (109), which explains why she “pass[es] a space of eight years [...] in silence” (149) and then jumps forward to her pivotal experience at Thornfield. Such omissions are not indicative of the protagonist’s repression, but of her authoritative, artistic decisions. In essence, she chooses when “a few lines [are] necessary to keep up the links of connection” (149), or when she should “draw up the curtains” and begin “a new chapter” (160).

Just as Brontë’s novel imaginatively magnifies the sincere and benevolent nature of Jane Eyre, Elizabeth Gaskell treats *The Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) as a defense of the

²² See Brontë 420-430 for in-depth descriptions of her “moral degradation [and] physical suffering” (420), “so sick, so weak” and living “like a lost and starving dog” (419), “trembling [...] ghastly, wild, and weather-beaten” (429).

authoress. Both of these texts embrace metafictional qualities. According to Angus Easson, Gaskell's "biography was not [and] could not be, an objective memoir" (xi).²³ In particular, Gaskell "retreat[s] from full disclosure" about Charlotte Brontë's scandalous "attachment to the married Constantin Héger," her school teacher, "in order to more effectively shape her portrait of goodness and rectitude" (53). On the other hand, she "was more than willing to expose the iniquities of others" such as Brontë's adulterous, alcoholic brother, Branwell (53). It is only on the last page of the biography that Gaskell admits to her authorial agenda. In her words, she turns away "from the critical, unsympathetic public – inclined to judge harshly," and aims instead "to obtain appreciation" from "that larger and more solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at [human] faults and errors" (457). Gaskell's use of language mirrors the way that Brontë later lambastes some of her own detractors in the preface to *Jane Eyre*'s second edition.²⁴ In print, she calls out a "small" group that similarly misreads the heroine's "protest against bigotry" as "an insult to piety" (C. Brontë 557). Through her heroine, Brontë then showcases a brand of compassion that she hopes her audience will reciprocate.

In stressing her "inexperience" in the world, symptomatic of youthful naiveté (214, 216), Jane actually justifies her own choice of cohabiting with an "old bachelor" (201). Due to the cultural distrust surrounding the nineteenth-century governess and the relationship that she bore to "two of the most important Victorian representations of the woman" – the maternal figure "who epitomized the domestic ideal" and the interloper "who threatened to destroy it" (Poovey 127) – Jane conveniently mistakes Mrs. Fairfax for the owner of Thornfield Hall (C. Brontë 167). The Ingrams, meanwhile, hyperbolize the period's distrust of the governess, such as the threat that Jane poses to Blanche and Rochester's future together. As an apparent outsider to the

²³ ie. Easson's full "Introduction" to the Oxford ed. of Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (2009): xx-xxiii.

²⁴ See Brontë 557-559 for her "Preface" to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847).

aristocracy, Jane jeopardizes the prospective couple's domestic bliss, which Miss Ingram believes to have, more or less, secured. Although Jane does not defend her position in dialogue, she puts forth an earnest image of herself, opposite Blanche's dishonest application of "physiognomy," used to discredit the supposed "faults of her class" (255). After all, the audience comes to learn that Jane Eyre is not a lowly, 'contaminating' presence, but an heiress.

At other times, the protagonist's voice is astutely self-deprecating. She often reminds her readers that, unlike Helen Burns, she is "a defective being with many faults and few redeeming points" (143). Her self-pity, as she goes on to call herself a great "fool" and a "poor, stupid dupe!" (237), serves to further generate sympathy and give way to favourable reader response, or even reassurance. In wondering how she could *possibly* think herself "a favourite with Mr. Rochester?" she compels the idea that perhaps, she *is* "of importance to him?" (237). As such, Jane builds narrative suspense, foreshadows the novel's dramatic love plot, and reiterates her esteem for the audience's conjecture. Brontë's readers are not to blindly consume Jane's narrative silences, or 'gaps,' but to participate in the foundation of a new sign-system, imperative to the female tradition. Although the novel's "universe" is a "fictive and linguistic artifact," its readers are paradoxically, driven to "respond [and] attribute human significance" to those circumstances of the imaginative world, that overlap with their own (Hutcheon 117).²⁵ It is up to them to determine why the heroine is "always suffering, always brow-beaten, always accused, forever condemned" (C. Brontë 72), and most importantly, how she might rectify this situation, emblematic of the Victorian woman's condition.

Jane actually elaborates on the "skills" that she possesses in order to produce her artistic vision, verbally as well as visually (317). During Rochester's assessment of her visual art, she

²⁵ See Hutcheon's "The Theme of Linguistic Identity" in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 104-117.

underscores several technical terms and adjectives used to illustrate the artworks' physical properties. Not only does she describe the "water colours," their "glimmering distinctness," "brilliant tints," and "faint lustre," but she discloses an attempt at perspectival space in the "foreground," "horizon," and "reflection" of her three landscapes (196).²⁶ The tone here suggests that Jane is proud of her artistic accomplishments, which contradicts her dismissal of the portfolio as "nothing wonderful" (195). As a female artist who would have been barred from training in the Royal Academy, she cultivates a false sense of modesty to maintain her audience's approval. More specifically, Jane's ability to capture "a very faithful representation of Rochester" in her sketchbook (317), endorses her creative method of extrapolating truth from "the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of [her] imagination" (316), as both a painter and a storyteller.

Fiction, likewise, grants Charlotte Brontë the power to craft a compelling argument for reform, and at the same time, make a protective claim to invention. In her letter to the poet Robert Southey, Brontë outlines the way that she "carefully avoid[s] any appearance of preoccupation" that might overtly exude "the nature of [her] pursuits" (Gaskell 125).²⁷ As a woman, she may not be able to take on the grand institutions of patriarchy (political, legal, religious) within her own social context, but she can publicize their flaws and failures, and even propose a model for improvement, through her protagonist. This is how Brontë shields herself from the social repercussions of direct activism, yet still partakes in the "critical process that frees the muted voices [of] feminist inquiry" (Lundberg 298). Put plainly, she reveals an awareness of gendered social risks in Victorian England, and so implements a form of social "resistance within [the] novel itself" (Waugh 11).

²⁶ See Brontë 195-196 for the full description of Jane's paintings.

²⁷ This is the same correspondence of 1837, one decade before the publication of *Jane Eyre*, during which Southey reminds Brontë that "literature cannot be the business of a woman's life" (Gaskell 123-125).

Jane's omissions in dialogue are then not as damning as has been suggested by Senf and her contemporaries. The heroine is not always outspoken and with good reason. Had she expressed herself as spontaneously as Bertha Mason did, her story would not have resonated with the general reading public.²⁸ In fact, Jane learns early on from her verbal and physical confrontation with John Reed – behaviour that lands her in the Red Room – that she must rebel through more creative means. It is only after some time spent in “silence and reflection” that she realizes the “madness of [her] conduct,” especially as a young woman (C. Brontë 97). The slightest emotional outburst could be met with severe consequences, and here, the protagonist's careless utterance results in her expulsion from Gateshead; her only forced departure throughout the course of the novel. Based on the narrator's retrospective commentary, this is her first real learning experience. Jane's regret indicates that her growth will rely on the changes made tangible through her autobiography, as opposed to outward social protest. In Freeman's words, Brontë correlates learning when “to be silent” with the implementation of an effective strategy “by which to tell her own story” (685). The tale, thereby, embodies an evolution toward the heroine's “forceful, honest, and self-consciously formalized” narrative voice (Peters 91).

With that in mind, Jane Eyre's “self-promotion” throughout her self-titled autobiography, cannot be considered “involuntary,” as Sharon Marcus proclaims in “The Profession of the Author” (2002) (146).²⁹ The heroine acts subtly, but deliberately. Just as the Brontës “concealed volcanic fantasies of autonomous power” in their work (Gilbert and Gubar 640), Jane, as pseudo-author, takes precautionary measures to navigate the professional world of publishing that has systemically restricted women. As the implied reader and writer figure of the story, she then bears a double connection to the pseudonymous Currer Bell. At Marsh-End, Jane Eyre assumes

²⁸ Jean Rhys publishes her own version of Bertha Mason's fictional story, as the doubly disadvantaged subject (via race and gender), over one century later, in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

²⁹ See Chapter 7 “The Profession of the Author” in *The Brontës* ed. Patricia Ingham (2002): 142-168.

the identity of “Jane Elliot” (C. Brontë 479), and before that, advertises for employment under her initials “J.E.” (154). In the same way that Jane’s adoption of alternate aliases helps her venture out of two dangerously self-limiting establishments, Lowood and Thornfield, Brontë’s pseudonymity grants her the protection to assess women’s social issues and other ‘taboo’ topics in literature, deemed anti-Christian by her contemporary critics – and most savagely denounced by Elizabeth Rigby.³⁰ In other words, she subdues her proto-feminist politics through the careful cultivation of an elusive public image. The critical backlash aimed at Currer Bell does not pose a direct threat to Brontë’s own career, for it was, essentially, targeted at an abstract entity. This, ultimately, allows for *Jane Eyre*’s commercial success, with an original print run that “sold out in just under three months” (Nemesvari 52).³¹

Genre, Intertextuality, and the Female Tradition

In “Metafiction and the Novel Tradition” (1984), Patricia Waugh designates a critical text as one that offers “innovation and familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions” (12).³² Likewise, Brontë parodies, subverts, and fuses together various tropes, such as the strict didacticism of eighteenth-century conduct books, the stylistic features of romantic poetry, and the sensationalism of the Gothic tradition. Some motifs repeated throughout *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* include the heroines’ gradual “control of the patriarchal estate” and access to the library as a “celebration of education or art for women” (Hoeveler and Morse 34). The library, as an inclusive zone of refuge, chiefly fosters the development of Jane’s intellectual capabilities. In childhood, “the word ‘book’ act[s] as a

³⁰ Refer to Rigby’s “Review of Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre, Governesses’ Benevolent Institution – Report for 1847,” *Quarterly Review* 84 (December 1848): 153-185.

³¹ ie. Nemesvari’s “Introduction” in the Broadview ed. of *Jane Eyre* (1999): 9-55.

³² See Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Consciousness in Fiction* (1984).

transient stimulus” for her (C. Brontë 78). Later, she enjoys “literature, poetry, biography, travels, [and] romances” at Thornfield, volumes more educational than “the scanty pickings” of didactic tales at Lowood (171). The practice of reading diverse genres helps Jane become a more mature and informed writer of her own story. In consequence, she channels her creative passion into art, as a safe separation from herself.

It is crucial to consider, however, that the Brontës do not attempt to “solve the literary problem of being female” by merely “presenting themselves as *male*,” as Gilbert and Gubar propose (65). Jane Eyre’s display of diverse conventions do not divulge an innate ‘need,’ or subconscious desire to mimic the “vocabulary and [artistic] visions” of “Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron” (312), or any other male predecessor that Gilbert and Gubar cite. Brontë’s references instead contribute to the mid-century novel’s overarching shift in genre. Prior to Jane and Rochester’s love declaration, for example, the narrator adopts poetic language and idyllic imagery, such as “skies so pure” (C. Brontë 332), the “fragrance [of] flowers,” “ripening fruit,” and even the sound of a “nightingale” (333, 337) to highlight her knowledge of romanticism and its respective topoi. This hybrid of intertextual allusions then advocates for Jane’s ability to read, write, and apply herself to revise the novel form, hence her altered discourse after leaving Thornfield.

Critic Amy J. Robinson argues that Jane’s “initiative” to branch out into the public sphere for work, first as Adèle’s governess and then as a schoolmistress, further “resembles,” or “follows, masculine archetypes” (67, 71), including John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678).³³ This statement is problematic, not only because the governess is an inherently feminine role, but because Robinson reduces the heroine’s agency to a feature of “the masculine

³³ See Robinson’s Chapter 4 “Journeying Home” in *A Companion to the Brontës* ed. Hoeveler and Morse (2016): 65-77.

Bildungsroman” (71). The reality is that all ‘work’ entails some form of public participation. While Jane teaches in order to support herself financially, she also, inevitably, engages with texts and other teaching materials that will impart her preferred ideologies to her pupils. In recalling how Mr. Brocklehurst forced the Lowood girls into complete “‘Silence!’ and ‘Order!’” (105-106), the protagonist, through her own teaching (and writing) techniques, updates his “false system of education [and its] books of instruction, written [only] by men” (Wollstonecraft 213).³⁴ Through Jane’s focus on women’s social obstacles – a topic noticeably absent from the craft, or perhaps even the *consciousness* of the period’s male writers – Brontë dispels conventional literary expectations and highlights the practical use of feminocentric fiction for its female readers. For instance, she experiments with dark, dreamlike visions of marriage and motherhood to convey concern for precisely female forms of vulnerability. Through the protagonist’s lens, Brontë then figuratively rebuilds the traditional Bildungsroman to trace their shared “quest for independence” (Hoeveler and Morse 67).

When Jane Eyre boldly asserts that she is “no bird; and no net ensnares” her (C. Brontë 338), she refigures the trope of poetic flight, typically tied to images of the male genius, such as Keats’ nightingale or Shelley’s skylark.³⁵ The novel as medium affords her the “right to predominate: to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last; yes – and to speak” (337). These affirmations, at the plot’s halfway point, almost seem to mirror the mid-century feminization of the Victorian novel. The relationship between two primary texts, Jane Eyre’s (implied) metafictional autobiography and Charlotte Brontë’s fictional *Jane Eyre*, stresses the gradual ascension of the female writer, to sing freely, not *as* but *alongside* the nightingale and skylark.

³⁴ See Brontë 94 for a Jane’s dismissal of religious conduct books, and in particular, Mr. Brocklehurst’s ‘Child’s Guide,’ as well as Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. D (1987): 211-239.

³⁵ ie. John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820).

Together, this is how they develop an inclusive literature, beyond that of a restrictive “female subculture,” or paracanon (Gilbert and Gubar 444).

Brontë’s depiction of Jane, as a humanly flawed, artistic agent, thus confronts the formulaic plot points of the past and transcends a typological categorization of female identity. Systemic programs of oppression often require the complacency of entire communities to thrive. This is a lesson that Jane initially learns “from the pages of *Pamela*” (1740), *Clarissa* (1747-1748), and other works by Samuel Richardson, but now expands on in her own writing (C. Brontë 65).³⁶ Just as the Harlowes fail to secure *Clarissa* from Lovelace, Brontë’s protagonist lacks responsible guardians to help her navigate the intricacies of a complex marriage market. For instance, the residents of Thornfield fail to warn Jane about Rochester’s past. Even critic Margaret Markwick questions whether or not “only Grace Poole and the surgeon Mr. Carter kn[e]w the truth” about Bertha Mason (Hoeveler and Morse 103).³⁷ Yet, against all odds, Jane perseveres and corrects *Clarissa*’s fate. Her lack of parental protection motivates her to be proactive. Not only does she survive Lowood school, but she successfully makes her way from Thornfield Hall to Marsh End, and later, to Ferndean – in a constant state of new beginnings, rather than a dismal end. In doing so, she updates the tragic topos of the orphaned heroine, in which parental absence or neglect nearly guarantees the daughter’s downfall.

Through the novel’s deconstruction of gendered propriety, Brontë normalizes the presence of universally complex characters, rather than flat prototypes. While Gilbert and Gubar define “patriarchal socialization” as the difference between the proverbial ‘angel in the house’ and the monsters that “male authors have generated” to classify women in fiction (17, 53),

³⁶ ie. Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748).

³⁷ Other servants, such as Leah and the charwoman, likely knew about Bertha Mason. See Brontë 242 for their allusions to Grace Poole as Bertha’s caretaker: “Not everyone could fill her shoes.” See also Markwick’s “Jane Eyre,” Chapter 6 in *A Companion to the Brontës* ed. Hoeveler and Morse (2016): 101-113.

Brontë does not internalize this distinction. Through Jane's characterization, she challenges "the phallogocentric assumption that unrestrained sentimentality is [...] the only sort of writing" that "a largely female audience wants to read" (Peters 87), and so accentuates the characters' multivalence to solidify the story's credibility. Jane's imperfections do not prevent her from garnering "novelistic awards" (Nemesvari 22), nor do they take away from the book's entertainment value. As such, the heroine overrides the perennial Virgin/Whore dichotomy – or the 'Madonna complex,' that doubles the biblical figures of Mary, Virgin mother of Christ, and Mary Magdalene, the elusive, but repentant prostitute. Plain Jane the 'everywoman,' is both and neither.

She denotes that even supposedly 'mundane' characters have meaningful stories to share in art. There is an obvious divide between Jane's subdued conversations and the depth of what she confides to her audience. As her sparse dialogue shows, especially in volumes I and II, the protagonist does not speak obscenities or revel in emotion. Instead, she borrows narrative strategies from the books that she reads in order to cautiously integrate her own viewpoint in writing. Within the narrative, for example, she insists that "women feel just as men feel" and deserve just as much "exercise for their faculties" (C. Brontë 178). In addition, she argues that "it is narrow-minded [for] more privileged fellow-creatures," or her male counterparts, to say that she "ought to confine [herself] to making puddings and knitting stockings" (178). This sentiment echoes Mary Wollstonecraft's call to "strengthen the female mind" (221) in *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman* (1792).³⁸ Through the justification of Jane's potential to do more and "learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex" (C. Brontë 178), Brontë indirectly

³⁸ See Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. D (1987): 211-239.

aligns herself with Wollstonecraft's proto-feminist manifesto. As a result, she intimates that there are still many obstacles for female writers to overcome.

In order to then determine "what was acceptable for [Jane's] narration," Brontë cautiously infuses, and sustains a critique of, "the established patriarchal attitudes that underlie" the classic fairy tale tradition (Peters 87). Most European fairy tales from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century were composed by men, yet their moralistic lessons primarily targeted female audiences.³⁹ Jane's pseudo-autobiography, therefore, combats the "prevailing patriarchal modes of discourse" that preside over popular culture, as well as England's literary marketplace (79). When the author "parodies conventional forms of narrative," she does not discredit them, but "tropes [the protagonist's] private efforts to write her 'own' novel," or life story (82).⁴⁰

The "implicit fairy tale patterns" that make up *Jane Eyre's* Thornfield Hall episodes warrant further analysis (Robinson 72). In *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet* (2016), Gero Bauer unpacks the problematics of a "paranoid patriarchal masculinity" in the aristocratic estate (39).⁴¹ The Gothic tradition muddles spatial boundaries through the core contradiction of "the home as a safe haven" and the bleak reality that it can be "a stifling prison" (24). By focusing on Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" (1697), he negotiates the gendering of public and private spaces to familiarize and ground his argument about performed paranoia and its relationship to the concealment and exposition of societal abuse.⁴² While paranoia can be degenerative, or even fatal when employed in Bluebeard's extremes, the application of the readers' own paranoid reading practices, in concern for and identification with Brontë's heroine, can heighten their awareness

³⁹ ie. Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, etc.

⁴⁰ See Elizabeth Gaskell's *Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) for further discussion of the Brontës' own childhood invention of magical kingdoms and fictive worlds, such as Gondal and Angria.

⁴¹ ie. Bauer's "Introduction" and "Bluebeard's Closet" in *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet* (2016): 7-100.

⁴² It is worth consulting the English translation of "Bluebeard" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (1999): 144-148.

of social issues, provoke critical responses, and engage the public in a larger reparative process. For this reason, Brontë encourages “full communication rather than [passive] telling,” as a “vital component of [Jane’s] novelistic narrative act” (Peters 97).

In conversation with Eve Sedgwick’s *Touching, Feeling* (2003), Bauer alludes to the patriarchal structures of “homosocially shared secrecy,” or “close homosocial bonds” between men as an approach for organizing particular power dynamics and exerting hegemonic authority over vulnerable racial, gendered, and socio-economic groups (Bauer 38).⁴³ Thornfield Hall, as a version of the Gothic estate, epitomizes the danger of these networks. The buried secrets of the home are contained in the covert spaces that encompass the master’s paternalistic ideology, linked by the “spatial and metaphorical qualities” of an inherently gendered ‘closet’ (22). Systemic abuses of power, paired with the period’s tricky marriage economy, reduce the female body to a type of property to be won and conquered, as personified by Bertha Mason. There is something sinister already lurking in Rochester’s attic, or in Bluebeard’s closet, that their wives, as captives, merely render visible. Simply put, Bertha is the physical representation of her husband’s closeted misogyny.

By drawing on elements of the Gothic tradition, Brontë constructs a narrative that invades her characters’ most private spaces and reveals their transgressions. In particular, she demonstrates the precarity of secrecy in the way that it invites readers to assign new meaning, or “apply [their own] paranoid need to know” (41). Analogous to Bluebeard’s doomed estate, Thornfield becomes “an architectural embodiment of [Rochester’s] mind,” to be infiltrated and scrutinized by Brontë’s interactive audience (11). The “effect of [her] guiding rhetoric, of the

⁴³ See Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re so Paranoid You Probably Think this Essay is About you” in *Touching Feeling* (2003): 124-151.

narrator's mediation" of things known and unknown, similarly, encourages their readers to progress, to turn the page, and enter the forbidden room alongside Jane (Hutcheon 140).

As a "paranoid reader of his own character," Mr. Rochester then moulds himself "according to available discourses" of aristocratic masculinity (Bauer 41). In a sense, Brontë equates the unreformed Rochester to the insecure Bluebeard. His persona, as an eligible bachelor, forces him to live in "constant fear of discovery" (11), which stresses the secret status of his hidden space, where Bertha resides. Just as Perrault's villain tells his wife not to enter the forbidden room "at the end of the long passage on the lower floor" – a precise detail that propels her entry (Perrault 145) – Rochester's own paranoid performance, when he brusquely warns the heroine to "be still" in the night (C. Brontë 223), gestures toward the estate's looming threat. This conduct typifies Judith Butler's concept of "demystification," which Sedgwick defines as behaviours that "*enact and reveal* [the falsehood of] performativity" in itself (Sedgwick 139).

Brontë stresses Rochester's "paranoid attempt" to protect his secret, and in doing so, destabilizes his "fiction of supremacy" within the narrative (Bauer 25). Not only does Jane illustrate the harsh realities that lurk behind Thornfield's prim exterior, she adapts them to heighten narrative tension and dissect the "mystery [from which she] was purposely excluded" (C. Brontë 242). To this end, the heroine transmits Grace Poole's eerie laughter onto the page and into the readers' realm. She also incorporates open-ended questions to communicate her anxiety and intensify the audience's own paranoia: "What mystery [...] what creature was it?" and "why *did* Mr. Rochester enforce this concealment?" (292). Through an ironic inclusion of Gothic elements, Brontë blends "romance with realism" (Bauer 76) to entice and familiarize her readers, prior to subverting their expectations in the final volume. Generally speaking, she needs to capture their attention if she wishes to provoke any critical response.

As a surrogate for the Gothic heroine at Thornfield, Jane occupies an anomalous position as both passive object and active intruder, until she bravely escapes into the unknown. Had she stayed with Rochester, she would have been “conquered” (C. Brontë 346) within the walls of an aristocratic establishment, and by extension, complicit in the social systems that Thornfield represents – namely, the colonial and sexual subjugation of his first wife. Instead, her narrative exposes the estate’s underlying toxicity. It is only once the protagonist leaves and finally abandons “the conventions, poses, obsessions, and anxieties of the Gothic novel [...] strewn like literary residue” in volumes I and II, that she can fully assert her narrative voice in the third section (Hoeveler and Morse 34). In leaving Thornfield, Jane overcomes the constraints that typically stunt the Gothic heroine. More than that, she declines the position as mistress of Thornfield Hall and forges an independent identity, more accessible to readers than the hackneyed heroines of the past. She never would be an “English Céline Varens” (C. Brontë 356), or a British Bertha Mason.

Brontë, consequently, locates “the Gothic within a rabidly Bourgeois agenda” (Bauer 34) and negates the silencing power of the patriarchy. The threat of misogynistic violence and colonial exploitation is enabled by an unwritten social code and further facilitated by society’s programmatic denial of the attic’s ‘contents.’ Rochester’s eventual comparison of “hiring a mistress [to] buying a slave” (C. Brontë 403), reaffirms the deep-rooted relationship between issues of race, class, and gender, hence the importance of intersectional study.⁴⁴ Brontë then exerts Jane and Bertha’s creative and destructive energies to transform the traditional canon and develop an inclusive literary culture. Their seemingly dichotomous demeanours, one pure and

⁴⁴ Rochester’s juxtaposition echoes and possibly informs John Stuart Mill’s own comparison of the housewife to the slave in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), twenty years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*.

the other passionate, are mutually integral to the novel's triumph.⁴⁵ Intersectionality, now at the forefront of contemporary feminism, thereby, modernizes the history of *Jane Eyre's* (mostly white) second-wave feminist scholarship.

The novel showcases literary study as a practical pursuit for all women to figuratively raid Bauer's coined 'closet' and bring light to what is hidden. Jane's education permits her increased self-awareness and informs her professional practice, as an educator, and later, a writer. The madwoman thus personifies the protagonist's rage, no longer repressed, but released. Just because Jane quells her anger, it does not mean that she lacks Bertha Mason's emotion. She simply leverages her writing as a substitute for uninhibited self-expression. The "monster woman" is, after all, someone who lacks, and so, "seeks the power of self-articulation" (Gilbert and Gubar 79), a skill that Jane gradually masters throughout the narrative. As Bertha's book-educated counterpart, the heroine validates her predecessor's psychological turmoil in print – an act of freedom that might convince more young women to pick up the pen, as an outlet for both criticism and catharsis.

Of course, the novel concludes with the obliteration of Thornfield Hall, an event that entails Bertha Mason's own engagement in the novel's reparative process. Her final destructive act is, quite literally, a precursor to Jane Eyre's creative production. While Jane complicates the image of the Victorian wife, Bertha's self-willed demise compromises the menacing stereotype of the madwoman, as well as the domestic prison that harvests its creation. In a utilitarian sense, her ruin is imperative for the sake of social change. To borrow from Jeremy Bentham's doctrine, Bertha Mason's self-destruction provides 'the greatest good for the greatest number.'⁴⁶ It is only

⁴⁵ See Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977).

⁴⁶ ie. *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill* (1973).

in death that she decisively grants Rochester the widowed status necessary to marry Jane; an act that subsequently establishes the novel's paradigm of gender equality.

After Bertha's fiery suicide, Charlotte Brontë retires the figure of the beastly bride. In fact, there is no single female character as tortured or as terrifying as Bertha Mason in her later publications. Fire is a restorative element in *Jane Eyre*, as it also illuminates the protagonist's creative spark and romantic love for Rochester, both of which demand the fragmentation of an older tradition to be fully realized. The mid-century novel, therefore, repositions female identity as psychologically complex. Through the description of Thornfield's "blackened ruin" (C. Brontë 525), "burnt to the ground" (529), Brontë then signals towards imminent change that will rise from its ashes. She implies that the aristocratic estate, as a symbol of patriarchal culture, no longer stands as tall or as strong as it had for generations before. When Jane solicits her "reader [to] hear an illustration" of its decay (524), she explicitly remarks that "there was the silence of death about it" (525). In other words, the politicized space of Thornfield Hall is rendered futile, whereas the heroine's own voice flourishes in fiction. The mansion's power, predicated on the imprisonment and silencing of women, has been usurped – a corrective shift that resituates the trope of vulnerable female subjects from the novel's centre to its periphery. Bertha Mason and Helen Burns, as extreme exemplars of sexual deviancy and religious piety, are both self-sacrificing, and most notably, secondary characters.

At the same time, Bertha's relentless fight against patriarchal oppression, in burning down Rochester's estate, almost seems to predict the suffragettes' militant arson campaign at the end of the century. Through the significance of Thornfield's demolition, she sets a radical new precedent for women's revolt in nineteenth-century England, as relayed to the public and concretized by Jane's story. This is why *Jane Eyre* is an effective replacement for the simplistic

social solutions offered in earlier fiction. Unlike Charles Dickens' novels per se, Brontë tackles the effects of poverty and isolation related to women specifically.

The publication of Jane's pseudo-autobiography, nearly one decade after *Oliver Twist* (1838), does not arouse its readers' sympathy through an eternally stunted or infantilized protagonist. While Dickens' orphaned boys are often saved from the streets of London's squalor, Jane relies on her own survival skills and works her way into adulthood through an unconventional coming-of-age. In short, Brontë portrays Jane Eyre as the tale's self-titled saviour, a heroic stance frequently reserved for men. Within the narrative, she reiterates that her female protagonist rescues her male counterpart, a remarkably gendered role reversal that occurs when Jane protects Rochester from the fire (224). This scene includes the strategic repetition of his declaration, "you have saved my life!" twice on the same page (224). By having Rochester pronounce this phrase, the heroine reconfirms her valiance without undermining her modesty.

Narrative Metalepsis and Jane's Final Transformation

Even as Jane resolves to leave Rochester, at the end of volume II, Brontë evokes sympathy through metafictional reader interactions. Upon the discovery of his wife's existence, the narrator once again reaches out to her audience with rhetorical questions: "Where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? – where was her life? – where were her prospects?" (383). In speaking of herself in the third person, the protagonist stresses that, despite her illicit relationship with the married Rochester, she is still the same "solitary girl" (383) who had invited the readers to share in the details of her life story. In effect, Jane treats them as a sort of support system, as though they have had an active part in her history since childhood, when really they have only read about it. Beyond this implied intimacy, she takes great pains to control her outward disposition.

While Jane's silence towards Rochester appears like "a mark of absence," passivity, or indifference, that "same silence viewed from the inside," within the narrative, signifies her strength (Hedges and Fishkin 158-159). This is especially true when she recounts the moments that lead up to her departure. Rochester anticipates "a scene of some kind" (C. Brontë 338), but as Brontë does with the sudden stylistic jolt in the third volume, Jane Eyre subverts all expectations: She had "not wept at all" (388).

At this point, the heroine recognizes that she must "*act*" alone because "*talking*" to Rochester "is of no use" to rectify their current situation (389-390). Jane basically weaponizes her silence in dialogue. Her calm and quiet demeanour gives her "an inward power" (393), as she both shuns and pardons Rochester without a clear "word of reproach" (388). The endurance of her silence forces him to engage in the readers' own speculation about what might happen next. Although he is vulnerable in begging her to speak, Jane only notifies the "reader!" – addressed here with an exclamation mark – that she "forgave him at that moment" (388). This reference to her internal thought process prioritizes the audience's exclusive access to her innermost feelings. It is, simultaneously, a reminder that Jane Eyre's individual actions will dictate the plot, which also hints at the fictional properties of Brontë's literary production. Jane goes so far as to paraphrase her friend Rosamond Oliver's certainty, that "if known," her "history [...] would make a delightful romance" (465). The readers, opposite Rosamond, are already privy to the details of her saga, and thereby, treated as insiders.

As the third volume opens, the protagonist answers her own questions, as a demonstration of her refined narrative voice. When Jane asks "What am I to do?" she elicits the "answer [her] mind gave – 'Leave Thornfield at once'" (387). In the difficult days that follow her aborted wedding, she wonders "who in the world" cares for her, but then quickly recalls: "*I*

care for myself” (408). The direct manner in which Jane now communicates leaves no room for nuanced interpretation. She must repudiate the “charade of marriage [that Rochester] first proposed,” to “discover her real place in the world,” and so impart an ‘authentic’ story, or subjectivity, to her readership (Gilbert and Gubar 364).

On her way to Marsh-End, Jane negotiates the ostensibly conflicting binaries of religion and secularism, spirit and body, in order to find the balance that is so essential to her own enlightenment in the modern novel. This explains why she briefly adopts a state of acetic renunciation. Brontë measures Jane Eyre’s growth, or “process of becoming” as that of a distinctively female and multifaceted “British subject” (Armstrong 28).⁴⁷ The moor scenes emblemize the dual renewal, or purification, of both a literal (genealogical) and figurative (literary) lineage – changes that spur the heroine’s conversion, or metamorphosis into what Nancy Armstrong calls ‘the modern moral protagonist.’ After “a pang of exquisite suffering” (C. Brontë 428), Jane Eyre is quite literally reborn independent.

Although this transformation is made tangible by her newfound status as an heiress (479), she carefully goes on to trivialize the sensational manner in which “circumstances” suddenly fell “in order” (482). Jane has been “lifted [to] wealth” (479), yet remarks that there is “nothing ideal about it” (480). More specifically, she suppresses the serendipitous, perhaps even miraculous event of her inheritance, and re-labels it “an affair of the actual world” (480). Seeing as one of her only relatives had died, “the words Legacy, Bequest” intermingled with “the words Death, Funeral” (480). Regardless, Jane’s decision to split the sum of twenty thousand pounds with her three cousins (480) fulfills a commitment to equality that underscores the novel’s chiefly democratic values.

⁴⁷ Nancy Armstrong’s Chapter 1 “How the Misfit Became a Moral Protagonist” in *How Novels Think* (2005): 1-52.

In fact, she keeps just enough money so that she has the financial security and leisure necessary to perfect her craft, with the emotional (rather than economic) support of her intellectual equal. The self-assurance that comes with Jane's prestigious social rank pushes her to speak, or write, with unprecedented confidence and develop gravitas in her voice. For example, when St. John brands the heroine's language as "violent, unfeminine, and untrue" (512) – a line reminiscent of Mr. Brocklehurst calling her "deceitful" in volume I (95) – she retorts: "You utterly misinterpret my words" (512). In the past, Jane had "silently feared" male figures of authority (505), but now, in observing the extent of their hypocrisy, "hardness, and despotism," she bravely "took courage" to express herself as "an equal" (506).

Meanwhile, St. John's treatment of Jane as the angelic prototype of Christian charity, especially in his attempt to make her a "missionary's wife," would entail the heroine's own self-sacrifice, or "premature death" in India (503). Their dismal communication simply cannot serve as the foundation for modern marriage that Jane envisions with Rochester. While St. John is not "a man to be lightly refused" (496), he is once more a clear-cut exemplar of patriarchal power that the protagonist must admonish. Most notably, he contributes to the shallow conception of female identity that Jane works to deconstruct throughout the narrative. For instance, the clergyman denies his feelings for Rosamond because he views her frivolity as incompatible with the role of "sufferer," "labourer," and "female apostle [...] Rosamond a missionary's wife? No!" (470). Jane instead investigates women's identities as much more complicated than this predetermined social script.

Furthermore, St. John interferes with Jane's linguistic and literary pursuits central to the creation of her autobiography. First he berates Jane's refusal "to give up German, and learn Hindostanee" (496), which forces her "words [to be] lost in sobs" (498). His immediate reaction,

to “put away [her] books” (499), reflects John Reed’s behaviour in the novel’s opening scene at Gateshead. In that moment, she situates the clergyman as the ‘double’ of her only other male cousin (who shares the same name). St. John, as a servant to the church, lacks John Reed’s violent nature, but nonetheless embodies a patriarchal presence within the heroine’s genealogical lineage. Both Johns principally “wish to coerce [her] into obedience” (509) and suppress her creative actions through financial or spiritual dominance – efforts concretely overshadowed by the publication of her tale.

By the end of the novel, the heroine’s maturation is exemplified through a process of “narrative metalepses,” or the “double temporality” of the text that emerges just as two realms fully overlap in volume III: the world *in* which the protagonist exists, and the world *of* which the narrator relays (Genette 235-236).⁴⁸ Although there is no titled ‘Introduction’ to *Jane Eyre*, Brontë incorporates a ‘Conclusion,’ during which Jane pronounces the famous words: “Reader, I married him” – a moment of utter triumph (C. Brontë 552).⁴⁹ The exaggerated recurrence of the word ‘reader’ in the third volume hints at Jane Eyre’s self-fulfillment, as she (presumably) wins over her audience, and solidifies the autodiegetic paradigm of convergence between the protagonist and her narrative voice (Genette 236). This way, the audience absorbs, or at least becomes cognizant of the political perspective that underlies the novel, beyond its most basic, thematic world.

According to Peters, there is a “clear evolution [of] direct ‘authorial’ appeals to the *reader*,” which discloses Jane’s volition “to communicate rather than simply ‘narrate’ her tale” (95). It is, therefore, worth considering the increased rate of the word’s repetition from the first

⁴⁸ ie. Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980): 234-254.

⁴⁹ See Brontë 552 for Chapter 38, titled “Conclusion.”

to the third volume.⁵⁰ After all, the heroine's relationship with her audience both precedes and propels her romantic reunion with Rochester. At one point, she encounters a "respectable-looking" butler, who hears of her "own story" around town, as it becomes a topic of public interest (C. Brontë 526-527). The man then guides Jane back to her romantic partner, and in doing so, literally impacts the tale's conclusion. His intervention, as a form of 'reader response,' not only highlights the practical force and real-life application of storytelling, but also suggests that *Jane Eyre* develops an audience before she attains an actual readership.

That being said, the text's sequence of narrative metalepses structures Jane and Rochester's dialogue during their reunion scene. Upon the protagonist's return to him, she no longer expresses her own uncertainty, but emphatically responds to his. The newly blinded Mr. Rochester anxiously asks "who speaks?" (534-535). In her reply, the heroine both builds narrative suspense and asserts her identity: "This is her voice [...] I am Jane Eyre" (535). At this point in the novel, she openly shares the "narrative of [her] experience" (542), and so propagates her perspective on the series of events that constitute her life story. Having achieved "a strong, eloquent inner voice," the "final step in her progression [is to] communicate [it] to other people" (Peters 90). This is how Jane finally masters the narrative.

Through the protagonist's task to "re-humanize" and defend her husband (C. Brontë 537) as a victim of his corrupt aristocratic lineage (396), Brontë synchronizes the couple's shared reform as a prerequisite for them to marry. Opposite Rigby's accusations, she does not endeavour to make "unworthy" individuals "interesting in the eyes of the reader" (Rigby 154). Alternatively, she uses Jane's tale to stress the imperfection of her characters, alongside the virtue of forgiveness. Now that "divine justice [has] pursued its course," Rochester rightfully

⁵⁰ See Brontë 143, 160, 195, 220, 251, 264, 363, 388, 413, 420, 421, 439, 479, 491, 505, 512, 513, 519, 524, 525, 550, 552, 553 for her direct addresses to the "reader."

experiences “remorse [and] repentance” for his previous conduct (C. Brontë 549). Even more, he vanquishes the temptations that have come to define aristocratic culture and cuts off “acquaintance with all the gentry” (528). Despite his physical disabilities, Jane concludes that he has become a “better” man (548).

In addition, Rochester’s impaired eyesight necessitates his reliance on Jane to see and experience art, which further prompts her to recite, or narrate, “books” (554). It is only as equals that they engage in a creative partnership, and that the heroine, most likely, pens her lengthy autobiography – an ending that both mimics and digresses from the traditional marriage plot. As his wife, Jane becomes Rochester’s legal property, yet she also declares that he is “[*her*] Mr. Rochester” (526). Just as the Brontës’ fiction sets a new precedent for the mid-century novel, the couple’s relationship provides readers with a modern vision for marriage, predicated on the fragmentation of outdated archetypes. Jane, essentially, thrives as a female writer and respected wife. The multifaceted heroine can fulfill both roles.

However, as Freeman posits, Jane’s “own powerful words complete [*her*] history much more fundamentally than does her marriage to Rochester” (Freeman 698). Along with the protagonist’s biological son, “the inevitable outcome of *Jane Eyre* is *Jane Eyre*” (698). Her creative contribution to the world is two-fold, marked by the labour involved in both motherhood and literary production. The couple’s unnamed child and Jane’s pupil, Adèle, signify new hope for the future. Despite Rochester’s inability to see “very distinctly,” he is able to recognize “his own eyes” again, when looking at his first-born; a renewal of his once tainted lineage (555). At Ferndean, the boy will not indulge in the same pleasures that his father once did. Meanwhile,

little Adèle will receive a well-rounded education, less “strict” than Jane’s own schooling at Lowood (553) – a possible homage to Wollstonecraft’s “Utopian dream” (231).⁵¹

In this line of argument, the novel does not exhibit a “deepening pessimism about women’s place in a man’s society” (Gilbert and Gubar 399), but rather foregrounds an optimistic discourse of inclusivity. The married couple’s shared domestic happiness, a stereotypically feminine concern, now informs the status of a powerful British nation, based on the premise of a healthy middle class household, as a model for social equality. Jane and Rochester’s humble dwelling at Ferndean lacks the “architectural pretensions” that Thornfield Hall once had (C. Brontë 531). While the mansion’s former grandeur embodies the traditions of aristocratic culture, their humble and secluded dwelling instead signifies a shift towards a more wholesome lifestyle. Rochester’s fractured, or “crippled” body (547), parallel the burning of Thornfield, alludes to the reform of patriarchal institutions (ie. the estate and its brutish master). While Gilbert and Gubar divulge pessimistic undertones in the novel’s portrayal of Ferndean, “set deep in a dark forest” (369), Brontë likely emphasizes its rusticity to highlight the expulsion of Rochester’s consumerist values. From a Marxist approach, reform requires the rejection of materialism, hence the rearrangement of his literal possessions. Unlike Jane’s time spent at his estate, first as a hired subordinate and then as a bride, luxuriously decorated with diamonds and jewels (C. Brontë 344), she can now actively exercise her creative faculties without being reified into the household.

On the contrary, *Jane Eyre*, as a literary production, infiltrates the private library, or the home, in order to promote progressive politics to domestic audiences that might otherwise lack the protagonist’s public experience. Brontë’s conclusion, ultimately, eradicates the feelings of

⁵¹ Return to Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. D (1987): 211-239.

hopelessness that plague volumes I and II. Regardless of Jane's systemic disadvantages, she reconfirms that she was "born to strive and endure" (408), as part of a larger process. Through the vast "proportion of [her] inner monologue" (Hedges and Fishkin 156), the heroine partakes in a tradition that has historically ostracized female writers. It is no wonder that novel-writing truly "attain[s] cultural power" in the 1840s (Kreilkamp 138). The Brontë sisters drove an influx of female-driven fiction that came to define the Victorian canon. As such, Jane Eyre herself participates in the feminization of the period's "commercially valuable" novel form, often revered for its "functional, utilitarian," or even logical conception (Gilbert and Gubar 540).

Finally, the narrative delineates a movement from the paranoid positions first made available by the Gothic novel, towards a more critical Victorian literature, as the basis for potentially reparative reading and response. The pseudo-autobiography validates Jane's female perspective – her wants, wisdom, needs, and desires – and thereby, situates the audience to share in a greater consciousness about gendered social issues. Brontë imparts the tale, through her fundamentally flawed heroine, to speak on behalf of those women without the same platform, whose accounts may have been silenced before her. Through Brontë's characterization of Jane, and concomitantly, Jane's metafictional depiction of herself, the novel signals towards a transitional cultural moment. Not only does Brontë redefine the proverbial 'happy ending' for a modern, multidimensional heroine (who also happens to marry), but she deploys a language that is both strong and sympathetic, neither of which are mutually exclusive. Jane Eyre's "fiery words" (343), once in print, illuminate her silences only to subvert them.

Haunting as Literary Enchantment in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

‘Strange.’ That is the word most often associated with Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.⁵² The novel’s dizzying and disorienting effect, in part due to its muddled chronology, flashbacks, and dreamlike sequences, primarily relies on Catherine Earnshaw’s journal. Brontë implements her deceased heroine’s diary not only as a relic of the property’s past, but as a metafictional record of its inhabitants’ history. Most notably, it is the archival document and literary composition that first informs Mr. Lockwood’s understanding of the social conditions and characters at both Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. His central preoccupation (or borderline obsession) with Cathy’s tale, beginning with her diary, epitomizes Rita Felski’s definition of “enchantment,” as an all-encompassing “absorption in a text” (53).⁵³ Through her creative control, Cathy incidentally impacts Lockwood’s own written account, and in a sense, *possesses* his pen, to deconstruct the dominantly patriarchal narrative that frames her life story. Thus, she indirectly asserts her perspective and matriarchal authority within the community to finally enforce social reform and free her daughter from domestic confinement. Analogous to the Brontë sisters’ posthumous legacy, Catherine Earnshaw’s ‘haunting’ evokes the lasting power of literary enchantment and counteracts her inevitable absence – or silence – from beyond the grave.

Although Rita Felski does not focus on metafiction as part of her feminist scholarship, she analyzes the reader’s singular relationship to art’s enchantment, as well as the antagonistic “critics [who, conversely,] “pride themselves on the power to *disenchant*, [or] to mercilessly

⁵² See Appendix D in E. Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* Broadview ed. (2007): 345-371 for contemporary reviews of the novel, including an unsigned critique from *The Examiner* (1848), which opens with the statement: “This is a strange book” (348), as well as George W. Peck’s article on the text’s puzzling and “peculiar” nature (358) in *The American Review* (1848).

⁵³ ie. Felski’s Chapter 2 “Enchantment” in *Uses of Literature* (2012): 51-76.

direct laser-sharp beams at every imaginable object,” and in this case, at the imagined persona of pseudonymous female writers (53-54). At the peak of their publishing careers, between 1847 and 1848, several reviews of the Brontë novels focused on their authorial identities, specifically. The most “common complaint” about the Bells’ “violations of genteel decorum,” owed to the fact that the brothers could be identified, or ‘outed’ as women and sisters (E. Brontë 13).⁵⁴ They refused to put their images up for sale along with their books, and as Elizabeth Gaskell puts it, “the whole reading-world of England was in a ferment to discover the unknown author[s],” a game of “conjecture” that “ran like wildfire” (Gaskell 264).⁵⁵ Even Charlotte Brontë expresses a wish for their critics to treat the Bells as male, for “they would be more just” in their reviews (321).

Nevertheless, the Brontës’ pennames enabled their participation in the quintessential ‘creative process,’ without the distinct pressures of feminine propriety. Louise Lee invokes Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1968) in order to examine the seemingly contradictory role of women’s authorial absence, as occupied by Catherine Earnshaw herself.⁵⁶ This concept, as well as the “choice of a male narrator” in *Wuthering Heights*, reflects Emily Brontë’s own use of her pseudonym, Ellis Bell, to enter the exclusively masculine “realm of discourse in which nineteenth-century fiction had to be written” (Homans 69).⁵⁷ Contrary to Gilbert and Gubar’s claim that pseudonymity stresses women’s “self-effacing withdrawal” from

⁵⁴ Beth Newman’s “Introduction” to E. Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* Broadview ed. (2007): 9-29.

⁵⁵ See Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).

⁵⁶ ie. Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” in *Image, Music, Text* ed. Stephen Heath (1977): 142-148. See also Lee’s “Wuthering Heights” in *A Companion to the Brontës* ed. Diane Hoeveler and Deborah Morse (2016): 79-99.

⁵⁷ Margaret Homans’ “The Name of the Mother in *Wuthering Heights*” and “Dreaming of Children” in Homans’ *Bearing the Word* (1986): 68-99.

the publishing world (548), the Brontës employ these identities as protective devices that facilitate their active participation as authors.⁵⁸

According to one of the most prolific, pseudonymous writers today, Elena Ferrante, the choice of publishing pseudonymously demarks only “a structural absence of the author,” rather than her literal non-existence (255).³⁴ The Brontës’ personas shield them, like masks, or blankets, so that they can function as ghost-like entities. This way, they are able to transmit their stories, or lodge their proto-feminist ideologies into the public realm, to more effectively haunt their readers, without the anxiety of personal attacks made against them. Just as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) exposes the difficulties of securing creative spaces for women to write or express themselves freely, Ferrante positions pseudonymity as a rare, but freeing strategy for the Brontës to exist, like Catherine Earnshaw, in between spheres – a balancing act between their private life and public literary success (Ferrante 247, 339).⁵⁹ In navigating both domains, their pseudonymity broadens the typically domestic parameters of ‘the woman’s place,’ and so lays the groundwork for an enduring lineage of female writers. This is how they redistribute agency from a sole “male symbol system,” in which all historical “models were masculine,” to a universal “energy” that “reanimates [and] revives” the politics of canonicity, at times through enchantment (261, 265, 335).

Enchantment and Narrative Structure

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë digresses from a conventionally linear representation of time. Although the novel’s first edition was divided into three sections, as

⁵⁸ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

⁵⁹ ie. Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* ed. Wiley-Blackwell (2015).

indicated on its original title page, the plot's events do not conform to a clear, chronological order.⁶⁰ From the moment that Lockwood initially tours the property and stumbles upon Cathy's diary in 1801, he becomes immersed in the affairs of the past. Her journal entries, which were written in the late eighteenth century, inform the content of his own diary, as well as the main plot of Brontë's novel. The novel's jumbled timeline, however, is not a reflection of Emily Brontë's 'uncontrollable' writing style, as Charlotte Brontë implies in the 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*, but a fortification of Mr. Lockwood's confusion as a visitor to the property who struggles to unpack its complex history.⁶¹ Through his disentanglement of the community's hostile relations, bitter rivalries, unhappy marriages, and tragic deaths, Brontë reproduces the audience's potentially overwhelming reading experience through the example of one fictional reader.

Despite the importance attached to Mr. Lockwood's role as the novel's overarching narrator, there is actually very little known, or said, about him. As critic Rebecca Steinitz observes, his "diary becomes the book itself," yet Catherine's journal remains the "emotional focal point of the novel" (261-262).⁶² It is as though his narrative only exists in its capacity to house, or frame Catherine's more mysterious, sympathetic, and spellbinding life story. The hours, days, and weeks of Lockwood's residency at the Grange go by, but he fails to give any obvious indication of it. He only vaguely dates his opening and closing journal entries, 1801 and 1802 respectively, to mark the passage of 'real time' (E. Brontë 37, 284). Everything else that occurs, in those 250 pages in between, is measured in relation to Cathy's biographical

⁶⁰ See E. Brontë 35 for the novel's original cover page, with the full inscription: "*Wuthering Heights*, A Novel by Ellis Bell, In Three Volumes," similar to the title page in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

⁶¹ ie. "Curren Bells' Prefatory Essays for the 1850 Edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*," Appendix C in E. Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* ed. Broadview (2007): 335-340.

⁶² See Steinitz's "Diaries and Displacement in *Wuthering Heights*" in Patricia Ingham's *The Brontës* (2002): 252-264.

exposition. Lockwood's impersonality, *ergo* contradicts the implied intimacy of his own journal and further literalizes the all-consuming force of literary enchantment.

Regardless of Brontë's skewed time frame, the heroine's diary hints at her lingering presence both within the estates and throughout the course of the novel. More than that, it stresses her refusal to be forgotten like so many of the silenced women before her – from her own (aptly) unnamed mother to Frances Earnshaw, both of whom are not granted dialogue, and so go unheard. The narrator barely brushes over their fleeting deaths, as there are no scenes of intense mourning for them; especially not in the way that Heathcliff pines for Cathy (175). In fact, Cathy seems to intervene directly in the physical world to ensure that she is commemorated. Even Mr. Lockwood perceives the peculiar circumstances that led him to Catherine's journal. Not only did a wicked storm leave him trapped at Wuthering Heights, in her old bedroom overnight, but a sudden "glare of white letters [...] as vivid as spectres" caught his "immediate attention" from her bookshelf (50-51). It turns out that his "candle wick recline[ed] on [an] antique volume," which illuminated the fly-leaf's inscription, "'Catherine Earnshaw, her book,' [alongside] a date some quarter century back" (51). Brontë's use of the pronoun 'her' reaffirms the heroine's ownership of her story, rather than Lockwood's exploitation of it.

After all, it is Cathy's writing that truly sets the plot in motion and relocates Lockwood to its periphery. As in *Jane Eyre*, Catherine Earnshaw's literacy empowers her. Her library may have been "select," but its "state of dilapidation proved it to be well used" (51). As Lockwood notes, "scarcely one chapter" from her shelf "had escaped [her] pen-and-ink commentary" (51). She not only reads books, but writes in them, as a tool of communication and self-expression. This form of reader response divulges her inclination to contribute to the period's literary and cultural conversations, and essentially, provides a model for Lockwood's active participation, as

the reader of her story. The journal then “paradoxically demands” that he “engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively, in its co-creation” (Hutcheon 7) – hence his literal transcription and symbolic publication of her tale.⁶³

Just as Brontë’s audience presumably sinks into the novel’s “fictiveness,” under a mutually magical and self-perpetuated ‘dizzy spell’ (Felski 53, 75), the narrator’s compulsive ‘need to know’ is also a *choice* to escape “the stir of society” (E. Brontë 37). The terms of enchantment’s reception occur in “a state of double consciousness,” which accentuates the reader’s mastery of “a mental balancing act” (Felski 54, 74). Here, in the countryside, and in the details of Cathy’s life story, Lockwood abandons himself fully, away from the squalor of the city. It is up to him, the reader, to pick up or put down a text; to animate or abandon it entirely. The visitor’s decision, and consequent act of opening the diary, then “plunges him into a narrative situation in which he must take part,” from his own separate sphere (Hutcheon 139).⁶⁴ Despite Cathy’s “uninformed childish hand,” Lockwood patiently works “to decipher the faded hieroglyphics,” for he is entranced by their “rudely yet powerfully sketched” scenes (E. Brontë 51). In particular, he applauds Catherine’s “excellent caricature [of] Joseph” (51). The accuracy with which she reproduces his dialect, so many years before Lockwood meets him, suggests that she writes honestly. This is how Cathy’s “guiding rhetoric” incites him “to bridge the gap between his own world and the potential ‘fictional’ universe” of the diary itself (Hutcheon 140). It is then unsurprising that Lockwood’s ensuing portrayal of Joseph corroborates and gives credibility to Catherine’s account, which reiterates her impact on him as a storyteller.

Although Emily Rena-Dozier suggests that there is no single, dominant narrator in *Wuthering Heights* (757), the heroine’s diaristic narrative relays her subjective point of view as

⁶³ Linda Hutcheon’s “Introduction” in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 1-16.

⁶⁴ Hutcheon’s “Composite Identity” in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 138-152.

an objective truth, or reality.⁶⁵ Cathy's mode of endorsing her personal redemption (as the implied writer of her journal), promoted by Lockwood's own written account (as enchanted narrator), stresses the contrived nature of writing, despite its seemingly spontaneous presentation in the text.⁶⁶ The novel's layered framework then highlights the fictionality of Catherine's world. While the tale's "concentric circles of narration" (Gilbert and Gubar 249) include reports by Ellen Dean, Isabella Linton, and Zillah, as they "jostle and compete in the narrative power vacuum," it is the heroine's "narrative mischief making" that presides from beginning to end (Lee 82-83). The choppy structural organization of *Wuthering Heights* exudes both the constructedness of the text and the obscurity of literary enchantment, and therefore, hints at Catherine Earnshaw's editorial control. In light of this, Lee positions her as the novel's "shadow narrator" and metafictional "shadow author" (94).

Although the trope of dying young women in Victorian fiction typifies the worsened state of their 'silenced' condition, Catherine's aura reignites her existence from beyond the confines of her physical body.⁶⁷ In death, she may lack an active voice, but can compensate for it through the supernatural transmission of her written "Testament" (E. Brontë 51), without any fear of social repercussions. While Lockwood lives vicariously through her tale, Cathy exerts herself more concretely through him, as her living, breathing scribe. In any case, he craves the "two things that Catherine has almost to excess: a family and a [distinct] narrative" (Steinitz 261). Their unspoken relationship is complementary because, while it figuratively revives the heroine's creative agency, it also gives the bored aristocrat a sense of greater purpose. Lockwood's *malaise*, additionally, explains his motivation for visiting the countryside in the first place. As an

⁶⁵ See Rena-Dozier's "Gothic Criticisms: *Wuthering Heights* and Nineteenth-Century Literary History," *ELA* 7.3 (2010): 757-775.

⁶⁶ ie. Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Consciousness in Fiction* (1984).

⁶⁷ Return to Carol A. Senf's "Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender," *College English* 52.4 (1990): 446-456.

outsider, he exhibits an idealized vision of the community's tightknit circle, rustic simplicity, and pastoral lifestyle. While skimming through Catherine's journal, which he comes to regard as a sort of "treasure," Lockwood acknowledges that her words "kindled" a newfound spark "within" him (E. Brontë 50-51). As such, he develops an impassioned investment in her story, and deludes himself with the illusion that such ephemeral effects of enchantment might last.

Lockwood's literal vision of Catherine Earnshaw most compellingly encapsulates the force of her writing. After reading her journal, she infiltrates his dreams (53) and brings about "the intense horror of a nightmare" (56). Cathy's phantom apparition, "doleful cry," and grasping "ice-cold hand" (56) alludes to her persistence to finally be heard. Through the snippets of dialogue that Lockwood attributes to her, such as the call to "let [her] in!" (56), he transmits a voice onto the page that overpowers his own, and essentially, reduces him to a mere vessel for her to haunt. Just as Catherine appears, the library's "pile of books move[s,] as if thrust forward" (56) – an act and assertion of her continued control from within the literary world, as a gateway into the physical one. This paranormal occurrence undoubtedly convinces Lockwood that "the place was haunted" (57), and moreover, establishes the novel's core relationship between haunting and literary enchantment.

The Question of Voyeurism

According to Carol Ohmann, "*Wuthering Heights* is a consistently controlled work" that reveals Brontë's "sophisticated awareness [of] sexual prejudice" in patriarchal society (911).⁶⁸ Through her female characters, she personifies the constricted position of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, regarded (at most) as wives and daughters, rather than

⁶⁸ See Ohmann's "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics," *College English* 32.8 (1971): 906-913.

individuals.⁶⁹ For example, when Cathy engraves various iterations of her name on the estate's "ledge," such as "*Catherine Earnshaw*," "*Catherine Heathcliff*," and "*Catherine Linton*" (E. Brontë 50), she conveys an exercise in self-definition at the cusp of adulthood, emblematic of the struggle to assert her own identity. As Ohmann contends, there are "voices [that] command" the Catherines, both mother and daughter, "to say [their] prayers, to obey, be neat, humble, dutiful, industrious, kind," all qualities that serve to mould them into the paradigmatic "angel in the house" (913) – a social "type [that Victorian] culture has conditioned [men] to expect" (912).

Prior to Lockwood's encounter with Cathy's diary, he adheres to a narrow conception of female identity and even applies it to her daughter, Catherine II (E. Brontë 43). Based on his first impression of her, he depicts the stranger as a perpetually silent subject who "never open[s] her mouth" (43). Instead, he refocuses his attention to her physical features – the "admirable form" and "exquisite little face" of a woman "scarcely past girlhood" (43). Lockwood, as a conventional member of the aristocracy, becomes infatuated with the domestic image that he attributes to her. His rendition of the tale, as Margaret Homans suggests, "follow[s] the Wordsworthian and Lacanian pattern, [or] language, of desire" (69). While she rightfully argues that Lockwood tries to "bury" both Catherines "in the landscape" of his romantic discourse (99), as the idealized icons of his imagination, it is the heroine's narrative intervention that eclipses his masculine rendering, or interpretation, of her matriarchal lineage. Brontë's juxtaposition here, between "the language of an uncivilized girl [and] that of an overcivilized man" (73), then highlights Catherine's dominant role as the novel's natural-born, and notably, female creative genius.

⁶⁹ ie. Mary Beth Combs' analysis of the period's laws of *couverture*, outlined in "A Measure of Legal Independence" in *The Journal of Economic History* 64.5 (2005): 1028-1034.

Although Mr. Lockwood's "fascination [with] Catherine Heathcliff's brilliant eyes" (165) appears voyeuristic at first, the motif of the Catherines' identical stare functions to confront his masculine gaze.⁷⁰ Gaskell, interestingly, capitalizes on this imagery through her discussion of the Brontë sisters. In order to promote their own creative capabilities, for instance, she emphasizes the "light [that] would shine out" of Charlotte's eyes, "as though some spiritual lamp had been kindled [...] behind those expressive orbs" (Gaskell 76). The claim that Gaskell "never saw the like in any other human creature" (76) reaffirms the singularity of the female genius – a concept attached to the 'Brontë myth,' that also applies to Catherine Earnshaw's enchanting energy.

That being said, Lockwood is not only invested in learning about the family's past in order to approach, and possibly seduce, Catherine II. Before he even catches a glimpse of the "pretty girl widow" (E. Brontë 62), he is intrigued by the family's vast property, and "request[s] a short history of the place from [its] surly owner" (38). Heathcliff's "impatience," naturally, prompts Lockwood to seek answers elsewhere (38), which eventually leads him to Catherine's old bookshelf. The gravity of her domestic narrative, in turn, trivializes Lockwood's commentary to a frivolous "parody of male romantic desire" (Homans 69). The heroine's journal, as the symbolic figure of her lasting, literary agency, thus complicates readings of *Wuthering Heights* as the tragic encapsulation of women's vulnerability.

Genre and the Politics of Space

Lockwood cannot truly co-opt Catherine's tale, for it would require a basic understanding of her gendered perspective, which he evidently lacks. It is his determination to learn more about the protagonist that possibly persuades him to turn to the housekeeper, Ellen Dean, for further

⁷⁰ See E. Brontë 165, 197, 261, 283, 296, 298, 300 for more references to their seemingly hypnotic eyes.

clarification. Nelly's class, as a working woman passed marriageable age, signals her social invisibility and situates her as yet another 'ghostly' storyteller. Due to her domestic brand of employment, she adopts the paradoxical position between public and private space.

The Brontës' own elusive presence, as pseudonymous writers similarly caught between spheres, divulges their concern for women's professionalization in Europe – an issue dissected over one century later, by the Italian-American activist, Sylvia Federici, in "Wages Against Housework" (1975).⁷¹ Enchanting tales are disruptive because they trigger escapist tendencies, which for women like Nelly, who admits to having "read more than [anyone] would fancy" (E. Brontë 87), are entirely incompatible with the realities of her domestic toil. Cathy's story, which Nelly partakes in through her reports to Lockwood, is a major distraction from her household chores. Enchanted readers are therefore not "prone [to] covert manipulation," an assumption ingrained in feminine frivolity, but have remained the consenting participants of bodily and domestic release from their own milieu (Felski 53-54). It is no wonder that Nelly's memory repeatedly "recur[s] to former times" (E. Brontë 311). Lacking any adequate entertainment in her secluded setting, she then sensationalizes the family's history and transforms it into a fantastic tale that only intensifies Lockwood's beguilement.

While Gilbert and Gubar insist that Nelly "does not tell stories to participate in them herself" (291), and generally "avoid[s] taking sides" (290), the servant's shameless self-promotion indicates that she is a strategic interloper in both the narrative and the estate. When she tells Lockwood, mid-story, that she would never typically "dream of chattering on at such a rate" (E. Brontë 85), she falsely alludes to her modesty. Not only does she attach great significance to her role as caretaker in several critical scenes, but she credits herself with the

⁷¹ ie. Federici's "Wages Against Housework" ed. Edmond and Fleming (1975): 1-8.

children's survival after they fall ill with the measles: "The doctor affirmed [that their recovery] was in a great measure owing to me, and praised me for my care" (67).

Just as Lockwood's partiality towards Catherine II accentuates his own biases in the narrative, Nelly's self-importance marks her as an unreliable 'raconteur.' In the context of the heroine's hardships, for instance, she tells Mr. Lockwood that "there was not a soul else," besides herself, "that [Catherine would] fashion into an adviser" (91); a claim that not only places the housekeeper as an insider with privileged access to the estate, but to the girl's internal thought-process. In actuality, she "had many a laugh at [Catherine's] perplexities" (90), and goes on to treat her daughter, Catherine II, with equal disregard during her childhood. Nonetheless, Lockwood continues to take the meddling housekeeper at her word, and often implores her to resume, or "go on" (85, 111, 245). Like Gilbert and Gubar, the visitor deems Nelly "a very fair narrator" (165), which again intimates the power of effective storytelling, as well as his own susceptibility to literary enchantment.

Through Nelly's account, Brontë heightens the "tensions that inhere between [the text's] surface drama and concealed authorial intention" (Gilbert and Gubar 249), which also accentuates the novel's metafictional properties, as an exceedingly hybridized genre. Similarly to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* borrows features from the Gothic tradition, such as "dreams, a disputed inheritance," and perhaps most glaringly, the apparition of "haunting ghosts" (Hoeveler and Morse 35).⁷² Rena-Dozier regards the "narrational frames" – the (heroine's) journal within the (narrator's) journal – as a calculated technique that "both reinforce[s] and undercut[s]" two "major modes of narrative authority [in] the nineteenth-century British novel: the gothic and the domestic" (757). This is how Brontë "breaks down" the

⁷² See Diane L. Hoeveler's "The Brontës and the Gothic Tradition," Chapter 1 in *A Companion to the Brontës* ed. Hoeveler and Morse (2016): 31-48.

“opposition between [literary] modes” to illustrate the ways in which they are both “predicated on acts of violence” (760). The heroine’s own longing for freedom, meanwhile, involves the renegotiation of public and private spaces.

Akin to Gero Bauer’s study of the ideologically misogynistic ‘closet,’ *Wuthering Heights* illuminates the secretive, and most sinister facets of the Victorian household, as the microcosmic, or architectural embodiment of patriarchal social structures.⁷³ From the confines of the home, Catherine “begins her narrative with an account of her brother [...] locking [her] indoors” (Homans 72). This description and subsequent denigration of Hindley as the cruel “tyrant” of her childhood, as well as Heathcliff’s “persecut[or]” (E. Brontë 51, 66), explicitly echoes Jane Eyre’s characterization of her cousin, John Reed.⁷⁴ As the heirs of their family estates, *Wuthering Heights* and *Gateshead Hall* respectively, both men become “detestable substitute[s]” for their absent fathers (51). They not only adopt paternalistic social values, but severely enforce them, as though to compensate for their parental (or paternal) loss.

In light of this, the two Catherine’s cannot exert themselves, or explore their surroundings, with the autonomy of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Beyond the politics of their public and private domains, they strive to navigate the vast middle ground occupied by the moorland between *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. In their repeated quest to explore this unruly territory, both women negotiate the precarity of their social situations and identities. If *Thrushcross Grange* is “heaven” and *Wuthering Heights* is “hell,” as Gilbert and Gubar allege (273), then the space at the centre circumscribes a uniquely purgatorial realm. During her short life, Catherine declares that she is “tired, tired of being enclosed” (E. Brontë 169) – a constant

⁷³ ie. Bauer’s “Preface,” “Introduction,” and “Bluebeard’s Closet” in *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet* (2016): 7-100, as discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁷⁴ See Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* ed. Broadview (1999): 66-67.

condition of Victorian domesticity, and of marriage. It is the heroine herself who asks: “What is the use of my creation if I [am] entirely contained here?” (103).

Although N. M. Jacobs argues that “Cathy’s transition into adulthood is a diminution of her powers” (229), her final transformation, as a supernatural entity, reestablishes them.⁷⁵ Death provides her an escape from the home’s boundaries. During Lockwood’s eerie vision, for example, she gestures towards her own purgatorial position: “I’ve been a waif for twenty years!” (E. Brontë 56). Lockwood, with his conventional, Christian values, assumes that, in “walking the earth” all that time, Cathy suffers “a just punishment for mortal transgressions” (57). The heroine’s anomalous position, alternatively, grants her unrestricted access to the spaces that she was once prohibited from entering. While Jane Eyre is able to roam the moors independently – an act constructive to her maturation – Catherine lacks this opportunity during her short life. On the other hand, death ironically paves the way for the protagonist’s imperfect form of self-actualization, which grants her increased narrative control and unprecedented influence within her community.

Akin to Bertha Mason’s suicide in *Jane Eyre*, the “motif of self-starvation,” or ““Catherine’s Hunger Strike”” (Gilbert and Gubar 282), elucidates a larger “protest against growing up female” (391). In a sense, her eventual passing, shortly after her daughter’s birth, exemplifies a maternal act of self-sacrifice that is highly transformative. Brontë, nevertheless, negates the traditional implications of women’s pure, or saintly renunciation. Catherine’s physical demise is transgressive, in that it secures her daughter’s singular role as the family’s female heir. As Nelly observes, her last creative act on earth, in giving birth to Catherine II, literally strips Edgar from the possibility of extending his stringently patriarchal lineage through

⁷⁵ See Jacobs’ “Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in Patricia Ingham’s *The Brontës* (2002): 216-233.

a male successor (E. Brontë 172). In contrast to Frances and Isabella's eager participation in the aristocratic institutions of marriage and motherhood, Catherine's rebellion against social decorum, even after marrying Edgar, results in a death that is voluntary. The deathbed "image" of Cathy's "divine rest [...] wearing the expression of a smile [...] in perfect peace" (172-173) reflects her willingness to die, and in a utilitarian sense, reveals an underlying hope for her daughter to attain the privileges that she was once denied.⁷⁶ Catherine Earnshaw's death therefore reorders, and feminizes, the family's lineage. Her "social 'consumption,'" as Gilbert and Gubar call it (269), is really a form of physical depletion from her fight against patriarchal tyranny. In her purgatorial space, she does not simply disappear. She reincarnates into the eternally enchanting artist, or writer, and so proceeds to reign over the 'characters' of her story.

As such, she is free to gambol about the plains of an ambiguous middle ground, between spheres, and experiments with the traits of two seemingly strict, female identities: the angel and the monster. Catherine emerges as the purgatorial ghost, and thereby, blurs the conventional binaries of heaven and hell, good and evil. This might explain why Brontë overlaps her protagonist's unrefined, unlikeable, and sometimes, malignant characteristics, with her otherwise benevolent nature.⁷⁷ As Brontë's contemporary critic, Sydney Dobell notes, the character of Catherine Earnshaw is "so wonderfully fresh" and "so fearfully natural – new," because her "two natures [...] co-exist" (363).⁷⁸

In Nelly's own "double dealing" (E. Brontë 338) – the loyalty that she promises to both Edgar and Heathcliff, as the masters of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, she colludes in the forced confinement of Cathy II. When the newly widowed Edgar Linton requests Nelly's

⁷⁶ ie. *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill* (1973).

⁷⁷ Unlike the previous heroines of the eighteenth-century, such as Samuel Richardson's Pamela or Clarissa, Brontë's modern heroine is often unmotivated to act in a way that is morally sound.

⁷⁸ ie. Appendix D for Dobell's full review for *The Palladium* (September 1850) in E. Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* Broadview ed. (2007): 362-366.

“vigilance” of the girl (194), his “confidence” proves to be severely “misplaced” (194). Meanwhile, Heathcliff informs Nelly of his “design” to coerce Cathy II into marrying his son, Linton, so that he can legally obtain her family’s property (266), and the housekeeper remains “foolish enough to imagine [that] the memory of [the girl’s] mother might disarm him from desiring her injury” (213). As a reader of romance, Ellen Dean overestimates and relies on the distinction between heroes and villains in order to decipher good from evil. Through the employment of rhetorical questions, in the form of rigid dualities, she seeks her audience’s approval and reassurance: “Well, Mr. Lockwood [...] he forced me to an agreement [...] Was it right or wrong?” (164).

In failing to recognize the risk that any ordinarily flawed human being might pose to others, Nelly is unable to protect the girl. Not only does she underestimate the common threat that letter writing presents to young women in ‘polluting’ the home, she dismisses Cathy II’s correspondence with Linton as “very silly” and “worthless” (222), even while Heathcliff intercepts “every line” for blackmail (248, 277).⁷⁹ Although Nelly articulates the wish to shield Cathy II from his schemes, she ultimately decides that there is “no remedy” to rectify the situation (279). In other words, the servant cannot openly interfere, or align herself with particular family members without compromising her employment at the property. Thus “ended Mrs. Dean’s story” (279), in a moment of apparent defeat, inaction, and complete passivity.

Despite Nelly’s flaws, however, Brontë situates her as a surrogate storyteller who reiterates the heroine’s distinctively female concerns. It is she, and not Lockwood, who can “defer the sequel of [the] narrative,” and decide when to “proceed” (111). Through the housekeeper’s deliberation of “what to hide and what to reveal” (252), Nelly both censors and

⁷⁹ See Catherine Golden’s *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (2009) for more on the manipulation of letters during the Victorian era.

dramatizes the story. She draws inspiration from the genres that she is most familiar with, in an effort to rationalize Cathy and Heathcliff's bizarre attachment. In particular, Nelly infuses elements of the forbidden love plot into the story, so that Mr. Lockwood can follow along smoothly, and more easily interpret the characters as culturally identifiable figures.

It is only later, under Catherine II's management of the estates, that the members of the household demonstrate a clearer understanding of moral ambiguity and psychological complexity. The novel's underlying question of "what Heathcliff is" (121), answers itself. Just as Lockwood and Nelly eventually separate Catherine II's physical "beauty" from the fact that she is "not an angel" (280), Brontë insinuates that Heathcliff's outwardly brusque behaviour does not make him a villainous beast. She, therefore, implements the popular, yet polarizing, tropes of sensation and didactic fiction to stress the metafictional effect of clashing genres, often present in the modern novel (Barnaby 39).⁸⁰ In doing so, Brontë points to the constructedness of Catherine's narrative and forces the reader to reflexively locate Heathcliff somewhere between the romantic hero and the apathetic antihero.

Violence and the Intersectional Subject

Brontë makes it clear, though, that Nelly struggles to determine the roots of Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship, as well as the depth of their shared *ennui*. From a contemporary, feminist perspective, the pair's obscure connection stems from their social subordination within the patriarchy – and more specifically, the overlapping circumstances of gendered and racial marginalization. The forms of oppression faced by Cathy and Heathcliff do, in a sense, equalize them as kindred spirits. Not only are Catherine's "great miseries [...] Heathcliff's miseries," but

⁸⁰ Edward Barnaby's "The Realist Novel as Meta-Spectacle." *The Journal of Narrative Theory* 38.1 (2008): 37-59.

“whatever souls are made of, [theirs] are the same” (E. Brontë 102-103). Opposite Isabella Linton’s inability to understand “what [she has] married” (149), Cathy not only ‘gets’ him, but *is* him. If she and Heathcliff are *one*, as the heroine so passionately declares (103), then they embody the intersectional subject of systemic discrimination.

Today’s interest in intersectionality revises the novel’s fetishistic treatment of Heathcliff’s racialized identity, or more generally, his “it-ness” (Gilbert and Gubar 294).⁸¹ As the only ethnic minority that Brontë incorporates within the characters’ remote community, he is an obvious social outlier. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, “Heathcliff is always merely ‘Heathcliff’” within the narrative, whereas “Edgar is variously ‘Mr. Linton,’ [or] ‘[Nelly’s] master’” (280). In fact, the servant’s emphasis on “Edgar’s autocratic hostility” towards Heathcliff (280) further clarifies his “profound alienation” from Western, aristocratic culture (294) – an exclusive system of rank and prestige.

As their society gradually corrupts them, at the cusp of adolescence, Cathy and Heathcliff also begin to exhibit divergent forms of privilege. Although they are “constant companions,” Heathcliff cannot “keep up an equality with Catherine in her studies” (E. Brontë 91). The heroine’s social class, from birth, provides her with an advantage over her adopted brother, who she says “know[s] nothing” (92). Catherine’s acquaintance with the Lintons, additionally, prompts her development of a “double character,” so “not to act like him” in front of her peers (90). While her adherence to social decorum is apparent here, this self-restraint also derives from the pressures of gendered propriety.

Heathcliff’s eventual manipulation of the period’s gendered social codes, in an effort to avenge himself on those who “hated him” (66), meanwhile, betrays Catherine. His marriage to

⁸¹ As opposed to the more conventional term ‘otherness,’ Gilbert and Gubar refer to Heathcliff’s ‘it-ness’ to reiterate Brontë’s stereotypical portrayal of his animalistic qualities, attached to his racial identity, prior to the abolition of slavery.

and subsequent mistreatment of Isabella alludes to Cathy's "imprisonment in the role of 'Mrs. Linton, lady of Thrushcross Grange,'" which "foreshadows her mortal end" (Gilbert and Gubar 278). In wedlock, both women are virtually, and legally, non-persons, and therefore, suffer the 'collateral damage' from violent rivalries between their husbands.⁸² In Isabella's case, she is the victim of domestic violence and psychological abuse. Heathcliff manipulates the traditionally desirable features of romantic masculinity (ie. his dark, brooding, and Byronic persona) in order to seduce her, and essentially, disrupt the Linton family line with his unknown heritage.

Heathcliff is very much aware of her "delusion" in picturing him "a hero of romance" (E. Brontë 161), and so takes advantage of it. In exacting his retaliation against Edgar Linton and Hindley Earnshaw, he incidentally harms the women in their vicinity, and manifests the same virile toxicity that oppresses his beloved Catherine. Under patriarchal law, the heroine is first the property of her father, Mr. Earnshaw, followed by her brother and family heir, Hindley, and finally that of her husband, Edgar. The attacks perpetuated by Heathcliff on these men then inevitably become an assault on her.

Throughout the novel, Brontë depicts violence, and chiefly, masculine violence, as cyclical. In doing so, she stresses the paternalistic nature of the Earnshaw and Linton's interconnected lineage. Cruelty breeds aggression, which explains why Heathcliff, who is repeatedly met with "Hindley's blows" in childhood "grew [so] bitter" (66-67). The children of the next generation suffer the brutal consequences of their parents' grudges. In seeking vengeance on Hindley Earnshaw, as well as Edgar and Isabella Linton, Heathcliff enslaves their children, Hareton, Catherine II, and his own son Linton, at Wuthering Heights. It is no wonder

⁸² This only changes with the Married Women's Property Acts of the 1870s. See Mary Beth Combs' "A Measure of Legal Independence," *The Journal of Economic History* 65.4 (2005): 1028-1034.

that these children consistently fight on behalf of their fathers. When Linton reveals that “[his] papa scorns [Cathy II’s]!” she responds by calling his father “a wicked man” (232).

Heathcliff’s attempted attack on patriarchal culture, “by subverting legitimacy” (Gilbert and Gubar 296) is complicated by his overt participation in cultural hegemony. Instead of focusing on structural reform, as the deceased Catherine does, he “steals or perverts birthrights,” and indulges in anarchistic behaviour (296). By ensuring that Hindley dies “true to his [aristocratic] character, drunk as a lord [and] in debt” (E. Brontë 189), Heathcliff diminishes his son to “a beggar,” in “a state of complete dependence on his father’s inveterate enemy” (190). Hareton not only inherits his father’s debts, but his grudges, and basically, “lives in his own house as a servant” (191). Heathcliff’s vicious treatment of Hareton gestures towards his agenda. He has no intention to “alter the ways of his world,” but to beat, burn, and “literally discontinue them” (Gilbert and Gubar 297). As Gilbert and Gubar put it, “to kill patriarchy, he must first pretend to be a patriarch” (297), a method that contradicts Catherine’s social critique and strategic call for change.

That being said, Gilbert and Gubar’s categorization of Heathcliff as the tale’s “triumphant survivor” and Catherine as its “dead failure” (292) is overly simplistic. Both characters are configurations of the oppressed ‘Other,’ and as such, struggle to express themselves openly, or relate to their community’s inherently white, male ‘status quo.’ At the time of *The Madwoman in the Attic*’s publication (1979), there was no designated language, or terminology, used to examine intersectionality, which now occupies a key role in (what is considered) fourth-wave feminism. Still, Gilbert and Gubar’s acknowledgement of social, gendered, racial, and androgynous ‘otherness’ in *Wuthering Heights* (295) is foundational to the

development of twenty-first century feminist, queer, and post-colonial methodologies in literary study, as well as their corresponding lexicons.

The Haunting of Lockwood and Heathcliff

It is no coincidence that the main subjects of Catherine's haunting, Lockwood and Heathcliff, are the two figures who try to dominate her daughter. While these men, in some shape or form, are outsiders of the community, they are simultaneously complicit in its patriarchal social systems. Through Heathcliff's captivity of Cathy II in *Wuthering Heights*, akin to Lockwood's own imagined ownership of her as his coveted bride, Brontë correlates the brutality of domestic abuse to the drudgery of wifedom, intrinsically linked by the Victorian woman's condition. Through Catherine's haunting of Heathcliff, she precipitates their 'reunion,' in death, and as a result, frees her daughter from his dominion. At the same time, the ghostly heroine enchants Lockwood, not only to convey her social critique within the narrative, but to eventually banish him from the property – a measure that ensures Catherine II's protection from continued confinement.

Nelly's negligence as Catherine II's maternal guide, or surrogate guardian, perhaps also provokes the intervention of her deceased, biological mother. Had Lockwood and Catherine II's relationship blossomed, as Nelly initially hopes, the young woman would have become the prisoner of his underlying paternalism. Lockwood feels entitled to her, and even attributes the failure of their romantic attachment to the fact that she "liv[es] among clowns and misanthropists, [and] probably cannot appreciate a better class of people when she meets them" (E. Brontë 284). Ironically, the heroine's enchantment of Lockwood reverses the traditional gender roles that he subscribes to, and figuratively *entrap*s him in the domestic details of her

history. His thoughts, like “the air, swarmed with Catherines” (51). After all, it is Catherine Earnshaw’s enchanting journal, combined with Nelly’s collaborative account, that reveals the full extent of the family’s barbarity – details that finally persuade Lockwood to terminate his stay at the property.⁸³

Enchantment is, therefore, not the sworn “enemy” of criticism, but often functions as a gateway to reader response, and in this case, responsive action (Felski 56). The heroine’s incentive in haunting Heathcliff, likewise, involves the protection of her daughter from his control. As Isabella aptly points out, Catherine “wouldn’t have borne [his] abominable behaviour quietly; her detestation and disgust [would] have found voice” (E. Brontë 186). The protagonist’s interference in Heathcliff’s affairs thus subverts the state of silent subservience that he imposes on her daughter, and furthermore, assures her a better life. Heathcliff “so certainly” expresses his “strong faith in ghosts [...] a conviction that they can, and do, exist” (272). In seeing his dearest Catherine “in every cloud, in every tree – filling the air at night” (301), he is reminded that she bears witness to the harm that he inflicts on others, and so himself, suffers.

It is Cathy’s anomalous stance, an ‘absent’ presence, that “disturbed [him] night and day [...] incessantly – remorselessly” (271). Her physical state of speechlessness does not take away from the story that she relays, or from the lineage that she extends. Heathcliff is “surrounded [by] her image! (301), and vouches that he “felt her” and “could *almost* see her,” yet “*could not!*” (272). As Nelly puts it, he develops a “monomania on the subject of his departed idol” (301). At times, Catherine’s refusal to engage with him from beyond the grave, “a piece of superstition on the part of [the] landlord,” provokes his “uncontrollable passion” and the cry for her to “hear [him] *this time*” (59). Opposite Senf’s claims about female silence as oppressive, Catherine’s dead silence becomes a source of power for her. Brontë then insinuates that she hears

⁸³ See Chapter 31 in E. Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) for the details surrounding Mr. Lockwood’s departure.

Heathcliff's plea for her to "haunt [him!]" (175), but only intervenes on her own terms, with the spite of an Old Testament God(dess). As such, she displays agency in the novel's editorial process to decide whether or not she will make another 'physical' appearance in the plot, or communicate with the living once more, as she does in Lockwood's vision.

As previously mentioned, the motif of Cathy's eyes constitutes her haunting presence most explicitly. When Heathcliff attacks Catherine II, she channels her mother's "gaze" (298), and by extension, her strength. Even when he turns away, in defeat, she insists that he look right at her (261, 298), which prompts the question: What "fiend possesses" her "infernal eyes?" (296). It is remarkable that, in both Catherine II and Hareton, Heathcliff "find[s] *her*," the Cathy from his childhood, "every day more!" (283). When "they lift their eyes together," he is quickly "disarmed" by their "resemblance," or as Nelly observes, the "eyes [so] precisely similar [to] those of Catherine Earnshaw" (197, 300). It is only once Heathcliff perceives the stare of his beloved that he rethinks "the use" of revenge (300). In other words, he "lost the faculty of enjoying [the community's] destruction" (300) due to Cathy's posthumous confrontation.

It is worth reiterating that Heathcliff lives in "anguish," "agony," "grief," "folly" (59), and an "intolerable torture" (272) that "devours [his] existence" until death (302) – the ultimate event that precipitates the novel's closure. Brontë, thereby, reinforces the mutually destructive and creative energy of literary enchantment. Seeing as Heathcliff "repent[s] of nothing," he is almost guaranteed a spot in Catherine's purgatorial realm (308). In that regard, his mysterious 'malady' reproduces the conditions of her illness, which complicates the period's readings of hysteria and anorexia as strictly feminine forms of vulnerability. Heathcliff's "abstinence from food" (307), in particular, mirrors Catherine's own self-inflicted starvation. In his final days, he falls into a trancelike "reverie" (308), as though beguiled by her aura. As Nelly notes, it was "not

an everyday spectacle [...] to see the master look glad,” “excited, and wild,” in apparent anticipation for his reunion with Catherine (303). The last image of Heathcliff that Nelly puts forth is, unsurprisingly, eerie. His “deep black eyes!” (305), “so keen and fierce” (310), were the most changed, for “he had a strange, joyful glitter in [them] that altered the aspect of his whole face” (303). The housekeeper even alleges that she “tried to close” them, in order “to extinguish [that] frightful, life-like gaze of exultation,” but “they would not shut” (310). Heathcliff almost “sneer[s] at [her] attempts” (310), which implies that, like Catherine, he is not entirely exorcised from earth. According to Nelly, his entity was “not Mr. Heathcliff, but a goblin” (305), or possibly “a ghoul” (306), analogous to Cathy’s ghostlike existence.

If “the greatest punishment” for both Cathy and Heathcliff “was to keep [them] separate” (70), then their supernatural reconciliation represents a kind of reward. The novel’s concluding purgatorial image resituates Heathcliff as Cathy’s ally (312). In death, it is as though they are restored to their purest childhood selves, prior to their social degradation, and ready “to rebel” again (51). In contrast to his prior material concerns, such as Lockwood’s outstanding payment (284), or the ownership of his land, Heathcliff no longer troubles himself with “how to leave [his] property” (308). In fact, he had “not [even] written a will yet” (308), which exemplifies his renewed refusal to adhere to social decorum, as well as the legalities necessary to preserve the patriarchal estates. Brontë not only discloses the expulsion of his aristocratic social values, but the pivotal role that the heroine’s haunting plays in perpetuating this shift. In leading him back to her, Catherine returns Heathcliff to himself.

Breaking the Cycle

By the end of *Wuthering Heights*, it is apparent that the central figure of ‘the mother’ directs the plot and dominates the narrative. More than this, Catherine assures that her longing for freedom is fulfilled by her daughter, who goes on to govern the Earnshaw and Linton family estates. While Gilbert and Gubar maintain that “patriarchal culture is transmitted from one generation to the next” (281), Cathy’s renewal of her lineage posits Catherine II as a sort of female heir, and fortifies the community’s move towards a matriarchal organizing structure. As Homans proposes, Brontë arranges the novel “around two contrasting stories of female development” (68); a tale of two Catherinees. Their interconnected plots not only “chart differing possibilities for the woman writer” (68), but trace the gradual rise of matriarchal authority. Opposite Heathcliff’s nihilism, rooted in his desire to eradicate all meaning, and all culture, from his society, Catherine’s concern for her daughter hints at the potential for reform and the establishment of a democratic value system. On the brink of death, Heathcliff acknowledges a “strange change approaching” (E. Brontë 300). It is due to his decline that Catherine II can freely take back her land, “manage her affairs,” and oversee her finances (288). The novel’s lineage of Catherinees, therefore, corrects the plight of the “literally or figuratively motherless” heroines of the past (Gilbert and Gubar 125). They are no longer the “metaphorical orphans [of] patriarchal culture” (251), but the matriarchs of an evolving establishment.

Brontë further obviates this shift through Hareton’s metamorphosis. Although the heroine fails to “place [Heathcliff] out of [her] brother’s power” (E. Brontë 103), Catherine II successfully liberates Hareton from his own oppressor; this time, Heathcliff himself. In so doing, she ruptures the family’s generational cycle of masculine violence. Gilbert and Gubar refer to Hareton as “a resurrected version of the original patriarch” (271), and yet, Catherine II carefully

reforms him into a suitable husband for her, akin to Mr. Rochester's conversion in *Jane Eyre*.

Hareton's illiteracy, like Rochester's blindness, leaves him disempowered, and necessitates the guidance of an educated counterpart. So long as Hareton is deprived of an education, he remains the "model of a jailer – surly and dumb, and deaf to every attempt at moving his sense of justice or compassion" (E. Brontë 263). Instead of teaching him to read or write (127), Heathcliff then reduces the boy to a state of total dependence, and instills in him the "gibberish" of his own childhood, "that nobody [else] could understand" (65).

Prior to Cathy's instruction, Hareton has little to no firsthand experience or engagement with literature, and as Brontë implies, lacks the ability to empathize with others. Fiction, as an approximate reflection of social reality, provides a prototype for readers' interaction with diverse characters, or difficult scenarios. The task of Hareton's education demands the elimination of Heathcliff's toxic influence, in the same way that Helen Graham negates Arthur's corruptive impact on her son in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). While Heathcliff "lost the benefit of his early education" and the "curiosity he once possessed in pursuit of knowledge," Catherine II now cultivates this "love for books" in Hareton (91). Although Zillah dismisses her literary pursuits, and asks, what "all her learning [will] do for her" while in captivity (277), Heathcliff recognizes the threat that Catherine II, as a well-educated woman, poses to his own authority. For this reason, he provides her with "no materials for writing, not even a book from which [she] might tear a leaf" (281). This precautionary measure prevents her from communicating outside of the domestic sphere. It is meant to silence her.

To answer Zillah's question though, Cathy II harnesses her passion for literature to join forces with Hareton, so that they can confront their master strategically. While she had her mother's "propensity to be saucy," Cathy also inherits her "curiosity and quick intellect" (192),

now used to “superintend” Hareton’s studies (187). Brontë’s emphasis on their now shared education, regardless of gender, recalls Mary Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminist manifesto, in its aim to democratize power.⁸⁴ As a result, Catherine II and Hareton’s prospects for the future supersede their predecessors’ relative stagnancy. In contrast to Heathcliff’s destructive impulse, Hareton’s actions are restorative, as he secretly provides Catherine II with “half-a-dozen volumes” from the library (282). While her first husband, Linton, helped his father take “ownership over everything she ha[d],” including “all her nice books” (265), her relationship with Hareton prioritizes the collaborative control of their material possessions, ahead of the Married Women’s Property Acts of the 1870s.

While Catherine II initially refuses to read to Hareton (278), their eventual partnership redistributes power within the estates, to counteract the previous patriarch’s monopoly. Together, Hareton and Cathy II legitimately harvest and transform the land. In planting flowers (297), for instance, they symbolically reclaim their stolen property from Heathcliff. Prior to his death, Cathy II bravely tells him that he “shouldn’t grudge a few yards of earth for [them] to ornament,” seeing as he has “taken all [of their] land and money” in the first place (297). Put plainly, she and Hareton now share in the responsibility to actualize their community’s cultural advancement. In marriage, they will produce a lineage of their own, and go on to reform the Lintons’ and Earnshaws’ patriarchal family structures, as well as Heathcliff’s dystopian domain. The couple’s expansion of a ‘middle ground’ updates the social systems already in place, rather than blindly adopting or destroying them. It is no wonder that Lockwood, upon his brief return, immediately perceives “an improvement” (285) – “progress [in only] seven months” (312).

⁸⁴ Parallel to Jane Eyre’s interest in Adèle’s improved education at the end of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Catherine II’s instruction of Hareton alludes to Mary Wollstonecraft’s call for men and women’s universal education in “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.” See *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. D (1987): 211-239.

Just as Brontë presumably expands the reader's awareness of systemic inequality through fiction, Catherine II adapts her creative faculties to foster compassion within her own milieu. It is worth mentioning that her renewed access to literature, thanks to Hareton, fundamentally propels her "change" of heart towards him (290). In order to "remedy the injury" that she caused by teasing his futile attempts at reading (290), her own restorative action is required. Along with an apology, she then gifts him "a handsome book" and promises that she will "teach him to read it" (293). Nelly, naturally, serves as "her ambassadress" and takes "the present to its destined recipient" (293). In light of this inclusive, collective effort, Hareton's "face glowed – all his rudeness and all his surly harshness deserted him" (293). From that point on, all "enemies [were] sworn allies" (293).

This change, concomitantly, involves the decline of religious extremism. From the beginning to the end of the novel, there is a noticeable collapse in the control that Joseph exercises at the property. His jargon and moralistic rants position him as a fanatical preacher, antithetical to Catherine II's learned language.⁸⁵ In light of this, he partakes in the early corruption of Hareton's speech. Through Cathy II's refinement of his language, Brontë then captures the period's move away from firmly didactic texts and teachings, and towards the more responsive reading practices of critical, literary productions. Once her authority fragments the estate's patriarchal dominion, Joseph's tirades prove to be virtually ineffective.

In that same regard, Hareton Earnshaw's intellectual growth reflects the community's capacity for change. Lockwood's last description of the young man, "respectfully dressed [with] a book before him" (287), encapsulates the concrete transformation made possible by both Catherine's literary practices. As Ohmann suggests, their "society [is] reconstituted in the new generation" as "youthful, loving, [and] free" (913). Cathy II and Hareton's passion for literature

⁸⁵ Throughout the novel, Joseph speaks with a thick, Yorkshire accent.

prompts them to make amends, not only with each other, but with their brutal pasts. As much as the boy profits from Cathy II's tutelage, "his brightening mind," in turn, adds to her "spirit and nobility" (E. Brontë 290). Nelly implores Mr. Lockwood to see how "easy" it was "to win Mrs. Heathcliff's heart" (294), and yet, the couple's relationship is predicated on mutual respect, overlapping education and literary interests, which encompass an ideology of gender equality that is incompatible with Mr. Lockwood's conventionally conservative frame of thought.

In light of this, Brontë integrates a linear measurement of time only in the novel's concluding pages, in order to highlight the community's social evolution. Upon Lockwood's return to the countryside, he emphasizes the purifying force of seasonal change – from the "sweet, warm weather" in the springtime, to Nelly's excitement for Catherine II and Hareton's upcoming wedding, symbolically planned for New Year's day (285, 312). Brontë then gestures towards the residents' 'new beginning.' As Diane L. Hoeveler puts it, "the happy ending that is finally achieved through Catherine II's marriage to Hareton is built over the restless ghost of her mother's body" (38).⁸⁶ The "sudden impulse" that "seized," or compelled Mr. Lockwood "to visit Thrushcross Grange" almost a year after his departure (E. Brontë 285), thus hints at the lasting impact of Cathy's tale. He simply could not resist knowing its "sequel" (289).

Unlike Joseph, who remains in a state of renunciation, or religious self-exile at Wuthering Heights, which has since been "shut up" (312), Nelly Dean adapts to her changed society, and gladly follows Catherine II to the now restructured, and quite literally renovated, Thrushcross Grange. Under Cathy II's rule, both women are free to sing their songs (287-288), "lighter of heart [...] than ever" before (294).⁸⁷ The haunting power of Catherine's narrative proves that "the dead are not annihilated," despite the tranquil image of their "head-stones [...]" in

⁸⁶ See Hoeveler's "The Brontës and the Gothic Tradition" in *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016): 151-165.

⁸⁷ See E. Brontë 287-288 and 294 for Joseph's condemnation of their 'satanic' songs.

that quiet earth” (309-312). Just as the diary conceptually, and “theoretically, continues forever,” Cathy’s spirit “presumably roams the moors with Heathcliff” (Ingham 263) on “every rainy night since his death” (E. Brontë 311). These “idle tales” surrounding the heroine’s life story still seduce the “country folk” within her community (311). This is why *Wuthering Heights* is not just “a story of origins” (Gilbert and Gubar 302), but an unconventional vision for steady social change, rooted in women’s self-expression. Brontë’s fictional world, or ‘song,’ is perpetually in print, and so, goes on.

Compelling stories stay with their readers. In that regard, *Wuthering Heights*’ cult following is a testament to Emily Brontë’s ability to enchant with words that flow effortlessly off the page and into the readers’ realm. The link between haunting and literary enchantment legitimizes the lasting power of the written word, and on a larger scale, fiction’s capacity to incite social change. The Brontës, through the “haunting honesty of [their] art,” similarly embody Catherine Earnshaw’s “spectral” status (440). Their pennames have allowed them to penetrate forbidden spaces and fictional realms, like pseudonymous ‘ghosts,’ to brand and evolve the Victorian tradition. Without Cathy’s journal as a tool for her sustained expression, she could not effectively transfix, or sway, the residents of Thrushcross Grange or Wuthering Heights – an act that culminates in her daughter’s own resistance to and release from the estates’ masculine dominion. Despite the heroine’s own physical absence throughout the novel, she negates the seemingly inexorable silence of death. Her lingering presence gives the journal its spine – and Brontë’s novel, its pulse.

**Publicity, Consent, and the Collaborative Counter-Narrative in Anne Brontë's
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848)**

Anne Brontë, the most frequently neglected or ‘forgotten’ Brontë sister, makes an exemplary subject for Carol Senf’s study of silenced women.⁸⁸ In “Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender” (1990), Senf focuses her argument around Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in order to disclose the ways in which Victorian men systemically intimidate their wives into silent subservience.⁸⁹ In responding to second-wave feminist scholarship (that includes Senf), it becomes crucial to examine Helen Graham’s authorial, editorial, and directorial control of her narrative. Despite the protagonist’s precarious social position, first in marriage to the abusive aristocrat, Arthur Huntingdon, and then in the company of Gilbert Markham’s critical farming community, Brontë employs her diary as a metafictional device used to micromanage her public image and censor the details surrounding her life story. Helen thereby enlists Markham as an informal scribe, ‘publicist,’ and protective male agent – analogous to Brontë’s use of a masculine penname – to openly promote and legitimize her sympathetic tale among the residents of Linden-Car. In the text’s layered structure, through letters and journal entries, Helen and Markham effectively create a counter-narrative to refute the gossip, rumours, and slanderous charges made against the heroine. Together, the couple harnesses Helen’s tragic history not only to redeem her character and restore her reputation as a paradoxically *unfallen* woman, but to defend their marriage as a modern ideal that anticipates the reform of nineteenth-century judicial systems in the move toward gender equality.

⁸⁸ Discussions of *Tenant*, especially prior to the feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, “tended to be contained in studies of Brontë fiction as a whole,” which prioritized works by Charlotte and Emily (Thormählen 153). See Marianne Thormählen’s “Aspects of Love in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” in Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess’ *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë* (2001): 153-171, as well as Kari Lokke’s critique of “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” in Diane L. Hoeveler and Deborah D. Morse’s *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016): 115-133, in which she maintains that Anne “had to await second-wave feminism for recognition” (118).

⁸⁹ See Senf’s “Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender,” *College English* 52.4 (1990): 446-456.

Reading Between the Layers

As in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Tenant's* chronology is skewed, or in Senf's words, "unnecessarily complex" (448). Brontë sets up the story in the late 1840s, around the same time as the novel's actual publication date. It opens with Markham in his library, where he "mus[es] over past times" and recounts Helen's autobiographical tale by literally transcribing her journal entries, in letter form, to the elusive Jack Halford (A. Brontë 41). In the following chapter, Brontë promptly flashes back to the events of the heroine's history, twenty years earlier. The time that elapses between her opening and closing journal entries, dated September 21, 1821 and October 24, 1827, also sets the stage for readers to trace Helen's personal and professional progression, alongside her shifting 'alliances.'⁹⁰ From her toxic relationship with aristocratic Arthur, to marital bliss with middle-class Markham (as unpacked in his final letter on November 3, 1847), the protagonist's growth underlies the novel's convoluted organization, and moreover, mirrors a period of political unrest and evolution in mid-century England.

Although the "wife's story [is] framed by that of her husband" (Senf 450), the novel's overarching narrative embodies a creative collaboration between Helen and Markham that affords her the opportunity to define, write, and *rewrite* her identity. From the very first moment that "Brontë introduces readers to [Helen] by means of [her] journal," the heroine is "already defining herself as an artist" and creative director (Diederich 25).⁹¹ Brontë suggests that Helen "anticipates an audience" for her written testament, as a sort of "artwork" used to 'sell' or convince others of her benign character, which "foreshadows her later need to sell" her paintings (26). The couple's literary production, as a shared project, and perhaps even an informal public

⁹⁰ See A. Brontë 41-42, 333-334 in the Broadview ed. of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (2009) for the text's major narrative transitions.

⁹¹ ie. Nicole Diederich's "The Art of Comparison: Remarriage in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 57.2 (2003): 25-41.

relations campaign, thus serves to humanize Helen and correct the townspeople's generally negative perception of her.

The protagonist's diary, which Priti Joshi refers to as "the most abused aspect of the novel's narrative structure" (913), can alternatively be read as a tool for Helen's empowerment, and emancipation from her past errors.⁹² While Senf infers that Markham co-opts, or "edits" her story "to his liking" (450), and so compromises the novel's seemingly progressive message – an argument predicated on his appropriation of her distinctively female voice "sandwich[ed] within the confines of [a male] correspondence" (Carnell 2) – it is worth noting that she limits his access to select extracts of her diary that she agrees to share (A. Brontë 130, 363).⁹³ Despite her earlier plea to "not breathe a word" of the journal's contents to anyone (130), Helen explicitly chooses where her narrative begins and ends, while tearing the rest away (334).

The question of consent, in Markham's supposedly autonomous choice of publishing the secrets of Helen's past, has been examined to the point of exhaustion. Too often overlooked, however, is the fact that she openly permits his transmission of the tale in an effort to clear her "name from every foul aspersion" (366). No matter what "terrible reports" emerge about the protagonist (94, 107), Markham maintains that they are "malignant," "baseless," and "vile constructions," "lying inventions" (110), and "detestable falsehoods" (111). It is this dedication that prompts Helen to trust and provide him with her (written) consent, "to make [her] revelations [known,] as he judges necessary" (363). Through this emphasis on *his* judgement, the protagonist also anticipates the public's possible backlash to the letters' taboo subject matter.

⁹² ie. Joshi's "Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë's *Tenant*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 49.4 (2009): 907-924.

⁹³ See Rachel Carnell's "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53.1 (1998): 1-24.

Throughout the novel, Helen constantly expresses concern that there is “no [one] to preserve [her] name from being blackened” (307). She compulsively asks “who told” Gilbert what information, and most importantly, “what did they say [about her]?” (128) – questions that heighten Helen’s anxiety surrounding her public persona. Even more, she surmises that if the townspeople “knew all” about her life, “they would not blame [her]” for her previous actions (127). Arlene M. Jackson explains that, by “having Gilbert (a male voice)” substantiate Helen’s “story to his brother-in-law (a male audience)” (201), she is able to indirectly disseminate a polished self-image (ie. ‘good’ publicity).⁹⁴ The citizens of Linden-Car, akin to Brontë’s “Victorian audience,” would then “accept [her] account as truthful” because Gilbert, a man of stature within the community, “accepts it as such” (201). This is how Helen safely, and strategically, separates herself from the brutal details and transgressions of her past.

According to N. M. Jacobs, the narrative structure of *Tenant* “represents an authorial strategy for dealing with the unacceptability of [its] subject matter” (Ingham 219).⁹⁵ The novel’s plot signals a number of Victorian social issues, such as marriage law, divorce, and domestic abuse, whereas its formal construction “calls attention to the artistic production of [the] work” itself (A. Brontë 18).⁹⁶ The text’s critical and politically charged aspects not only stem from Brontë’s “increased social and cultural self-consciousness,” but of a greatly gendered dissatisfaction with the social systems put in place (Waugh 3).⁹⁷ So while Markham, as the story’s primary narrator, establishes an “outer reality” that is inherently “male,” it is his external narrative that safely funnels the story’s “inner reality,” its depth, conflicts, criticisms, and complexities, all “largely female,” into the reader’s realm (Ingham 219). The protagonist’s

⁹⁴ Arlene Jackson’s “The Question of Credibility in Anne Brontë’s *Tenant*” (1982) in *English Studies* 63.3: 198-206.

⁹⁵ N. M. Jacobs’ “Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in Patricia Ingham’s *The Brontës* (2002): 216-233.

⁹⁶ Lee A. Talley’s “Introduction” to the Broadview ed. of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (2009): 9-33.

⁹⁷ See Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Consciousness in Fiction* (1984).

creative and censorial presence lingers. Like the ghostly Catherine Earnshaw's hold on Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, Helen subtly impacts the way that Markham relays her account to Halford, as a figurative member of Brontë's own readership. This means that he does not actually violate her confidence, but fortifies it.

The novel's structural form plays with the artificiality of writing, which compels the readers to look beyond the 'surface' of the story's plot, and in this case, to read between its narrative layers. The various writer characters prevalent throughout the Brontë canon partake in the textual processes of production that reveal their mid-century novels' status as carefully consolidated fabrications with metafictional properties. In simple terms, metafiction provides "a useful model" for learning about the subjective "construction" of an apparently objective "reality" (Waugh 9). Brontë's *Tenant* showcases how writers infuse their individual biases and ideological perspectives into their work, either purposely or subconsciously, to fulfill a particular agenda. For instance, in the same breath that Helen insists on composing an archival "record" (A. Brontë 270), she positions Annabella Wilmot as its literary "villain" (297), which correlates her personal prejudice to an impartial truth, all for the sake of her own self-promotion. Through Markham's factual treatment of Helen's fictional diary, as well as the couple's repeated claims to truth, Brontë then presents their collaborative counter-narrative as a calculated mean to both recall their relationship's origins and reclaim its history from their detractors.

While Helen's struggles are specifically "rooted in historical reality," they are also "mediated by a literariness that disrupts one's ability to mistake the novel [as] an objective reflection of the real" (Barnaby 39).⁹⁸ Here, the prominence of journals and letters, two popular literary devices embedded in the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel, highlights the textual overlap of fictional and historical narratives. For instance, Brontë juxtaposes the novel's chapter

⁹⁸ Edward Barnaby's "The Realist Novel as Meta-Spectacle." *The Journal of Narrative Theory* 38.1 (2008): 37-59.

titles with the characters' dated letters and diary entries, so that they 'clash' and further elucidate the text's constructedness, hence its metafictional quality. The novel's narrative tension, above all, dissolves its illusionary "spectacle" as an encapsulation of biographical detail (39, 45).

Despite the apparent legitimacy of Markham's letters, he refers to their contents as "a tale of many chapters," and introduces certain sections with creative titles, starting "with Chapter first [...] 'A Discovery'" (A. Brontë 42). In transcribing the pages of Helen's diary, he occasionally uses the plural pronoun "we" to delineate a shared editorial choice, such as that to start "another chapter, and call it – 'The Warning of Experience'" (131). The heroine thus occupies an active, though tactically understated, role in altering and advertising her life story, which dismantles the reductive claim that the novel's narrative structure is "clumsy" (Joshi 913).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is not simply the "pseudo-biography of Branwell Brontë" (regardless of his illicit affair with the married Mrs. Robinson), but Markham's publication of Helen's own diaristic pseudo-autobiography (Diederich 25). Although Anne Brontë does not distinguish the novel as the protagonist's memoir, as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), both heroines deploy sympathetic narrative techniques to 'win over' their audiences.⁹⁹ Through contemporary "narratological analyses," readers can uncover these "previously unnoticed levels of sophistication" in the text (Nash and Suess 153).¹⁰⁰ In particular, Helen's rhetorical questions activate a metafictional interaction with her readers in order to arouse their support. When the protagonist wonders, in the pages of her diary, whether or not she will "escape in safety" during her journey from Grassdale Manor to Wildfell Hall (A. Brontë 327), she builds suspense and sways the audience to root for her. Like Jane, Helen refers to the procedure involved in moulding

⁹⁹ See C. Brontë 59 in the Broadview ed. of *Jane Eyre* (1999) for its original cover page with the inscription: "*Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, Edited by Currer Bell, In Three Volumes."

¹⁰⁰ ie. Marianne Thormählen's "Aspects of Love in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," in Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess' *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë* (2001): 153-171.

a public persona. Once the townspeople express “curiosity” about her, for example, she contemplates the repercussions of “gratify[ing] it,” namely “the ruin of [her] son,” but also worries that if she is “too mysterious, [she] will only excite their suspicions” and “invite [further] conjecture” (333). This motivates Helen to develop a middle ground, in which she communicates cautiously, at times through Markham as her spokesperson. It is unsurprising, then, that he adds guiding questions to the margins of her narrative, or in between journal entries, to engage and find common ground with his reader: “Well Halford, what do you think of all this?” (334).

In directing “all of [his] sympathy” towards the heroine, and all of his “fury against [Arthur]” (334), Markham steers the community’s own interpretive ‘reading’ of Helen’s history. His emotional investment in the diary’s plot and characters – including the “selfish gratification” that he expresses in witnessing “her [first] husband’s gradual decline” (334), fuels the audience’s trust in all that Helen posits as truth. At the time that Markham transcribes her tale, the couple is already married, but that does not stop him from articulating an exaggerated concern for her fate. Markham’s rhetoric certifies that Helen’s “character sh[i]ne[s] bright, and clear, and stainless” (335), which in turn, urges the letters’ recipient to agree: “*she* was blameless, of course” (99).

In negotiating dualities of intimacy and legitimacy, Brontë postulates Helen’s journal and its reproduction as “both an [art] object and a performance” (Hutcheon 144).¹⁰¹ Once she reveals that Halford is Markham’s brother-in-law, it becomes clear that he could have simply waited to share the story with him in person, just as Halford relayed the “most remarkable occurrences” of his own life “when [the two men] were together last” (A. Brontë 41). Instead, by writing what Markham deems a “proof of [his] frankness and confidence” through the “full and faithful account” of Helen’s history (41), he is able to stage and effectively endorse the tale’s

¹⁰¹ See Linda Hutcheon’s “Composite Identity: The Reader, the Writer, the Critic” in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013): 138-152.

authenticity. Markham's statement here mirrors Helen's language when she describes the purpose of keeping a journal: "This paper will serve [as] a confidential friend into whose ear I might pour forth the overflowings of my heart" (150) and "indulge my thoughts unscrutinized" (226). The couple's narratives remain consistent so that they corroborate each other's accounts.

In looking beyond the outward transparency of Markham's letters, however, it is wholly plausible that Helen dictates their contents, and potentially even directs his hand. There could be no other viable reason for him to reproduce such an extensive account of her past, in all of its "minute details" (40) – an otherwise futile and time-consuming activity. In that same respect, Lee A. Talley argues that Helen's narrative "about the difficulties of her marriage [...]" overpowers Markham's lighter tale of an awkward bachelor's romance" (17). As he himself admits, there was "nothing [else] to tell," or recount to Halford, in their correspondence (41). Markham's 'lack' of masculocentric ideas, or personal anecdotes, perhaps conveys the period's newfound interest in women's stories.¹⁰² By the mid-century, men of the public world could be found reading or discussing works by female authors, which reflects the way that Helen's tale fills a certain void, or gives greater (creative) purpose, to Markham's own life.

Markham's writing, as a form of protective intervention, thereby contrasts with Helen's role as the creative agent of their counter-narrative. After all, she can manipulate entire sequences of her history, or omit them altogether, without the residents of Linden-Car knowing any better. In other words, Markham and his neighbours would be unable to accurately dissect or dispute her claims. Even Senf remarks that "the central portion of the novel, Helen's journal, includes information about people Markham has never met" (447) – specifics that he regards as precise, and so, imparts to Halford. His near-blind "acceptance of Helen's story," as the source

¹⁰² Consider the influx of female-driven fiction in the 1940s and 1950s, as discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

material for his letters, concomitantly situates her journal as the metafictional “mean through which Anne Brontë increases the novel’s credibility” (Jackson 201). Helen then maintains an authoritative stance because she writes, or invents, the characters that her public representative perceives as ‘real.’

The couple’s joint effort to alleviate Helen from the blame of her first, failed marriage – an event brought forth by Arthur’s wrongdoings, rather than a reflection of the protagonist’s innate immorality – projects the Christian virtue of forgiveness onto the townspeople (as literal and figurative readers) to respond, or partake in Brontë’s vision for divine social justice. Through the development of Helen’s narrative voice, as the first-person narrator of her diary, she is ideally able to both purge of and repent for her past; to tell “all [of her] history [...] in order to excuse [her] conduct” (336). Markham, accordingly, portrays Helen as a dedicated wife and mother, unrewarded by her first husband. As such, the novel’s collaborative structure does more than imitate “the way that women’s views” were systemically “silenced,” or usurped, by men (Senf 455). In contrast, it promotes the fight for gender equality as the shared responsibility of men and women alike.¹⁰³ The success of Helen’s new beginning in Markham’s town is thus predicated on his active will, or volition, to speak up and align himself with her, as a member of a historically marginalized group. When Helen blatantly asks if he is “hero enough to unite” with someone “despised by all” (A. Brontë 111), Brontë foreshadows his transformation into an unconventional hero, who both defies and redefines the norms of Victorian masculinity, in his support of the modern heroine.

¹⁰³ Think of today’s feminist ‘HeForShe’ initiatives.

The Subversion of Gossip and Letter Writing

Gossip, in its most basic form, entails a process of storytelling and often, fiction-making. Whether factual or unfounded, part-truth or half-lie, scandalous information carries a certain weight, and so fuels its own publicity. That being said, Brontë reiterates the role of ‘hearsay’ within Markham’s social milieu – the setting that he himself describes as “the world of farming community gossip” (127). Together, he and Helen recognize that there is an inherently human discomfort surrounding the ominous ‘unknown,’ which compels the citizens of Linden-Car to try and fill in any missing links, or gaps. In capitalizing on gossip’s unparalleled power to generate publicity, the couple predisposes the townspeople to think more favourably about Helen.

From the moment that the tenant of Wildfell Hall is first introduced in Markham’s rural village, there is widescale speculation surrounding “the probable and improbable history of the mysterious lady” (45). Having previously lived among Arthur’s duplicitous acquaintances, Helen is more than familiar with the significance of gossip in such tightknit social circles, which likely incites her to solicit Markham as her unofficial publicist. In any event, it is his family and friends who label her “ignorant[t]” and “self-opinionated” (46). Mrs. Markham even chastises the young widow’s failure to learn the gendered social codes that “every respectable female ought to know” (46). The dominant narrative attached to Helen, unsurprisingly, depicts her as deceitful, irresponsible, and immoral. Not only was there immediate concern about “her appearance, manners, and dress” (46), but “shocking reports” (91) about her past. As a result, she is already disliked in the town when she goes on to marry one of its most prominent bachelors.

In light of their neighbours’ “idle slander,” it makes sense that Helen and Markham would actively seek a way to “silence or disprove” their misconceptions (92). As Brontë intimates, it takes time for them to conceive a lasting change within the community. Initially,

Gilbert could barely “endure [the townspeople’s] company” and so often excludes himself from it (96); an action that is ineffective in altering their views. Other times, he adopts an aggressive approach, and brazenly argues that they should “hold [their] tongues” because their “suspicions [are] utterly misplaced” (the near-equivalent to telling someone that they are wrong, without explanation), which proves to be equally futile (92-93, 95). It is only during the couple’s budding courtship that Helen makes the courageous decision to open up about her past. By providing Markham with some answers, and filling in the blanks of her own choosing, she equips and meticulously conditions him to respond to any other charges made against her.

To that end, Helen’s narrative omissions signal a sovereign choice. As she tells Markham, she “was wearied to death with small-talk” (97), during which “there [was] no exchange of ideas or sentiments, and no good given or received” (98). Helen may not always express her opinions openly, but that does not mean that she lacks the power of self-articulation. In moments of intense emotion, she found that she “could not trust [her]self to speak” (276), and even admits, on more than one occasion, that she must “suppress” her feelings in order to avoid an outburst (193, 279). In the face of cruelty, it is prudent of her to preserve this “strain” of silence (272), indicative of the modest image that she eventually designs for herself in writing. While Helen’s “nature was not originally calm,” she “learn[s] to appear” it through “many repeated efforts” (294), and like Jane Eyre, comes to rebel through more creative strategies. In fact, she discerns early on that Arthur’s “delight increased in proportion to [her] anger and agitation” (193), and so subverts her outward silence to, instead, communicate a highly critical perspective into her journal.

The couple’s dissemination of Helen’s story, meanwhile, embodies an anomalous form of damage control through secret sharing, and “what is, in essence, gossip” (Joshi 918). This is how

the narrative shifts “from a private, confessional mode,” as epitomized by the heroine’s diary, “to a more public exchange of communications” – not only between Markham and Halford, but among the ‘secondary readers,’ bystanders, and even eavesdroppers, in their vicinity (Hoeveler and Morse 126).¹⁰⁴ It would be fair to assume that the bulk of their correspondence was informally ‘passed on,’ by word of mouth, to the residents of Linden-Car, including Markham’s own family members. In the nineteenth century, people often read their letters aloud, or summarized them to members of their household, as a topic of discussion, debate, or mere entertainment.¹⁰⁵ It would have been somewhat expected for Halford to show his letters (or at least, recite their contents), to his wife, Rose, who also just so happens to be Markham’s sister. As Brontë denotes, it was almost too easy to meddle in other peoples’ affairs. One obvious example of this is when Gilbert gets his hands on Helen’s letters to her brother, which catalogue the particulars of Arthur’s illness and physical decline (A. Brontë 356). While these pages were addressed solely to Frederick Lawrence, he still provides Markham with open access to them, which prompts him to copy their contents, verbatim, into his own narrative. By so thoroughly outlining the tragic events of Helen’s life story, to Halford specifically, Markham clearly anticipates their broader circulation. Even he specifies his resolve to, one day, fully “enlighten [his] mother and sister on [the heroine’s] real history and circumstance, just so far as it is necessary to make the neighbourhood sensible” (347, 363).

Moreover, Brontë implements letters to “suggest how stories” function as “a persuasive tool for powering reform” (Golden 44). While letter writing was considered a leisure activity of the upper classes, Markham and his middle class farming family were, by the mid-century, able to take part in this once prestigious pastime. Due to “the spread of the railway transportation

¹⁰⁴ ie. Kari Lokke’s critique of “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” Chapter 7 in Diane L. Hoeveler and Deborah D. Morse’s *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016): 115-133.

¹⁰⁵ See Catherine Golden’s *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (2009).

during the 1840s,” the postal service revolution took off, and as a result, democratized the practice of letter writing (Ingham 148).¹⁰⁶ England’s new mailing system, the Penny Post, finally established the flat rate of a single penny per letter (Golden 79), which allowed average workers to send out their mail without worrying about its cost. This explains how Markham could afford to write such exhaustively long passages to his brother-in-law.

Although “the Penny Post laid itself open to overuse, abuse, misuse, and manipulation” (170), Helen and Markham exploit its negative effects for the sake of a more positive outcome; namely, to publicize their collaborative counter-narrative. Brontë’s emphasis on women’s private histories illuminates the atrocities that are often hidden from public view. Letters infiltrate the sacred domestic space to exert an influence both within and outside the household space. Just as the Penny Post provides members of the lower classes with new opportunities to distribute their mail, it substantiates women’s presence in society, from within the confines of their home.

Of course, gossip can inflame pre-existing prejudices and spark outrage, but it can also provoke sympathy. In plain terms, Helen subverts the invasive risk that leisure activities, like gossip or letter writing, pose to women and their reputations, and conversely, harnesses the novel’s male correspondence to further perpetuate her own positive self-image. Seeing as she and Markham are “suspicious of the spoken,” they “put their faith in the written word” to (partially) “redeem gossip” through its triggering ability to open up a dialogue about otherwise “unspeakable” topics intrinsic to the female experience (Joshi 919). Rather than shamefully hiding her past any longer, the heroine outlines every personal tragedy as symptomatic of the period’s patriarchal systems (social, legal, or political) to coherently convey her critique of them.

¹⁰⁶ Sharon Marcus’ “The Profession of the Author,” Chapter 7 in *The Brontës* ed. Patricia Ingham (2002): 142-168.

The Precarity of Space, Pseudonymity, and Writing ‘Behind the Scenes’

In conversation with the previous two sections, it is worth noting how the novel’s organization emulates the politics of space. Brontë imparts “a conscious commentary on the intractable cultural rift between public and private spheres” (Carnell 1), in order to stress the artificiality of such a gendered divide. Through Helen and Markham’s combination of the letter form, a medium that encompasses both public and private worlds, and the diary, a private composition by nature (now made public), Brontë blurs the boundaries that separate the masculine “political realm [of] debate and exchange, [and] the domestic household” (3). In doing so, she deconstructs the period’s rigidly dichotomous understandings of gender.

As Kari Lokke puts it, Helen and Markham’s narratives overlap and “break down distinctions between gendered realms of language,” mainly through the heroine’s “detailed recording of [a] masculine,” rakish world, opposite Markham’s leisurely correspondence, which recalls the decidedly “female, world of parlour gossip” (Hoeveler and Morse 130). Like *Jane Eyre*, *Tenant* “revises the eighteenth-century novel,” as made explicit by “Helen’s inner narrative [of] imprisonment” (Carnell 16). While Gilbert and Gubar deem Anne Brontë’s work a “failure” in her supposed “attempt to master,” or replicate, “the Richardsonian rigours of the epistolary novel” (317), she actually transforms the literary tropes of the eighteenth century to reiterate the couple’s crafty construction of a contemporary, more multidimensional narrative.¹⁰⁷ The stoic Helen Graham is no Pamela or Clarissa, nor is she meant to be.¹⁰⁸

Instead, Brontë’s heroine manifests “the rationality of the public sphere” (Carnell 10), adjacent to Markham’s sentimental articulation of his every emotion. Through Helen’s narrative,

¹⁰⁷ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

¹⁰⁸ ie. Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748).

she exerts her power over him, which not only showcases the force of effective storytelling on its readers, but elucidates the “feminizing influence of the literary public sphere” (15). The novel’s framework overlays Helen and Markham’s viewpoints so that they are nearly indistinguishable. This apparent amalgamation of ideas situates them as equals, both capable of devising a poignant social critique through their writing. Above all, it ensures that what is written cannot be held solely against the heroine, who, as a woman, faces a more severe degree of public scrutiny. She, alone, would have been judged harshly for choosing to divulge the details of domestic abuse, just as Brontë’s own critics denigrate her for the novel’s coarseness.¹⁰⁹

Helen’s editorial approach to Markham’s transmission of her narrative thus corresponds to Brontë’s own indirect strategy for publication: the adoption of her masculine pseudonym, Acton Bell. Just as Gilbert facilitates the insertion of Helen’s “voice in public debate” (11), and shares the journal’s narrative from her point of view, Brontë enters the period’s predominantly masculine literary marketplace behind the shield of a protective penname. Had the Brontë sisters openly “defin[ed] their voices as female,” they would have faced an increased risk of social persecution, as well as programmatic exclusion from England’s publishing world (8). In that same regard, Helen’s writing, as well as her visual art, enters the public arena through a sort of ‘middleman.’ Female artists “were not supposed to paint for a living, any more than they were supposed to write,” which explains why the heroine, “like her creator, indeed [...] chooses to retain her anonymity as an artist” (Ward 166).¹¹⁰ More specifically, she “take[s] the precaution to give a false name” to the subjects that appear in her work, in the event that her audience “recognize[s] [her] style, in spite of the false initials” (A. Brontë 70). This tactic reflects Brontë’s embodiment of the Bell persona to cathartically expel her brother’s vices (ie. alcoholism, as well

¹⁰⁹ For contemporary reviews of the novel, see Appendix B in the Broadview ed. of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (2009): 418-440.

¹¹⁰ Ian Ward’s “The Case of Helen Huntingdon,” *Criticism* 40.2 (2007): 151-182.

as his adulterous affairs) from her own conscience, and safely onto the page (11). Both the fictional Helen, and her author, Anne Brontë, take this measure so that they can pursue their respective artistic visions and convey an intersecting proto-feminist commentary.

The strict standards of female propriety in nineteenth-century England designate very few acceptable spaces for women to exert their influence.¹¹¹ It is therefore convenient for Brontë's mostly female, contemporary readership to figuratively 'get lost' in, or identify with, the heroine's struggles as implanted in fiction. Her readers, through their response, can then 'enter' the narrative, or dialogue, to reaffirm and further relay Helen's ideological perspective (a likely iteration of theirs) into the greater public's consciousness (Kreilkamp 138).¹¹² As the text's primary artist figure, Helen is the pseudo-author of Brontë's novel, and Markham, akin to Currer Bell, serves as a sort of male 'mouth piece' that both facilitates her public engagement and protects her image.

Law, Morality, and the Female 'Criminal'

Although literature "in and of itself" cannot "guarantee affective humanism" (Carnell 15), Brontë propagates unspoken truths and injustices into the public domain. By the mid-century, the novel becomes a tool to incite social change, and as Mary Poovey contends, an informal 'social document,' more humanizing than the period's government-run projects, grounded in measurable data, hard facts, and statistics.¹¹³ The references to Victorian law in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reiterate the radical changes that either coincide with, or incidentally derive from, the novel's publication. Even more, Brontë's study of women's legal status (as non-

¹¹¹ Gero Bauer's *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet* (2016).

¹¹² Ivan Kreilkamp's Chapter 4 "Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship" in *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005): 122-154.

¹¹³ See Poovey's *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988).

persons) anticipates the more distinct calls for change that emerge less than one decade later, as exemplified by Caroline Norton's infamous court petition.¹¹⁴ Although Brontë does not elicit her critique in the same straightforward manner that Norton does, her fictional heroine's rhetoric predicts the language that Norton uses in her campaign against the period's laws of coverture.

As previously mentioned, the associations commonly made between 'female space' and the home were contradictory. After all, women could not legally claim land ownership until several acts were developed in the mid to late nineteenth century. Prior to this transition, England's laws of coverture positioned "husband and wife [as] a single person under law: a man with 'property'" (A. Brontë 20), which inevitably limited Helen's rights "during both the 1820s action of the novel and the 1840s writing" of it (20), a timeline that traces the jump from her first to her second marriage.¹¹⁵ As the wife of Arthur Huntingdon, followed by Gilbert Markham, the protagonist is "divested of autonomous legal status – unable to sue, to contract, to bequeath property, [or] to enjoy custody of children" (Ward 153). This explains why "there was no 'case'" for her, "at least not in formal juristic terms" (151).

In weighing "the effect of [Victorian] law" on the lives of seemingly "real women" (152), Brontë demonstrates how vulnerable or marginalized populations, *and* their children, remain systemically disadvantaged by the governing structures meant to protect them. Marrying into an aristocratic family should, hypothetically, guarantee Helen a sense of security and financial stability, yet her husband is granted economic leverage and managerial rights over her (Combs 1031).¹¹⁶ As Helen admits, she "would leave [him] tomorrow" if not "for [her] child" (aptly named Arthur II), who would have to remain under his father's care (A. Brontë 267). Despite the

¹¹⁴ See "A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill" (1855), in which Caroline Norton disputes England's laws of coverture.

¹¹⁵ See Talley's "Introduction" to the Broadview ed. of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (2009): 9-33.

¹¹⁶ ie. Mary Beth Combs' "A Measure of Legal Independence," *The Journal of Economic History* 65.4 (2005): 1028-1034.

fact that Arthur is a philandering alcoholic, the law prohibits her from taking legitimate action against him due to “the double sexual standard[s]” still “widely accepted” (Hoeveler and Morse 356).¹¹⁷ The heroine, consequently, becomes disillusioned with the ‘freedoms’ of adulthood that she first envisions for herself. They do not apply to wifehood.

Arthur, meanwhile, manipulates the period’s coverture laws to further control his wife. He knows that she “must identify [herself] with him,” as well as “his degradation, his failings, and transgressions,” and so threatens Helen’s “debase[ment]” through their “union” (A. Brontë 234). Put plainly, the “abused wife was left with no legal recourse” because her “husband’s bad behaviour automatically reflected upon [her]” (20). Arthur, at times, exploits his own alcoholism to both humiliate and silence Helen: “If you bother me with another word, I’ll ring the bell and order six bottles of wine” (229). In acting out this way, he not only takes advantage of the law, but of the protagonist’s moral character, her tendency to forgive, and especially, her Christian guilt. This is how Arthur perverts Helen’s perception of reality and forces her to tolerate his harmful habits. He even persuades Helen that “perhaps [she is] wrong” for being “less patient and forbearing” (238) – a brand of “systemic mental cruelty” (Ward 159) equivalent to modern-day ‘gas lighting.’¹¹⁸ It is only later in the novel that the heroine courageously refuses to take responsibility for Arthur’s behaviour, and thereby challenges the laws that merge husband and wife into a single entity: “He may drink himself dead, but it is NOT my fault” (A. Brontë 279).

According to Diederich, the mere “presence of remarriage” in *Tenant* was “significant,” not just because it was still illegal for women to initiate divorce, but because it was a topic not

¹¹⁷ See Beth Lau’s “Marriage and Divorce in the Novels,” Chapter 21 in Diane L. Hoeveler and Deborah D. Morse’s *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016): 355-368.

¹¹⁸ ‘Gaslighting’ signifies the psychological process of manipulating someone to question their own actions, and/or sanity. Playwright Patrick Hamilton coined the term when he wrote *Gas Light: A Victorian Thriller* (1938), almost a century after Brontë published *Tenant*. See Rosemary Erickson Johnsen’s “On the Origins of ‘Gaslighting’” (2017) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* for more on the subject.

meant to be discussed, let alone *endorsed* in print (25). While Helen's first marriage reveals an "urgent need for reformation" (Hoeveler and Morse 118), the improved social conditions surrounding her second marriage presuppose the "1854, 1856, and 1857 parliamentary debates about divorce," which eventually result in the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (Poovey 53). Prior to this law, "only four women had successfully petitioned for divorce" in all of England (Hoeveler and Morse 356). After its passage, however, they still had to wait for the emergence of the Married Women's Property Acts of the 1870s and 1880s, as well as the 1873 Infant Custody Act, to both claim ownership of their land and appeal for custody of their children (Ward 163). That being said, it was virtually impossible for Helen to (legally) separate from Arthur and gain custody of her child within the novel's social context.

The townspeople then rightfully refer to Helen as a "criminal" (A. Brontë 66), as she runs away with Arthur II in 1827, decades before any of the aforementioned judicial changes (328). In legal terms, she kidnaps her son, and proceeds to raise him in a way that contradicts the established norms of masculinity. As such, Brontë juxtaposes Helen's maternal duty, to care for her child at all costs, with the period's discriminatory laws, in order to stress their vast incompatibility. The humanly flawed heroine, subsequently, justifies her transgressions, as an effort to do what is, otherwise, considered 'right' or 'good,' for the greatest number of people – a Utilitarian and notably secular ideal.¹¹⁹

Helen's tale is rather exceptional, in that it portrays her in an unusual position relative to the period's predominant legal and social rules. She, ironically, feels "like a criminal" just once throughout the novel, in a scene that has nothing to do with Arthur II's kidnapping (A. Brontë 292). Her guilt corresponds only to moral failings, and namely, the "ungenerous concealment" of Arthur and Annabella's affair from Lord Lowborough (292). As a result, she harnesses the

¹¹⁹ ie. *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill* (1973).

narrative to mindfully express her regret, and “confess [that she] “was wrong” (293). Brontë’s readers are meant to witness Helen’s rationale, her remorse and moral reasoning, so that they are more likely to sympathize with her than to agree with the ecclesiastical courts (Ward 157). This discrepancy between Victorian law and morality thus positions Helen a ‘modern moral protagonist’ to necessitate structural reform in nineteenth-century England.¹²⁰

Remarriage and the Modern Woman’s Professionalization

In the latter-half of the novel, Helen transforms “from the woman (artist) as object of the gaze, to the woman (artist) as subject and creative producer in her own right” (A. Brontë 19). These plot points of a *Künstlerroman*, or the artist’s narrative, particularly, denote a process of personal and professional growth. Between her first and second marriage, she substantially revises the way in which she engages with art. While Helen’s creative practice, as a painter and writer, originally captures her romantic perception of the world, she later adopts a more pragmatic approach to the canvas, as well as the page, for the sake of effective social criticism. In that capacity, Brontë traces the mid-century movement, in which women, like the Brontës, truly begin to thrive as artistic producers and cultural contributors.

At first, Arthur is the “reigning tyrant” of the protagonist’s “thoughts” and imagination (159). She paints only what is designed “to meet his eye,” and treats “all [her] employments [...] whatever skill or knowledge [that she] acquire[d],” as an opportunity for his “advantage or amusement” (148). In other words, Helen’s art portfolio is used as a tool for seduction, rather than for her own self-fulfillment. When she competes for Arthur’s attention, for example, Helen notes that, though her rival, Annabella “is an accomplished musician [...] he paid more attention

³⁸ See Nancy Armstrong’s “How the Misfit Became a Moral Protagonist” in *How Novels Think* (2005): 1-5.

to my drawings than her music” (151). In light of the period’s hostile marriage economy, young women enacted the archetypal ideals of femininity, self-sacrificing to the point that even Helen “would willingly risk [her] happiness for the chance at securing his” (147).

In essence, the heroine applies her creative faculties to try and “save” Arthur (146), and basically *mould* him into “the creature of [her] own imagination” (149). Her earliest endeavours to change his disposition and “deliver him from his faults” (167) allude to the Victorian notion that women were primarily responsible for the actions of the men around them – their husbands, brothers, and sons. It is worth noting that, in contrast to the period’s laws of coverture, Helen and Arthur are not at all ‘one’ in their core values. In stark contrast to Helen and Markham’s collaborative counter-narrative, which entails their mutual access to each other’s letters, there is no transparency between Helen and Huntingdon. More than that, he goes out of his way to hide his letters from her, since they are “[un]fit for a lady’s eyes” (173). Through her descriptions of Arthur’s writing as trite and insincere, Brontë then warns her readership to “*never trust his word,*” and instead, invest their confidence in the heroine’s narrative account (221).

The period’s unwritten social codes, like its concrete laws, normalize the utter dismissal of female consent. Parallel to Helen’s refusal of Mr. Boarham, she tries “very hard to convince” the men in her life “that [she] meant what [she] said” (140). Not only does her first husband silence her, but he often strives to speak on her behalf. When Arthur asks for Helen’s hand in marriage, he quite literally “constru[es] [her] silence” as an acceptance, and responds to his own proposal: “You will!” (161-162). This false foundation to their relationship predicts the couple’s failure to coexist and adequately connect to one another, on equal terms. Through several such occasions of miscommunication, Brontë illustrates both the nuances and problematics of female passivity, as well as the significance of self-expression, in art as in marriage. In one instance,

Hattersley misreads his wife's docility as apathy, and her "silence [as] indifference" (321), which makes him "think [that] she has no feeling at all" (255). When Helen unpacks the frustrations underlying Milicent's outward ambivalence, Hattersley struggles to understand the distinctively female reluctance of articulating them: "I don't like that way [of] fretting in silence and saying nothing – it's not honest" (255).

Prior to Markham's maturation, even he wrongfully deciphers consent from the heroine's silences. Like Lockwood's impression of Catherine II in *Wuthering Heights*, he initially exhibits a "caricature of maleness" in his treatment of Helen as an object of desire, which sets up his character arc within the novel's love plot (Ingham 221). In watching her "from [a] distance," Markham's male "gaze" is inherently voyeuristic (A. Brontë 47). Later, when the heroine refuses to admit whether or not she loves him, he interjects in the same way that Arthur does: "then I will conclude you do; and so good night" (112). This misappropriation of Helen's omissions in dialogue further delays the couple's romantic reunion. While Markham reasons that her "silence naturally led [him] to conclude [him]self forgotten" (401), Helen clarifies the extent of her feelings through creative actions, rather than openly professing her love. Again, she seeks an alternative mode of self-articulation, and in this case, draws from cultural symbolism (now made literary), to convey her personal feelings. By gifting Markham a Christmas rose, specifically, she presents him with "an emblem of [her] heart" (403).

According to Joshi, Arthur is "beyond redemption," whereas "Markham learns sensitivity," and provides "Helen with the partnership of equals she is unable to have" in her first marriage (915). By questioning the community's traditional values, he challenges the period's unattainable ideals of femininity that even his mother insists on. In many ways, the women in Markham's life govern his ideological beliefs, which explains his shifting affiliation from his

mother to his wife – or, from one more ‘old-fashioned’ Mrs. Markham to a ‘modern’ one. Brontë, therefore, delineates his move out of a prolonged (and indulgent) childhood, towards adulthood via marriage. As Markham matures, he begins to see Helen as more than an abstract idol, or “divinity” (A. Brontë 127), and also champions an unconventional philosophy pertaining to their union (78). Gilbert, selflessly, attests that he “would rather give than receive” in an effort to make his “wife happy” (78). While his mother might “seriously disapprove of” Helen (69), she rewrites all the rules of propriety that he had previously been taught.

Here, Brontë also infers that there are incentives for men, who already benefit from the period’s patriarchal systems, to support modern social movements, like gender equality. Opposite Lockwood’s stagnancy, Markham adapts to new systems of thought (such as Helen’s unspoken proto-feminism), and is rewarded for it through their romantic consummation. Once he “is touched by [her] terrible [tale],” and “learn[s] from it,” he hopes to implement a similar change in his own community (Senf 452). The heroine’s sympathetic life story, or “narrative of distress,” catalyzes Markham’s own “moral obligation” to restore her honest character and advocate for her social reintegration (A. Brontë 16). His feelings for Helen, in light of all of her flaws, thus reads as a celebration of the multifaceted heroine.

It is unsurprising that Markham originally does not “like her much,” for she is “too hard, too sharp, [and] too bitter” compared to the coquettish women in the village (67). Over time though, he appreciates those exact qualities that break from the period’s prescribed social codes. Unlike his father, who designated “ambition [as] the surest road to ruin, and change [as] another word for destruction” (42), Markham embraces Helen’s drive, and develops a shared vision for self-fulfillment with her, through their collaborative counter-narrative. Concomitant to Jane and Rochester’s joint reform, Brontë then synchronizes the couple’s growth, so that they set a new

precedent for marriage in the mid-nineteenth century novel. Just as Markham quells his initial outbursts of anger, jealousy, and pride – tokens of his once toxic masculinity – Helen must shed her former identity as the subordinate Mrs. Huntingdon, and finally, forge a new sense of self. In both owning and growing from her past, as well as demanding, and eventually, receiving the respect of her (second) husband as “less of a pet and more of a friend” (188), Helen validates herself as both a wife and a worker, within domestic and professional worlds.¹²¹

Although female artists were, at the time, prohibited from attending the Royal Academy, the main “institution that trained professional[s] in England” (25), Brontë strongly endorses the legitimacy of Helen’s art.¹²² After the protagonist’s first marriage, she is no longer excessively sentimental about her craft, but rather quite organized. Not only does her workshop contain “a painter’s easel” and “rolls of canvass,” but “bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, [and] paints” (69). Helen’s use of the pronoun “my” (69), in reference to her studio and supplies, complicates the notion that women could not make any claim to their own belongings, which further foreshadows the late-century Property Acts. In fact, Helen even adapts her art supplies for the practical purpose of self-defense. When Walter Hargrave “precipitates himself towards” her body, without consent, she “snatche[s] up the palette-knife and [holds] it against him” (305). Just as the canvas, or the pages of her journal, ensure the heroine’s safe self-expression, this instrument is chiefly protective. It is vital to recognize that she does not actually resort to physical violence, but acts in “so determined a manner” that Walter does not “choose to resist [her] authority” (306). In contrast to the way that Helen first succumbs to Arthur’s lure, when he kisses her “against [her] will” (143, 153), she now asserts her own volition. At this moment,

¹²¹ Helen echoes Wollstonecraft’s call for the wife to be treated as a friend, rather than the “rattle,” or the “toy of man” in “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1792) in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. D (1987): 227, 229.

¹²² Talley touches on this in his “Introduction” to the Broadview ed. of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (2009): 9-33.

Helen's "art comes, symbolically and literally, to her rescue, as it will later in her efforts to save herself and her son" (Hoeveler and Morse 125), when she "funds [their] escape" (A. Brontë 32).

Despite the difficulty for female artists to secure creative work spaces,¹²³ Helen first develops her craft in the private library. This is where she "set[s] up [her] easel" and "work[s] [from] daylight till dusk" to "improve [her] talent [as] an actual painter" (300-301), and perhaps most crucially, experiments with "irregular composition[s]," or narratives, in her journal (188). Brontë's characterization of Helen in her "favourite resort" (161) then gestures toward the productive purpose of her silence, as she brainstorms new creative visions. In the seclusion of this setting, Helen Graham, like Jane Eyre or Catherine Earnshaw before her, not only thinks critically and strives for a deeper awareness of the world, but engages freely in the concerns of a public realm, typically reserved for men. The private library, located in the domestic sphere, thus serves as a figurative safe space for study, and a kind of sanctuary, for the Brontë heroines.

Moreover, Helen "retire[s] to the library" to "indulge [her] thoughts," and find "respite from forced cheerfulness and wearisome discourse" (150, 152, 161, 291). Whether she is surrounded by the Millwards, Wilsons, and Markhams, or in the earlier company of Huntingdon and his inebriated posse, Helen often wishes that "the company were gone" (158). This inclination to distance herself from such corrupt social circles, ranging from gossips and alcoholics to violent men and condescending elders, discloses Helen's masked disdain for gendered decorum at the core of the period's aristocratic social systems. For this reason, she exploits the "easel and painting apparatus," conveniently located in the library, "as an excuse [to] abandon the drawing-room," and creatively convey her critical perspective (154).

Once Helen provides Markham with the pages of her diary, she similarly consigns him to the library's silence. Close reading, as well as writing, requires concentration. Arthur,

¹²³ Virginia Woolf unpacks this issue in *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

meanwhile, goes out of his way to disturb Helen's *willful*, rather than repressive, state of quietude, while engaged in serious study (161). He cannot adapt to it, for he lacks his own intellectual endeavours (193). Over the course of their marriage, Helen "wish[es] he had something to do, some useful trade, or profession, or employment – anything to occupy his head or his hands for a few hours" (206). She, especially, longs for Arthur to "play the country gentleman and attend to the farm," or to "take up some literary study" (206) – characteristics, interests, and activities that all come to describe her second husband, who uses his hands to cultivate the land at Linden-Car farm, and his head to ameliorate Helen's public image through their shared narrative. In this regard, Helen and Arthur's incompatibility mirrors the mismatched coupling of Markham and Eliza Millward, the chatty young woman who diverts him while "finishing [his] letter[s]," or attending "to [his] daily business" (353). Brontë, thereby, positions Helen and Gilbert's corrective marriage as a sort of 'wish fulfillment' for them both.

Seeing as Arthur "never reads anything," he simultaneously discourages his wife from doing so (193). Helen's first husband views her passion for art as a mere distraction that interferes with her domestic duties, and so compromises the traditional dynamic between the sexes that solidifies his dominance. When she is "occupied with a book," for example, he won't let [her] rest till" she gives up and "close[s] it" (193). As Helen describes, she could maintain, at most, "eight to ten minutes of silence" until "Arthur would speak next" and intercept all "communication between [her] eyes and [her] brain" (197), which signals to his blatant disregard for her creative capabilities. It is no wonder then that the heroine "rarely refers to herself as an artist" for the duration of their marriage (Diederich 26). Even during their courtship, Arthur refers to her as *his* "own Helen," which reiterates the issue of ownership and consent (A. Brontë 164). Not only does he kiss her suddenly (161-162), but he seizes Helen's artwork, an intimate

part of herself, without permission (151-153). Helen exclaims that Arthur has “no *right* to take” her portfolio, and “*insist[s]* upon having [it] back!” (156), yet ironically, accepts the loss of such significant belongings by marrying him.

The period’s marital dynamics enable Arthur to try and silence the heroine, or in this case, prevent her “from making her story known” (Senf 454). His careless treatment of Helen’s books and art portfolio, early on, predicts the eventual demolition of her supplies. Arthur is threatened by the prospect that she will express her rage towards him through art, and consequently, aims to counter her creative ‘spark’ with his own destructive “blaze” (A. Brontë 310). Once he discovers Helen’s plan of escape, he throws all of her “painting materials [...] into the fire – palette, paints, pencils, brushes, varnish” – “all [is] consumed” (310). This action illustrates the problematics of “common law,” which “restrict[s] women’s agency,” not only in regard to their property, but “to their talents” and professional prospects (Diederich 33). Parallel to John Reed’s violent misuse of the library in *Jane Eyre*, Arthur concomitantly manipulates the physical properties of his own “heavy book[s]” when he “hurl[s]” one at his dog – an attack that was “perhaps intended for” Helen, considering she “had also been struck, and rather severely grazed” (A. Brontë 196).¹²⁴ Like Jane, she fights back against her oppressor through her learned language.

Huntingdon’s anxiety surrounding his public image – name, title, and rank – likely inspires Helen’s unflattering portrayal of his character. At one point, he refuses her motion to separate, because he fears becoming “the talk of all the old gossips in the neighbourhood: he would not have it said that he was such a brute his wife could not live with him” (278). At another time, he worries that Helen will relate the details of their relationship “to Mrs. Hargrave,

¹²⁴ See C. Brontë 66-67 in the Broadview ed. of *Jane Eyre* (1999) for the scene where John Reed strikes Jane with his hardcover volume.

[or] write long letters to Aunt Maxwell [and] complain of the wicked wretch [that she] married” (268). Although the protagonist promises that she will “complain to no one” about him (268), Arthur remains concerned that she will “disgrace” his aristocratic family name (311). Helen may not be able to battle her husband in court, or pose a threat to him financially, but she *can* write, and so divulges the full extent of his depravity through narrative means.

In order to rectify the errors of her first failed marriage, Helen makes sure to cultivate a friendship with Markham before they embark on their romantic relationship – a concept drawn directly from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).¹²⁵ The couple’s bond stems from their mutual interests and shared values, rather than a trite flirtation. Though meaningful “discussion of abstract matters, or topics of common interest,” such as “painting, poetry, and music, theology, geology, and philosophy” (A. Brontë 88-89), Markham finds that he “like[s] to listen” to Helen (83), which encourages her participation in the debates of the public world. In Rachel Carnell’s words, they see “eye-to-eye on the important matter of aesthetic judgment” (11), which is crucial to the construction of their narrative composition.

As Helen and Markham continue to lend each other books (A. Brontë 338-400), they build a solid foundation to their relationship, that later prompts the heroine to trust him with her journal. Over time, their joint reading practice, or book swap, progresses into an intimate correspondence, or “spiritual intercourse” (404), and a collaborative writing exercise, where they continue to “exchange [their] thoughts” (339). The couple almost immediately embarks on a creative partnership that compels the communication represented by *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In particular, Markham “inquire[s] after the picture[s] she was painting,” while she, in turn, “ask[s]” for his “opinion or advice respecting [her] progress” (89). Even though Helen cannot

¹²⁵ Wollstonecraft argues that friendship, or comradery between husband and wife, is the basis for a healthy marriage. See *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. D (1987): 227, 229.

“afford to paint for [her] own amusement” (70), he celebrates the continued productivity of the “fair artist” (70-71, 84) – an “appreciation for Helen’s artistic and intellectual gifts” that further unveils “the gulf between him and Huntingdon” (Hoeveler and Morse 128). Brontë, therefore, redirects attention from Helen’s silences, once enforced by Arthur, to her increased agency as an artist-figure, now supported by her (second) spouse.

By the end of the nineteenth century, it actually becomes a common topos for “talented” young women in fiction to “rescue” themselves through diverse modes of artistic creation (Gilbert and Gubar 545), as exemplified by the fin-de-siècle New Woman genre.¹²⁶ By displacing the period’s gendered and economic social issues onto the sympathetic Helen, Brontë underscores a shared cause among figures of the wife and female worker, directly implicated in a historically marginalized social group. While literally selling her artwork, or figuratively ‘selling’ her character, Helen does not, as with other forms of dehumanizing toil, encompass Karl Marx’s concept of the abstracted worker (Ingham 158) – especially not in the same way that the governess is reified into her employer’s household. Maybe then, the earlier Brontë heroines, including Charlotte’s Jane Eyre and even Anne’s Agnes Grey, could be thought of as Helen’s predecessors, whose perseverance forged the way for the professionalization of the female artist, inherent to establishment of a female literary tradition.

The Mother, the Son, and the Middle Class

Motherhood, for Helen, is intrinsically linked to her capacity as an artist, writer, and creator. Through her (dual) maternal and professional presence, she fulfills a paradoxical role – or at least, one that is considered incompatible by Victorian standards, as both Arthur II’s mother

¹²⁶ See, for example, Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894).

and primary provider. While Huntingdon rejects Helen's artistic endeavours, Gilbert comes to cherish her creative and biological productions – her artwork and her son. Brontë, then, depicts a traceable evolution from the aristocratic values of a patriarchal marriage economy, symbolized by Helen's initial relationship with Arthur, towards the equalizing dynamic of her marriage to Markham, in order to finally rectify her tainted patriarchal lineage.

Although Helen treats her first husband like “a spoilt child” (A. Brontë 206), she refuses to coddle her son, or pamper him with the same “luxury and affluence” that perverts his precursor (299). It was a common conviction that “great men [had] extraordinary mothers” (Lewis 464),¹²⁷ whose parenting had “lasting, eternal effects” on their children (A. Brontë 22) – hence the heroine's urgency to “strive against” the “crime of overindulgence” (207). Helen's responsibility, as a mother, is what persuades her to quit trying to change her “hopeless” first husband (238), and instead, “counteract” his “corrupting intercourse and example” on Arthur II (281). She raises her son so that he does not feel pressured to conform to the period's hollow social protocols and expectations, which dictate the power dynamics (spatial, marital) between the sexes. The creative control that Helen exerts, in raising Arthur II, essentially, permits her to mould a morally superior surrogate for the figure of the father.

Helen rejects the flaws and defects ‘attached’ to the Huntingdon family, and so gravitates towards the feminization of her familial lineage. The pivotal decision to change her son's last name, symbolically, negates the aristocratic tradition of building masculine bloodlines. Most notably, she adopts her mother's maiden name, ‘Graham’ (328), and moves into her estate – property attributed to the matriarch – to ensure that her son literally abandons the part of him that was raised a Huntingdon. In making a home of Wildfell Hall, an otherwise “superannuated mansion of the Elizabethan era [...] untitled and untrimmed,” Helen figuratively renovates it,

¹²⁷ See Sarah Lewis' *Woman's Mission* (1839).

and expels the “ghostly legions and dark traditions” of the past, to mark their new beginning (51). It is no wonder that Helen Graham’s journal entry, following her safe arrival at Wildfell Hall, opens with a declaration of liberty: “Thank Heaven, I am free at last” (328).

In a utilitarian sense, Huntingdon’s imminent death prefigures Arthur II’s ability to assert his own existence, apart from that of his biological father and in accordance with new understandings of masculinity, such as those manifested by Markham. Despite the tragic events of Helen’s life, the novel’s conclusion is, in some ways, reminiscent of a Shakespearean comedy. There are multiple marriages, including that of Frederick Lawrence and Esther Hargrave (389), young Helen Hattersley and Arthur Graham (405), Jack Halford and Rose Markham (407), and surely, Gilbert Markham and Helen Graham (406-407). Brontë then puts forth a vision for social improvement through the careful coupling of the protagonist’s second marriage, and also ‘repairs’ the flawed power structure epitomized by her earlier relationship with Arthur. As she specifies, Arthur II, “with his young wife, the merry little Helen Hattersley, of yore [...] realized his mother’s brightest expectations” (405). The fact that they reside together at Grassdale Manor, where the original Arthur and Helen once lived, somewhat cleanses the aristocratic estate, alongside the familial lineage. The protagonist, as Carnell recounts, “teach[es] Gilbert and her son to be rational and human participants in the world of public affairs,” and over time, “insightful readers” (17), which recalls the image of Helen and Milicent “between [their] books and [their] children” at the library, doing just that (A. Brontë 251).

Of course, “the new masculinity” embodied by Markham “is sketched in contrast to [Huntingdon’s] masculinity at Grassdale” (Joshi 917), or even Rochester’s at Thornfield Hall. By the end of the novel, Helen and Markham’s home, packed with “furniture,” “painting materials,” and “a tolerably well-stocked book case” (A. Brontë 331), quite literally replaces all that Arthur

had destroyed in the heroine's first marriage. The assumption is that Gilbert, an honest worker, will make an honest husband for Helen, and a reliable father figure for her son. It is no wonder that he instructs Arthur II in matters of farming; an activity that is distinctly democratic in its ability to provide for the town's most basic, human needs. Brontë capitalizes on this agricultural imagery to validate the protagonist's success in "sow[ing] again the good seed" of her influence and cultivating the boy's growth into a respectable young man (313). The routine of Markham's rigorous farming schedule, in some ways, even reflects Helen's work ethic in honing her hands-on skills, as a painter.¹²⁸ The simplicity of the couple's eventual life together elicits the ideals of a prosperous middle class. Helen finds "pleasure in [her] labour" and "[her] earnings," within a newly regulated "household economy" (331) that combines the efforts of both husband and wife. Here, Brontë denotes a positive correlation between women's *opportunity* and *productivity*.

Regardless of the period's property laws, Helen remarks that there is truly something to be said for "paying [her] way honestly" and knowing "that what little [she] possess[es] is legitimately all [her] own" (331). By redistributing her wealth to support Markham's middle-class family, she purifies the once corrupt status of money, and so, glorifies the cross-class couple. Brontë thereby prioritizes "women's rights," the rights that secure Helen's ability to foray into the predominantly masculine art world, as a mean of ensuring the greater "public good" – hence "the inextricability of [these] two [things]" (Hoeveler and Morse 130). Helen is able to both earn and spend her money more productively than the aristocrats who squandered it gambling.¹²⁹ Thanks to her, Markham can "bequeath" the family farm to his younger brother, Fergus, and ultimately, assist him in "obtain[ing] a fortune sufficient" enough to marry and live as happily as they do (A. Brontë 407). While Helen's project of publicity is "the novel's *raison*

¹²⁸ See the *Old Farmer's Almanac* (1848).

¹²⁹ Think of Lord Lowborough's ruin (A. Brontë 175-185), as well as John Reed's "sunk and degraded" character (C. Brontë 316).

d'être" (Jackson 203), it only thrives through the married couple's reciprocity, and namely, the employment of Markham as her middleman.

Brontë's inclusion of these last details, right as she brings the "narrative to a close" (A. Brontë 406), tangibly purges Helen from her past. Gilbert's letters do not actually 'expose' her life story, in the way that Senf and her contemporaries suggest. Rather, it is the female protagonist, as the author of her journal, who 'adapts' both her husbands as characters, collaborators, and participants – either willingly (Markham), or unwillingly (Arthur) – within the narrative. In using the journal and letter mediums to open up about her first marriage, Helen is able to justify her transgressions and fully move on from them, through the promotion of an improved self-image, beyond that of her socially prescribed 'ruin.' As such, she remains the driving editorial force of the novel's collaborative counter-narrative, without directly implicating herself in this venture.

Finally, *Tenant's* unconventional form and content alter the landscape of Victorian literary culture to expand the scope of (and possibilities for) women's fiction. Its "subject matter" is not "an entire mistake," as Charlotte Brontë proclaims (E. Brontë 338).¹³⁰ The novel's carefully woven narratives exhibit Anne Brontë's "conscious, perceptive control of her materials" (Jackson 198) to reshape the period's dominant views of gender, as firmly implanted in nineteenth-century legal systems, or perpetuated by gossip and frivolous chatter. The heroine and her author (Brontë/Bell) use alternative strategies, and at times, masculine personas, to share facets of their overtly female experiences with a larger audience or readership. Through the networks of discourse available to Helen, she thus elicits an open, "cultural dialogue," surrounding her "rhetoric of silence" (Hedges and Fishkin 159), that naturally shatters it.

¹³⁰ See "Currer Bells' Prefatory Essays" (1850), included in the Broadview ed. of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (2007): 335-340.

Conclusion

Beyond the sensational Brontë myth there are three female writers who, through Jane Eyre's autobiographical voice, Catherine Earnshaw's haunting energy, and Helen Graham's counter-narrative, subvert their outward silences in order to capture and critique gendered social issues in nineteenth-century England. There is nothing spontaneous about the construction of their layered stories, which trace their characters' obstacles within hostile social milieus, as microcosmic approximations of the female experience. While the Brontë sisters might be excluded from openly political forms of protest or public debate, their engagement with metafiction allows them to grapple with complex power struggles. Through their heroines' interactions with books, journals, and letters, they exhibit narrative control, and consequently challenge the very patriarchal systems put in place to silence them.

Gilbert and Gubar famously attribute "male sexuality [to] literary power," or in Freudian terms, the "pen [to] a penis" (3-4), but the Brontës re-appropriate metafictional tools for the sake of their own 'release,' or artistic self-expression.¹³¹ Their application of such devices not only mitigates the protagonists' silences, but updates second-wave feminist interpretations of their restricted dialogue as oppressive.¹³² According to Patricia Laurence, female "silences represent different ways of feeling and knowing" (Hedges and Fishkin 156).¹³³ In the case of the Brontë canon, more specifically, they signal to the female writer's state of critical reflection, as she develops alternative modes of discourse that are more accessible to her (156).

¹³¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

¹³² Carol A. Senf's "Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender," *College English* 52.4 (1990): 446-456.

¹³³ ie. Laurence's "Women's Silence as a Ritual of Truth" in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism* ed. Hedges and Fishkin (1994): 156-167.

Women's social progress hinges on the action of their predecessors, hence the novelistic effect of dialogue between Jane, Catherine, and Helen, or even Charlotte, Emily, and Anne. The Brontës' mid-century novels forge, and essentially, feminize new networks of thought and language – what George Eliot refers to as “female culture, based on supportive camaraderie instead of masculine competition” (Gilbert and Gubar 498). When each heroine falls, she rises again to create, enchant, and transform. The protagonists' identities, as readers, writers, mothers, visual artists, and storytellers, therefore highlight the Brontës' mediation of multifaceted interiorities for women, through diverse creative acts. The endings of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* all hint at the promises of futurity. Through their children, each heroine finds solace in the gradual rethinking of rigorously gendered social norms. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* concludes with the optimistic image of Jane and Rochester's shared genealogical lineage, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* stresses the generational improvement from Catherine Earnshaw to Catherine Linton, whereas Helen Graham quite literally dismantles her first husband's dominant patriarchal stance, by adopting her mother's maiden name and passing it on to her son, in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The authors, through their literary productions, devise (or like their heroines, *conceive*) new models for matriarchal governance, at the time of Queen Victoria's own reign. Of course, there is still room to improve and secure women's rights (even now), but the Brontë novels set the precedent for confronting constrictive boundaries, of sex and of space alike, in the eternal pursuit of equality.

Lastly, Linda Hutcheon's analysis of metafiction as a “way of dealing” and commenting on “the discrete brute facts of chaotic reality” applies to the Brontë novels (88).¹³⁴ Under the guise of their pseudonymous identities as the Bell brothers, they harness literary fiction to subtly

¹³⁴ Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (2013).

convey their female perspectives on said “facts” (88), without the consequences of direct, verbal defiance, or confrontation, within their immediate surroundings. Through their tales, the Brontë sisters contextualize the social, sexual, and professional politics of the mid-nineteenth century, predicated on the dualities of woman and writer, labour and lineage, as well as subject and art object. In doing so, they demonstrate the potential of literature to promote collaborative social reform, which ultimately, prefigures the politics of twenty-first century intersectional, feminist movements. The novels’ continued relevance and longstanding success supersedes the strict ideals that limited Victorian women to domesticity or denounced their work entirely. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Tenant* thus self-consciously allude to the establishment of an anomalous middle ground, where “the critical and creative meet,” at times, in practical silence (144). Their heroines’ dialogue may be sparse, but the Brontës’ prose croons, ceaselessly, to ensure that their stories reverberate until they are finally, fully heard.

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