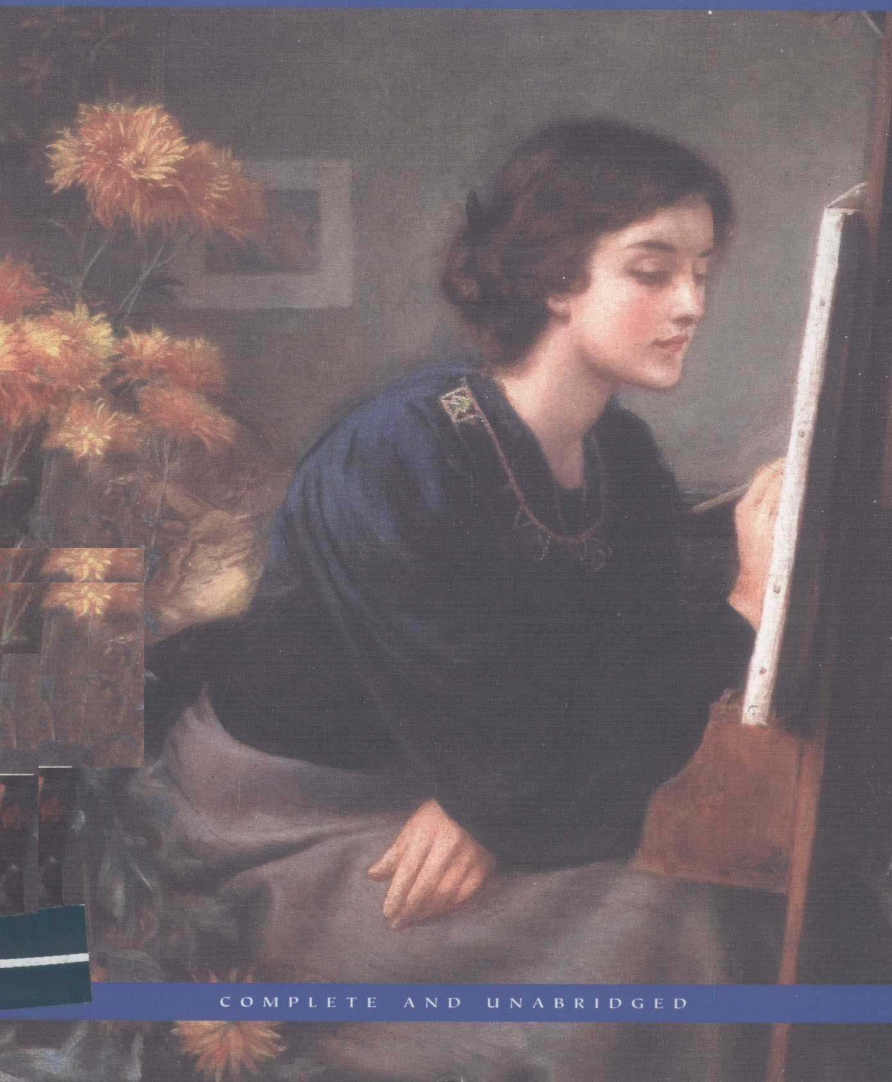


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# *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

ANNE BRONTË



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

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Anne Brontë

Introduction and Notes by

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THE TENANT OF  
WILDFELL HALL

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION

The paradox of what the Yorkshire Tourist Board promotes as Brontë Country is that it is far bigger in the mind than on the map: not so much a country, perhaps, as a continent. 'Brontë Country' embraces extremes by being both a geographical expression such as Metternich (writing in the year of Anne Brontë's death) famously found Italy to be and a powerfully imagined, self-regulating fictional world like that known to Graham Greene's readers as Greeneland. And the peculiar 'character of the country', as Elizabeth Gaskell termed it, has over a century and a half of Brontë studies – beginning with Gaskell's own 1857 biography of Charlotte Brontë – been consistently considered essential to a proper appreciation of the three sisters' lives and work.

Certainly some preliminary charting of the novel's terrain much enhances our understanding of, and pleasure in, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848); and Anne Brontë does her best here to encourage exactly that operation in all the 'men and women' (p. 5) to whom she addresses

herself. For she supplies careful establishing description both of 'the grim, dark pile' (p. 305) of which the novel's heroine, Helen Graham, becomes the mysterious 'tenant' and of the surrounding countryside. Wildfell Hall itself is 'a desolate place to live in' (p. 43) and stands near the top of a hill so steep as to exact, for its ascent, the toll of a 'streaming forehead' (p. 78). But beneath 'the steep acclivity of Wildfell' lie those 'more frequented regions, the wooded valleys, the cornfields, and the meadow lands' (p. 17) from which Helen is sometimes censoriously and sometimes admiringly observed. Gilbert Markham's seemingly happy valley becomes, sure enough, the base for his courting, as if to assimilate him to the romantic valley-dwelling shepherd in Tennyson who begs his beloved to 'Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height,' abandoning her chilly and rarefied state of single blessedness in favour of the connubial Elysium that he proceeds to conjure.<sup>1</sup> The perfect aptness of the hilltop and valley locations that Brontë respectively decrees for Helen and for Gilbert is verified in the scene which best encapsulates their relationship (pp. 52-4): Helen proudly withdrawing to a lofty eminence, a figure in the landscape no less picturesque than the scene she sketches, and Gilbert then gauchely approaching in an obstinate endeavour to draw her back into society once more.

Far from running smooth, therefore, the course of true love in *Wildfell Hall* regularly leads the perspiring Gilbert up a steep and stony hill. As John Donne warned in the third of his verse satires, 'On a huge hill, / Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will / Reach her, about must, and about must go.' Brontë herself, in her own arduous quest for the 'priceless treasure' of truth, may be more of a pearl-diver than a mountaineer (p. 3); but for her readers she plots an overland path as mazy as the expedition Donne describes, with rewards as huge as the rise of the ground. The novel is so constructed that continuously, past the point of its heroine's initial entrance on 28 October 1827, we are sent journeying up hill and down dale in search of the truth about her hidden past and unknown future, what she was before becoming Helen Graham and what she will turn into when she is Helen Graham no longer. The chapters taking matters forward between Helen and Gilbert are the story's meadow lands, as it were, where we are first conducted and into which we again 'come down' as the conclusion draws near. The chapters holding the keys to Helen's past life, on the other hand, constitute the book's rugged 'mountain height'. They soar

1 'Come Down, O Maid' was published (as part of *The Princess*) at the end of 1847, six months before *Wildfell Hall* first appeared.

colossally over the rest of it, their towering presence measured by the two hundred unbroken pages which they occupy (pp. 102–309).

Brontë has created, in other words, a division in the narrative which is doubly determined: as corresponding to the variety in the landscape; and as arising naturally, in the reader's experience, from the different natures and backgrounds of the two characters who share the story-telling. Details of Gilbert's home as a place 'where all comparatively was light, and life, and cheerfulness' (p. 83) prime the reader's selective memory; and associations develop which encourage a draining off, from that part of the story given us by Gilbert's letters to his brother-in-law, of anything dark or brooding. But Helen, too, resembles her dwelling-place: such a 'gloomy object of attraction', in Gilbert's eyes (p. 83), as to shadow our approach with dismal and desponding possibilities. As her 'lonely, comfortless home' (p. 43) suggests the lonely, comfortless path she trod for years to need such a refuge, so that part of the story given us as her diary of those years is bound to leave just as 'cold' and 'stern' an impression as Wildfell Hall itself (p. 18). The effect of the switch made at the beginning of Chapter XVI, from Gilbert's letters to Helen's diary, is perhaps best explained by recalling that in another Brontë novel, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, a contrast was sensed when Heathcliff went out and Edgar Linton came in which 'resembled what you see in exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful fertile valley'.<sup>2</sup> The exchange of storytellers after fifteen chapters of *Wildfell Hall*, when Helen's voice succeeds to Gilbert's, produces an effect exactly the reverse of this. It proves perfectly judged, however, since it has generally been the bleakness – whether personified by Heathcliff or purveyed by Helen – that readers find compelling.

The bleakness is all the more marked because it plays against our settled sense of the text's main features. No sooner is Helen's diary opened than it effectively abrogates the original opening of *Wildfell Hall*; that first chapter can now be seen not in fact to have represented the historical beginning of the story at all. Abrogated, too, are all the comforting associations which Chapter I had carried with it. A very reassuring familiarity had attached to this chapter in so far as it consisted of excited gossip about the arrival, at the principal property in the neighbourhood, of an eligible stranger possibly in possession of a good fortune. Except for making a woman rather than a man the cynosure of curiosity, Brontë here replays – as Penny Gay observes<sup>3</sup> –

2 Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Wordsworth Classics edition, p. 49

3 The Bibliography carries full details of Gay's discussion of *Wildfell Hall*, and of other critical studies likewise alluded to in the course of this Introduction.

the opening scene of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (first published in 1813). Brontë's sister Charlotte at this time thought of *Pride and Prejudice* (which she had only just discovered) as 'a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers'.<sup>4</sup> The first chapter of *Wildfell Hall* thus appears to set its readers deliberately down in a world which they know and where they can feel sure of being safe. That inviting quality soon dims and diminishes, with the incorporation of some altogether rougher stuff. But nothing quite prepares us for the time when we must start to surmount the crag which is Helen's diary. We very soon find ourselves in less familiar, more demanding territory; and what went before comes to seem, in retrospect, routine and regular to the point even of flatness.

The looming peak of Brontë's novel, as disclosed by the diary, is an account of Helen's past 'matrimonial experience' (p. 207) and of the 'warnings' which her various mistakes and misfortunes convey. In the context of Chapters 1 to xv, this tale of woe – or of wooing, wedding and repenting – is as unexpectedly dark, grim and desolate, when the reader comes suddenly upon it, as 'the steep acclivity of Wildfell' amid the tract of land it dominates. The entries in the diary trace three years that turn 'I love him' (p. 123) into 'I HATE him!' (p. 243), and then, for the concluding 'phase' of Helen's 'conjugal life' (p. 252), three more years of sham and shame. Having married an unworthy husband, trusting solely to her own 'strength and purity' to save him from 'the gulf' (p. 206), she suffers just the consequences that the voice of experience insists are inevitable. Helen's own warnings here were handed down to her by her honorary parents both within the novel and outside it: by her eighteenth-century fictional forebears, that is, as well as by her actual aunt. The heroines of Samuel Richardson (a novelist to whom Brontë also owes much else) are quite decisive on this point: 'What a dreadful, what a *presumptuous* risque runs she, who marries a wicked man, even hoping to reclaim him, when she cannot be sure of keeping her own principles!'; 'while I was endeavouring to save a drowning wretch, I have been . . . drawn in after him'; 'who can *touch pitch, and not be defiled?*'<sup>5</sup> More immediately there is the monitory voice of Mrs Maxwell, who in Chapter xvii (pp. 116–18) is only too right

4 Letter to G. H. Lewes, 12 January 1848; quoted by Elizabeth Gaskell in Chapter xvi of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*

5 Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (ed. Jocelyn Harris), 3 vols, Oxford University Press, London 1972, i, 26; Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (ed. Angus Ross), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1985, pp. 985, 1116



both about Helen's vain presumption and about the radical unreliability of Helen's future husband, Arthur Huntingdon. He, to Mrs Maxwell, is fatally tainted by the company he keeps and incorrigibly given to romantic intriguing. Brontë's metaphor of the diver and the well, in her Preface to the Second Edition (p. 3), instructs us to take these suspicions seriously: in the mud there will turn out to be much truth. Helen is indeed quickly disgusted with the 'worms' (p. 282) or 'human brutes' (p. 274) that Arthur calls his friends; and she is indeed destined to discover, when he and Annabella repair to the shrubbery (Chapter xxxiii), that there have long been three people in her marriage.

Helen's matrimonial experience is so painful – and the first-personal form of the diary makes it so immediate – that early readers, pressing home the Preface's own empiricism (p. 4), wondered what there might be in the life of the novelist from which the book could possibly have wrung such 'bitter knowledge' of these things. Charlotte Brontë, in her 1850 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' (the respective pseudonyms of Emily and Anne), had a sad and simple answer. It had to do with her shrinking violet of a sister – whose nature was modest and reticent and 'nun-like', and who of course never married – having nevertheless 'been called on to contemplate, near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused', and having then fictionalised this in her account of how Helen's dissolute husband damages both himself and her. The misused talents and abused faculties plainly belong to Branwell Brontë (1817–48), although the piece avoids naming him, and the suggestion is that *Wildfell Hall* translates its author's despair at witnessing the ravages of her brother's addictions (which were born of deep personal anguish) and feeling the failure of her own efforts to save him from that gulf. What Charlotte Brontë offers seems in some ways a specious solution to an artificial difficulty, leaving the novel peculiarly exposed to the potential reductionism of biographical reading. To suppose that Anne Brontë's understanding of the predicament of 'she, who marries a wicked man' – or in this case, at least, a 'merry, thoughtless profligate' (p. 117) – and vainly strives to change him came solely from the accident of being Branwell's sister would traduce her as an artist and him as a person. Rather, this is a predicament whose every sorrow and frustration Brontë's prefatory observations show her to have understood anyway, as soon as she picked up her pen to 'tell the truth' about certain 'errors and abuses of society' that seemed ripe for reform; for on doing so she found just what Helen finds, that at considerable cost to herself she was endeavouring to save someone – the hypothetical 'careless bachelor' with the messy apartment – who did not want saving

at all (p. 3). Brontë's somewhat strained relationship with 'the Public', on this view, underpins Helen's relationship with Arthur. And the dilemma of the novelist who addresses abuses is the same as that of the wife who believes herself betrayed. Each is touching pitch; each must decide, as we see Helen doing in Chapter xxxvi (pp. 253-4), whether to appease or to admonish, to remonstrate or to relent.

For Helen, faced with this dilemma, there is – eventually – no possibility of compromise. For Brontë, there can be no chance of a climbdown until Helen's diary finally dissolves into an ellipsis, more than two hundred pages after Gilbert began reading it. Then we abruptly descend from the impressive if inhospitable mountain height of Helen's chapters of narrative (with their cold, stern and unblinking examination of an increasingly abusive marriage) to what I have termed the meadow lands of Gilbert's; and some of the comforts which the latter had initially afforded are restored to us, as the dawn chorus begins and 'the pure morning air' wafts in again (p. 310). At the end of the long and sleepless night that Gilbert has spent closeted with a 'thick . . . manuscript volume' behind a 'shut and bolted' door (pp. 101, 102) come the first welcome glimmerings of daylight. So having through the hours of darkness 'devoured' Helen's diary, up to the point at which the last few leaves are 'torn away', he puts his head out of the window and lifts up his eyes unto the hills. He seems in search of a sign from somewhere to help him decide what this as yet amorphous mass of experience might all mean; for neither to Gilbert the avid reader nor to Helen the troubled writer – 'I will commit it to paper tonight, and see what I shall think of it tomorrow' (p. 129) – can it truly begin to make sense or really start to take shape until the morning after the night before.

The sort of shape that the returning daylight will impart to it has been foreshadowed, perhaps, in the pages of the diary itself. There has been the detail of the 'amorous pair of turtle doves', for example, in the painting with which Helen covertly communicates her ardent hopes of a 'fond and fervent . . . tender and faithful' mate for herself (p. 125). And what we have seen here of the allegorising imagination at work in Helen's art is encouragement to us (as, of course, to Gilbert) to let this play also upon the life that she has been setting down and prospectively to fashion its missing and as yet unwritten portions into a similar domestic idyll. Gilbert then cries out to be depicted as Helen's true complement and consort, the man capable of making her whole again and of coming in to crown her abeyant autobiography. But the ordering which Helen most assiduously promotes is religious, rather than aesthetic. In this vision, the significance of that long dark night of the

soul which was her marriage to Arthur is that, like the night through which Gilbert finds himself sitting up to read about it, it carries the assurance of a bright new dawn to follow; the Christian promise, Helen knows, is that 'the world will not be left in darkness' (p. 265).

Equally, 'a glorious rest at last' (p. 239) is what Helen – as a true wayfaring Christian treading anxiously along what she terms 'the path of life' (p. 25) – can confidently anticipate; and Brontë's novel, written as it was at a time when writers and readers alike 'were determined to shape the facts of this world into a religious topography' (Qualls, p. 12), appears to support that expectation so far as to 'bid the future pay the past / With joy for anguish, smiles for tears' (p. 131). Indeed, when the diary breaks off, Helen has just left the anguish of Grassdale Manor behind her, to taste instead the 'trembling joy' of her escape (p. 304), and the reader naturally supposes that this act has made it emphatically Helen's time to fulfil the behest which she herself takes so seriously (p. 27, quoting Isaiah 7: 15–16): 'to refuse the evil and choose the good'. With Arthur duly refused, and shown after six years to be all that Mrs Maxwell thought him and more, can it be long before Helen chooses Gilbert? Riding blithely over the obvious legal obstacle, we easily imagine an early church wedding for this 'amorous pair' whose eyes first met in church (p. 14); and we can even contemplate such a consummation not just as Helen's romantic reward but as the rebirth which is so strongly indicated by her travels – she has, after all, now come back to the place where she was born (p. 289) – and as the rescue which is called for, likewise, by her preceding travail. Having ended her time at Grassdale by finally admitting defeat in all her endeavours to save her drowning wretch of a husband, Helen may well seem to stand in need of a deliverer of her own. So Brontë can certainly bank on the wishful thinking of most readers constructing a drama of despair and deliverance in which Gilbert, the Good Shepherd who tends his lambs on the lower slopes (p. 46), will be cast both as Helen's soulmate and as her saviour.

Some readers, here, will wisely check their wishful thinking. For the opposition between 'truth' and 'error' which is established in Brontë's Preface is fundamental to the whole of *Wildfell Hall*; and it must impress extreme caution in all conjectures as to the direction being taken either by 'the path of life' or, for that matter, by the plots of novelists. Such conjectures might hold up as unchallengeably true, or they might unravel completely as altogether erroneous. In the course of the novel itself, what most patently unravel are the stories about Helen which – arising out of the same vacuum of things hidden or unknown that so draws Gilbert to fill it in – circulate as neighbourhood

gossip. In our own time, correspondingly, feminist criticism of Brontë's book has unravelled the very view that exerted the strongest initial appeal, of Gilbert as Helen's destined deliverer. Helen does not need to be made whole, it objects, and she is her own deliverer; Gilbert, far from managing to save her from drowning, only weights her down further or else officiously encumbers her with help when she has reached ground. Yet supremely in the momentary flourish with which he closes Helen's diary and opens the window upon a splendid late summer's morning, if for that single instant only, Gilbert *is* the man who makes the crucial difference. A signal is sent out that now it is to be off with the old plot, the years of 'guilt and misery' (p. 304) at Grassdale, and on with the new, Helen's developing relationship with himself. Around the story of a love which withered and died, it will henceforth be possible to wrap the contrasting story of a love which is set to blossom, with all the understated and improbable beauty of the Christmas rose that becomes its emblem (pp. 378-9). Joy will enclose anguish as Gilbert's letters are enclosing Helen's diary. It is as if the novel had been composed on the same principles which inform Helen's remarkable régime of aversion therapy (pp. 288-9), and its harrowing inner story (now, we suppose, safely over) had therefore found its way into the outer story as the unpalatable surprise ingredient 'surreptitiously introduced' in order that the lashings of sentiment with which we expected to regale ourselves should not slip down too easily. Alternatively, if an analogy were to be sought in Helen's work as an artist, the outer story might appear added as essential edging for the complementary inner story, much as a painted picture must then in a separate process be 'finished and framed' (p. 58).

The special subtlety of Brontë's patterning, however, becomes apparent only later. It is that these discrete slabs of narrative, like the two characters who from their separate standpoints contribute them, have the capacity to coalesce. Gilbert's narrating voice is to be amalgamated with Helen's, and the two of them will come forward simultaneously as letter-writers (he, as before, to his brother-in-law; and she, now, to her brother), when the seemingly shelved subject of her failed marriage is dramatically resumed. The present is not to be so easily 'torn away' from the past as the last pages of a diary from their binding. So, although there is an obvious convenience in describing Gilbert's as the outer story and Helen's as the inner story, with the former enclosing the latter, it may finally be more accurate to see the two as intimately combined and conterminous within the overall design of the author. And this is the kind of artful mingling upon which the novel's closest counterpart, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, had also crucially

depended. Midway through that novel, one small impulsive act by Nelly Dean – who tells much of the tale to a listening Lockwood – epitomises its interlacing of narrative threads; twisting together ‘a curl of light hair’ from the head of Edgar Linton and ‘a black lock’ from Heathcliff’s, she encloses both in a locket.<sup>6</sup> As the dark is to the fair in *Wuthering Heights*, so Helen with her heartfelt ‘overflowings’ (p. 120) is to Gilbert with his more self-conscious scribbles, when Anne Brontë puts the pair together: they are opposites, that is, but emphatically not contraries. Not only can a single structure successfully contain them both, but it will thereby reveal them as mutually enhancing and even alike. Neither character manages to articulate or even fully recognise this paradoxical sameness in difference except, as the reader does, at the very end; but if as well as Sir Humphry Davy (p. 98) Helen’s list of topical reading had included his friend S. T. Coleridge’s monograph *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (published just a few weeks earlier) the following passage might have enlightened her:

Permit me to draw your attention to the essential difference between *opposite* and *contrary*. Opposite powers are always of the same kind, and tend to union . . . The feminine character is *opposed* to the masculine . . . the interest of permanence is opposed to that of progressiveness; but so far from being contrary interests, they, like the magnetic forces, suppose and require each other.<sup>7</sup>

Readers of *Wildfell Hall* seldom perceive Gilbert as ‘magnetic’; and readers of William Blake will be accustomed to a terminology different from the one which that analysis employs. But Coleridge has unwittingly provided a very helpful account of the symbiotic partnership which develops between Brontë’s two storytellers. This equation, too, has a masculine and a feminine term. But permanence is also meeting progressiveness here, while man meets woman; for although Helen is certainly a pioneer of sorts – her husband’s vindictive attack on her painting materials (pp. 285–6) implicitly marking the fact that she is potentially a self-supporting artist as a direct threat to traditional male pride and the accompanying antediluvian ‘idea of a wife’ (p. 192) – Gilbert the gentleman farmer pursues an occupation which is hereditary (p. 9) and as old as the hills. She and he are, moreover, separate ‘powers’ which ‘tend to union’ in so full a sense that the glances exchanged in church in Chapter 1 prefigure an eventual exchange of vows.

6 *Wuthering Heights*, Wordsworth Classics edition, p. 122

7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (ed. John Colmer), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1976, p. 24

That very tendency of previously separate powers to unite is itself, once we can detect it in Gilbert's story, a striking confirmation that Helen's story may indeed be considered the 'opposite' of his. She after all, in relating her melancholy 'matrimonial experience' (p. 207), has dealt instead with union followed by separation. And a marked contrast in the ways they respectively represent marriage is another felicitous consequence of Brontë having divided the narrative of *Wildfell Hall* between two storytellers. The transition from Gilbert's letters to Helen's diary, when – in a tactic whose artistic effectiveness Helen's own careful composition will demonstrate (p. 125) – attention is invited to a feature suddenly more 'sombre' than what surrounds it, enables Brontë to present a more balanced view of marriage than was customary in fiction. The prevailing custom was for a novel to work slowly up to marriage, through a series of suspenseful postponements. What George Meredith later dubbed the 'nuptial chapter' would be the conclusion of everything; and no space would be left for marriage's uncertain aftermath, even though the novelist might find the before and the after equally interesting. ('Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning,' writes George Eliot.)<sup>8</sup> In *Wildfell Hall*, however, Brontë gives us the before and after in one package.

She does this in miniature, as it were, with a minor character like Lord Lowborough; his 'matrimonial efforts and researches' are shown (p. 153), and so too is the chequered matrimonial experience which these subsequently bring him. But most importantly, with the turn after fifteen chapters from letters to diary, she does it on the larger canvas as well. Gilbert's letters constitute a tale of courtship, with Helen (after Eliza Millward) made the principal object, and they therefore reach towards marriage; but Helen's emergence as subject, through her diary's now yellowing leaves, takes us – in respect of an earlier relationship – unsparingly past that point. Gilbert is a character in the position of Jane Austen's Mr Darcy: in the opening chapter, a single man in want of a wife; on the final page, proudly sporting his 'Just Married' sign. 'I was married in summer,' he briskly states, 'on a glorious August morning' – which distinctly recalls the splendour of the daybreak that followed his perusal of the diary (p. 310). Helen, on the other hand, is a character whose 'I am married now' (p. 158) marks not a long journey's yearned-for conclusion but the start of a protracted ordeal. And while we learn practically nothing about Gilbert's happy ending ('I need not tell you . . . ' is his rhetorical rounding-off) the

8 Quotation taken from Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Wordsworth Classics edition, p. 683

diary discloses nearly everything that Helen's previous marriage has led to, from a 'First Quarrel' (Chapter xxiv) to an eventual 'Scheme of Escape' (Chapter xxxix). If we adopt the categories of D. A. Miller, who distinguishes between 'narratable' states in fiction (those states 'of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency' from which plots necessarily take their rise) and 'nonnarratable' states (those states of 'perfect union' and of 'plenitude' in which novels traditionally come to rest),<sup>9</sup> it is plain that Gilbert's chapters of narrative allow marriage to retain the 'nonnarratable status' commanded by the main marriages in Austen's work, but that Helen's diary – concealed inside them – presents the spectacle of a marriage made excitingly, and alarmingly, narratable. Brontë's novel charges itself with the responsibility of reconciling these opposed positions. Whereas Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, at the start of the nineteenth century, is committed to treating marriage as a bourne, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, at the century's close, is equally bent on treating it as a beginning (with all the attendant implications of 'disequilibrium' and 'insufficiency'), *Wildfell Hall* – in terms of both chronology and ideology – occupies an intriguing intermediate position.

Thus there is a crystal clarity about the way in which, with their respective accounts of union concluded and of separation resorted to, the letters and the diary in *Wildfell Hall* convey the before and after of marriage. In so far as they do that, Brontë appears completely in control of the effects which her narrative strategy produces. But in so far as the letters and the diary simultaneously co-operate to open – with their respective positions inside the novel's structure – a His-and-Hers split in the storytelling, there may be deeper and darker implications. For the embedding of the diary kept by the woman within the letters written by the man has been seized upon by modern commentators keen to challenge any reading of Brontë's novel which fashions it as domestic idyll or as allegory of recovery and rescue. Such an embedding is interpreted in this context as repeating and reinforcing Helen's long experience of male encirclement – summed up by perhaps her bitterest biblical quotation, 'He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out' (p. 288) – and as equating Gilbert, whose framing discourse begins and ends the book, with all of the other characters who banefully beset her round. True to form, by the time he comes to absorb Helen's diary, Gilbert has started pressing his attentions and his presents upon her as if eager to emulate the past 'persecutions' of 'Messrs Wilmot and Boarham' (p. 128) or of Mr Hargrave (who makes

a move on Helen, in modern parlance, when they play chess in Chapter xxxiii). Gilbert has even been linked to the very worst of Helen's tormentors, and seen not just as 'another Mr Hargrave' (p. 311) but as another Mr Huntingdon. The point to grasp here is that Helen's marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, in the year 1821, entailed her 'coverture'; legally, she submitted to being incorporated in the person of her husband, with her past life and name erased and her property combined with his. And now the swallowing up of her diary in Gilbert's letters is a kind of narrative coverture, another ostensible merger which soon starts to look more like a hostile takeover. Increasingly, in modern commentary, this is treated as an intolerably high-handed male manoeuvre, both because Gilbert superimposes his voice on Helen's – through ordaining each division of her manuscript and deciding what 'we will . . . call it' – and because he presumes to tamper with 'a few passages here and there' (p. 102). According to Elizabeth Signorotti, who completes the unravelling of all comfortably romantic views of Gilbert as saviour or as soulmate, his 'appropriation and editing of Helen's history' shows the absolute reverse of sincere concern and only bespeaks 'an attempt to contain and control' (Signorotti, p. 21). The fact that Gilbert reveals that history to a comrade of his might be an aggravating circumstance, even many years after the chronicled events took place. He knows Helen to be an intensely private person, yet just as he let Jack Halford take his sister's hand in marriage – and gained by doing so 'a closer friend than even herself' (p. 10) – so he now grants that same brother-in-law access to Helen's heart, as it has overflowed into the pages of her diary, apparently for no better reason than that he finds himself chided by Halford into making him some 'return of confidence' (p. 7). This 'passing of a woman's story between men in order to repair their intimacy,' as Betty Jay expresses it (Jay, p. 39), is proof to feminist critics that Gilbert respects that woman's feelings less than he values male bonding.

The diary is thus a double-edged sword. We might have trusted that its inclusion would settle all our doubts about the diarist: why has she been behaving so strangely? and why does her son bear 'a striking likeness' to Frederick Lawrence (pp. 63–4)? Yet in the event it does just as much to raise questions about the man over whose shoulder we, like Halford, must read it. Certainly, if they follow the logic of 'refuse the evil and choose the good' as I outlined it earlier, critical studies of the novel will sometimes accept Gilbert as Arthur's redeeming antithesis, and the August wedding as auspiciously counteracting the 'foreboding fears' that surrounded its decidedly 'ill-starred' predecessor (pp. 188,



381); but many modern studies – looking rather to young Arthur, and to the second of the book's marriages between an Arthur and a Helen (p. 381), for that salutary contrast – are inclined to regard Gilbert as a mere replica of Helen's original husband, and even more deceptive in his dangerousness because a thicker veneer of civility covers the 'sadistically predatory nature' of his 'desire to conquer and control Helen' (Signorotti, p. 22). Recent feminist criticism has therefore turned on its head that more innocent interpretation, invited by Brontë's overt religious patterning, which my own discussion previously sought to sketch. And there is now scope for the same synthesis of opposing views which, with regard to marriage, the book itself effects. Significant areas of agreement between the two camps nevertheless already present themselves, and are more important than any differences. Whether or not we consider that Gilbert contributes anything himself to Helen's endangerment, Brontë still leaves us with the impression of a sinister masculine confederacy and still imparts a strong sense of Helen as ganged up on and besieged. *Wildfell Hall* is quite consistent both in offering a peculiarly dim and disillusioned view of male cliques and in making the isolation of its heroine's integrity the fulcrum of the narrative.

The endangered heroine herself, at the beginning of Chapter xxxvii, pulls the parts of this picture into place. Helen writes here of being assailed by afflictions. Agonisingly excluded from what she sees as a damaging new closeness between her husband and her young son, she admits to keeping aloof from the joys of affectionate attachments and speaks of shouldering a massive 'weight of sadness' (p. 256). She carries the same beleaguered air with her, and the same weight of sadness, when she flees from Grassdale to become 'the persecuted tenant of Wildfell Hall' (p. 322). Here too she sustains a siege – from the curious locals, among them Gilbert's mother and sister, by whom she is 'ferreted . . . out' (p. 308) – and here too she distinguishes herself from others near to her by appearing altogether 'more mature and earnest' (p. 41). Helen's 'weight of sadness' is in fact her gravity, and the obsolete positive senses of 'sadness' ('seriousness' and 'steadfastness') are very powerfully revived in her. This heroine stands out because – as Juliet McMaster has argued – Brontë inverts the traditional moral axis of gender to set a woman who is solid as a rock against men who are at best bending reeds, at worst human brutes, and generally incapable of responding adequately to 'the serious part' of her (p. 157); and Helen is duly seen holding firm through a relentless sequence of deprivations and curtailments, including even a threatened confiscation of her very identity. Isolation, so destructive in Dickens's women, becomes in