Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë’s *Tenant*

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In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft counters Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s claim that girls have a “natural” fondness for “dolls, dressing, and talking” by noting instead that “a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses . . . will endeavour to join the conversation . . . [and] imitate her mother or aunts.”¹ Substituting Rousseau’s essentialism with social constructivism, Wollstonecraft advances an argument for women’s equality, but, as her sneering remarks about “weak nurses” and “idle chat” indicate, only at the cost of disdain for women. Wollstonecraft’s antipathy for women’s lives is so palpable that even her most sympathetic readers have suspected her of wishing to make women not equal to but the same as men.² Wollstonecraft’s contention that rather than looking to their mothers, women should imitate “manly virtues, or, more properly speaking . . . those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character,” lent support to this suspicion.³ Her self-correction (“or, more properly speaking”) and critique of aristocrats elsewhere make it evident that her target is not exclusively women but also aimless, idle lives that stoke vanity and repulse thought. The “manly virtues” Wollstonecraft venerates—rationality, purpose, achievement—are those of the emerging middle-class man. Nonetheless, her assaults on femininity are so frequent, her rhetoric so blistering—“these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!”—that contemporaries, nota-

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Anne Brontë’s *Tenant*

bly Hannah More, responded angrily, insisting that women are morally superior to men. In 1799, More wrote: “I would call on [women] . . . to raise the depressed tone of public morals . . . On the use . . . which [women] shall . . . make of this influence, will depend . . . the well-being of those states, and the virtue and happiness, nay, perhaps the very existence, of that society.” For More, men and women are different, and, rather than imitate men, women must act as moral guides influencing men’s behavior.

For much of the nineteenth century, More seems to have won the argument. According to Barbara Taylor, William Godwin’s *Memoirs* made Wollstonecraft a pariah, and most women in the nineteenth century either rejected the “evil book,” or, if they were inclined toward women’s rights or equality, read it surreptitiously but did not acknowledge or openly ally themselves with Wollstonecraft. Anne Brontë appears to be one of those writers who quietly supported Wollstonecraft’s ideas about femininity’s drawbacks while avoiding Wollstonecraft’s name. Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), whose heroine inveighs against chat and talk as feminine and disruptive, has been read as a straightforward Wollstonecraftian indictment of gossip as degraded and feminine, but this is a distortion of the text and a simplification of Brontë’s gender politics. Reading *Tenant* against Wollstonecraft, I demonstrate that, contrary to appearances, Brontë not only refuses the Wollstonecraftian indictment of the feminine, but also rejects its Moreian elevation. My reading reveals a nineteenth-century “feminism” that forges a path between the extremes of the Wollstonecraft-More spectrum.

Recent *Tenant* criticism has highlighted the novel’s protofeminist themes—marriage as a prison for women, women’s struggle to gain independence and an identity outside marriage, and an expose of men’s bad behavior. Yet, few have noted that alongside the novel’s critique of existing modes of masculinity is its portrayal of the formation of a new masculinity, one that emerges not, as More would have it, under the tutelage of a woman, nor, as Wollstonecraft would have it, by eschewing the feminine. In *Tenant*, a reformed masculinity emerges by emulating feminine ways, the very gossip or “idle chat” that Wollstonecraft excoriated in *Vindication*; only in Brontë’s novel, it emerges without the aid of women. The feminist rediscovery of Brontë has obscured her more radical account of masculinity-in-the-making. Focusing on gossip, I demonstrate that Brontë was no surreptitious or inadvertent Wollstonecraftian, but an engaged interlocutor who defended “idle chat” and offered it as the model for a reforming masculin-
ity. In doing so, Brontë upended the Wollstonecraftian preference for masculine virtue over feminine culture. And yet, Brontë did not essentialize gossip as necessarily feminine; in Tenant, “idle chat” is not so much gendered—not so much associated with women—as classed, the lifeblood of a healthy middle class. I aim to unpack Brontë’s gender politics, reveal her radical blueprint for masculine reform, and complicate analyses of gossip as either a dangerous or liberating weapon wielded by women—the coin they circulated in lieu of the monetary circulation from which they were largely excluded. To position gossip as merely a substitute for an engaged life is to neglect that, as a form of human exchange, it is an engaged life. Brontë, unlike Wollstonecraft, understood this, and, unlike some nineteenth-century novelists, did not attempt to beat the habit out of her characters.

I

Slipping out of a dinner party in Linden-Car, Helen Graham complains to Gilbert Markham: “I was wearied to death with small-talk—nothing wears me out like that . . . Is it that they think it a duty to be continually talking . . . and so never pause to think, but fill up with aimless trifles and vain repetitions, when subjects of real interest fail to present themselves?” Such remarks have led critics to suppose that Brontë is a critic of idle talk, but this blurs character with author. Although Brontë presents daily life in Linden-Car as punctuated by small talk, rumor, and gossip—Helen’s appearance in the crumbling mansion, her origins, her reputed affair with her landlord, Frederick Lawrence, and her flight are closely scrutinized by her genteel neighbors—she does not dismiss this talk as Helen does, but presents it as serving the vital function of creating fellowship and community. The novel begins as domestic social comedy, with idle talk creating connection and interjecting humor. As Mrs. Markham presides over tea and quizzes her sons, Gilbert and Fergus, about their day, her daughter, Rose, unable to contain herself, breaks in:

“I was going to tell you an important piece of news I heard there—I’ve been bursting with it ever since. You know it was reported a month ago, that somebody was going to take Wildfell Hall—and—what do you think? It has actually been inhabited above a week!—and we never knew!”

“Impossible!” cried my mother.
“Preposterous!!!” shrieked Fergus.
“It has indeed!—and by a single lady!”
...“Oh dear! that spoils it—I’d hoped she was a witch,” observed Fergus, while carving his inch-thick slice of bread and butter.

(pp. 13–4)

Fergus’s exaggeration and self-mockery, as he slices his prosaic bread and butter, mark Brontë’s gentle indulgence, and the scene is suffused with love and comfort. Such banter, cheeriness, and affection are utterly lacking in the central section of the novel, when Helen’s diary takes over and chronicles her isolated life on her alcoholic and abusive husband’s estate, Grassdale. The gossip of middle-class Linden-Car functions not as a critique of the behavior, but rather to heighten its contrast with the chilling atmosphere of the upper-class estate.¹⁰

Gossip has long been identified with women and danger, but, in Linden-Car and Tenant, it is neither exclusively feminine—Markham and the vicar join in every conversation—nor particularly malignant.¹¹ Indeed, much of what passes between the neighbors in Linden-Car is precisely idle gossip, speculative but harmless. True, rumors that Helen and Lawrence are lovers lead Markham to attack his rival, but if we recall that Markham refuses to heed the gossip and only acts when he has visual proof of the relationship, it is clear that his volatility and hypermasculinity, not idle village talk, are the sources of the violence. Brontë’s lengthy transcriptions of such chat make evident that, while annoying to Helen, the village talk in fact builds social contact and community.¹² In her positive representation of gossip, Brontë differs from writers such as Jane Austen who also narrativize idle chat in small communities. Yet, while talk and misunderstanding propel plot in Austen’s novels, the narrator does not condone them: Emma, for instance, must learn not to credit rumors, not to devise fictions from slim evidence. Only the narrator is permitted to use gossip to reveal character or create fictions from the stuff of chat. Patricia Meyer Spacks has noted the similarities between “gossip” and the novel, yet most nineteenth-century novelists condemned their characters’ gossipping ways.¹³ Anne Brontë is an exception.

That Brontë does not share Helen’s lofty rejection of idle talk is clear when Helen’s diary takes over and we are plunged into the life of the landed gentry in which social relations are pinched and hobbled. In this world, Helen asks Annabella Wilmot, a woman she dislikes intensely, to be her bridesmaid, explaining simply “I
have not another friend” (p. 181). Later we learn that Helen has had no contact with her brother since their parents died, and although she turns to him when she escapes, their relationship is so reserved that Helen plans to repay him the expenses he has borne to set her up—in their own childhood home (p. 393). Even having reestablished ties with this beloved brother, however, Helen does not attend his wedding (p. 470). The cozy tea table at which Mrs. Markham involves herself in her children’s lives and presides over their gossip is unknown in the upper-class world—and its absence is damaging.

In place of human fellowship, Helen’s only “confidential friend” is her diary. Into its “ears” she “pour[s] forth the overflowings of [her] heart” because if “it will not sympathize with [her] distresses . . . it will not laugh at them, and, if [she] keep[s] it close, it cannot tell again; so it is, perhaps, the best friend [she] could have” (p. 154). Helen’s sense of propriety and desire for confidentiality is so powerful that it isolates her. But more than that, as Brontë details in an elaborate subplot, it wrecks the possibility of alliances. When Helen discovers that her husband, Huntingdon, is having an affair with Lady Lowborough, she angrily confronts him but decides not to share her discovery with Lord Lowborough (p. 311). Two years later, when Lowborough eventually learns of his wife’s infidelity, he accuses Helen: “You helped to deceive me” (p. 341). She protests that her motive was “kindness” and that it was his “wicked” wife who deceived him, but Lowborough insists: “‘And you madame,’ said he sternly . . . ‘you have injured me too, by this ungenerous concealment’” (pp. 341–2). The accusation is not unjust: while Helen chooses to ignore her husband’s affair as long as it puts an end to their “conjugal endearments,” her refusal to gossip denies Lowborough the same choice (p. 306). As a result, he must bring up as his own the daughter of the adulterous union between his wife and Huntingdon. The episode reveals the cost of intense reserve: all exchange, even the most pertinent, is shut down. What remains are superficial and frivolous exchanges—the very sort of “small talk” of “aimless trifles and vain repetitions” that Helen objected to in Linden-Car (and that may explain her aversion to and misunderstanding of its function at Linden-Car). As many critics have pointed out, Tenant targets the bad behavior of upper-class men.14 But, it also censures the silences that enshrine and perpetuate such behavior—and here Helen too is culpable. In light of the isolation, loneliness, and repression that cripple the relations between characters in the upper class, it is impossible to read the exchange, talk, chat, and gossip of middle-class Linden-Car as undesirable.
Brontë furthermore recuperates what Helen denigrates as “small talk” by undercutting the alternative to the oral that our narrators, Helen and Markham, embrace. Both are suspicious of the spoken word, demanding “proof” (p. 126) to support what they are told, and, like Othello, accept only the “ocular” as evidence, but Brontë exposes this reliance on the empirical as naïve. During her passionate courtship with Huntingdon, Helen refuses to credit the word-about-town that he is “wild” and has affairs with married women (pp. 135, 149). She asserts that “I don’t believe a word of it . . . till people can prove their slanderous accusations, I will not believe them” (p. 149). The gossip, however, as Helen learns from Huntingdon’s own bragging shortly after their wedding, turns out to be a laundered version of his actual debauchery (pp. 208–9). In light of Huntingdon’s subsequent brutality and psychological abuse of her, Helen’s high-minded refusal to heed the “gossiping” hints appears not admirable, but delusional. Given her reliance on the empirical, Helen’s rejection of sight once she discovers her husband’s perfidy is predictable: “I have found it my wisest plan to shut my eyes against the past and future, as far as he at least is concerned” (pp. 268–9). As with any naïve adherent of a faith, with disappointment comes complete rejection.

Markham shares Helen’s empirical naivety. While he refuses to believe the whispered innuendos about Helen and Lawrence, he is led astray precisely by the evidence of his eyes: spying Helen walking with Lawrence, Markham concludes that Lawrence is her lover and shuns her (pp. 106–7, 113–4). When Helen demands an explanation, their conversation is a telling exchange of the competing claims of the spoken word and visual evidence. When Helen demands, “why did you not come to hear my explanation . . . ?” Markham responds, “because, I happened, in the interim, to learn all you would have told me,—and a trifle more I imagine” (p. 123). Their exchange continues:

“Impossible, for I would have told you all!” cried she passionately—“But I won’t now, for I see you are not worthy of it! . . . [Y]ou never understood me, or you would not soon have listened to my traducers . . . Tell me . . . on what grounds you believe these things against me; who told you; and what did they say? . . . ”

“I do not make jest of them, Mrs Graham,” returned I [Markham] . . . “And as to being easily led to suspect, God only knows what a blind, incredulous fool I have hitherto been, perseveringly shutting my eyes and stopping my ears.
against everything that threatened to shake my confidence in you, till proof itself confounded my infatuation!"

“What proof, sir?”

“Well, I’ll tell you. You remember that evening when I was here last?”

“I do.”

“Even then you dropped some hints that might have opened the eyes of a wiser man; but they had no such effect on me . . . ”

“You should have come to me, after all,” said she, “and heard what I had to say in my own justification . . . You should have told me all . . . ”

“To what end should I have done so?—You could not have enlightened me farther, on the subject which alone concerned me; nor could you have made me discredit the evidence of my senses . . . ” said I.

(pp. 123–8; emphases added)

Markham insists on the authority of his eyes while Helen simultaneously disdains and privileges the oral by challenging others’ words and offering in their place her own. But because both have discredited speech, it is difficult for Helen to offer words or Markham to credit her: what he has seen, her words cannot undo. But while her protagonists put their faith in the ocular, Brontë does not: Helen’s naive empiricism leads to her disastrous marriage, and Markham’s to the only physical violence in a book about male brutality.

Suspicious of the spoken word and reliant on the visual, Helen and Markham put their faith in the written word (their courtship begins with an exchange of Sir Walter Scott’s Marmion), but here too Brontë exposes their naivety. The lovers’ reliance on text is most evident when Helen, finally pushed to counter the evidence of Markham’s spying eyes, chooses, not a verbal explanation, but a silent offering to him of her diary, which he reads alone (pp. 129, 397). Helen’s diary is the most abused aspect of the novel’s narrative structure. Reviewers and critics have complained that the technique is clumsy, the premise—Markham writes a lengthy letter to his friend Halford in which he transcribes her diary—implausible, and the two narratives distinct tales with little in common. Until recently, conventional wisdom was that Brontë should have dispensed with the diary and had Helen orally narrate her story to Markham. But this suggestion denies Brontë’s craft, the way, as Garrett Stewart puts it, she “presses structure
The diary is a fitting narrative device because the characters require it. Their textual exchange, rather than marking Brontë’s clumsiness as a writer, indicates her protagonists’ faith in the written word and Brontë’s cannily selected device to reflect this faith.

But their faith in the written word is folly too: as Brontë demonstrates, words on a page can betray. Helen’s distrust of talk and the classed reserve that lead her to “confide” her troubles to her diary exposes her to Huntingdon, who confiscates it, discovers her “scheme of escape,” and imprisons her (pp. 154, 362). But Huntingdon is not alone in using Helen’s diary to expose her; Markham also does so. Tenant is an epistolary novel that includes Markham’s letters to his friend Halford recounting his courtship of Helen. While part of the story is Markham’s, the bulk is Helen’s and appears in the form of her diary. Because Halford is, in Markham’s derogatory description, “as great a stickler for particularities and circumstantial details as my grandmother,” Markham transcribes Helen’s diary into his letters (pp. 10, 129, 431, 432). The violence of this act is unmistakable; for the second time, Helen is exposed and spoken for. Some critics have speculated that Markham may have obtained his wife’s consent before sharing the contents of her diary, but this argument is undercut by Brontë’s deliberate narrative architecture. She places on the same page two events that are widely chronologically separated: Helen’s plea when she first hands Markham her diary—“Don’t breathe a word of what it tells you to any living being—I trust to your honour”—and Markham’s promise to Halford twenty years later: “I know you would not be satisfied with an abbreviation of [the diary’s] contents and [so] you shall have the whole” (p. 129). The juxtaposition draws attention to Markham’s violation of Helen’s trust and cannot be redeemed by reading outside Brontë’s text.

II

Positioning Huntingdon’s and Markham’s uses of Helen’s diary as mirror images of one another—one uses it to imprison her, the other to expose her—Brontë indicates a continuity in the men’s attitudes and behavior toward women. Although Markham is unlike Huntingdon in crucial ways—he does not drink, gamble, or abandon his wife—he is, nevertheless, a disturbing hero and lover for our much-abused heroine. The list of Markham’s faults is long: he is brutal in his assault of Lawrence (pp. 116–7), vicious when
he vindictively slanders Jane Wilson (pp. 416–7), self-absorbed and petulant when he flirts with Eliza Millward, and cruel in his dismissal of her when Helen warms (p. 26). Furthermore, Markham desires power over women, as when he declares, “I felt it glad to have it in my power to torment [Helen]” (p. 123). As readers from Charles Kingsley onward have asked: is Markham an appropriate mate for the long-suffering Helen? The answer, I contend, is that he is not.

In this novel, Brontë challenges the central tenet of domestic ideology—women’s influence on men—that More articulates. The doctrine was simultaneously empowering and burdensome and found its way into even “protofeminist” novels such as Jane Eyre, where Jane fulfills (or reduces) her ambitions for a wider life by taming and managing her “master.” In Tenant, however, Anne Brontë narrates a tale in which masculinity is impervious to the softening or “superior” influence of women. The novel is, instead, an excruciating exposé of the utter fictionality of this doctrine.

Helen, following More’s script, marries Huntingdon in the grip of the ideology, convinced that she can reform him. Six years later, she must escape to protect herself and her son. In rejecting the fantasy of masculine reform at the hands of women, Brontë undermines the basic Moreian premise of domestic ideology.

But while Huntingdon is beyond redemption, critics have pointed out that Markham is more pliable. They have suggested that through reading Helen’s diary, Markham learns sensitivity, thereby providing Helen with the partnership of equals she is unable to have with Huntingdon. For such critics, Markham’s faults are not puzzling but necessary; they demonstrate that although Helen fails to reform Huntingdon, she succeeds with her second husband, a man who also clearly requires reform. Others have countered that there is scant evidence of Markham’s reform (and much evidence of his continued self-absorption, insensitivity, and petulance) underscoring the limited choices available to women. I concur with these latter critics that any reform on Markham’s part is so slight as to be hardly worth mentioning. Yet in debating whether Markham changes or not, we miss a basic point: that the text posits it as desirable that he should. Tenant suggests that Markham ought to reform—and reform by becoming more “feminine,” Wollstonecraft had urged women to “imitate manly virtues,” but Brontë reverses this dictum, suggesting that men imitate womanly behaviors. If, with Helen’s first husband, Brontë exposes the practical limits of More’s injunction to women to elevate men, with the second husband she rejects
the Wollstonecraftian gender hierarchy of virtues. Markham is to be reformed and feminized, but, in keeping with Brontë’s skepticism about the limits of women’s influence, the vehicle for that reformation is not Helen but another man. Throughout the novel we have no textual evidence of Helen’s wielding positive influence on Markham. (Tellingly, critics who assert Helen’s influence on Markham—N. M. Jacobs, Elizabeth Langland, Linda Shires, and Juliet McMaster—can only speculate about it.) Notably, Markham composes his letter to Halford while Helen is away. The complete absence of female supervision of male reform is so striking that it gives the lie to any argument that Brontë maintained faith in its possibility. Instead of a woman’s tutelage of a man, Brontë sketches a portrait of two men, Markham and Halford, tottering unsteadily toward a new form of masculinity.

Recent studies of Victorian masculinities have offered a nuanced view of that once-monolithic creature, the Victorian Man, confident, imperious, rigid. Scholars have demonstrated that, in the early decades of the century, masculine identity was in flux, unstable, and recreating itself. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall write that “far from carrying the blustering certainty of the late Victorian paterfamilias, early nineteenth-century masculine identity was fragile, still in the process of being forged and always measured against the background of condescension from the gentry as well as the long tradition of artisan pride.” In contrast to the eighteenth century’s proliferating forms of masculinity (the fop, the rake, and the gentleman), the 1830s, David Glover and Cora Kaplan write, were notable for “a strong bid to establish a dominant form of masculinity for the industrial era,” and Thomas Carlyle, according to Herbert Sussman, “quite self-consciously [sought] to establish a foundation myth of manliness for an industrial society.” As the middle class acquired an identity and became more confidently established—unevenly, yes, but nevertheless distinctively—it reimagined gender identity and relations and tussled with existing and new forms of masculinities. To put it in Raymond Williams’s terms, in the 1820s and ’30s residual and emergent forms of masculinities jockeyed for dominance.

Studies of early Victorian masculinities have focused on men—their self-fashioning and self-articulation—and Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Thomas Arnold feature prominently. To my knowledge, no critic has examined Victorian women’s responses to masculinity, emerging or residual. (By contrast we know a great deal about nineteenth-century men’s responses to femininity and the na-
scent women’s movement.) The study of Victorian masculinities is ripe for such extension, and Brontë’s *Tenant* is a rich place to begin as it tackles precisely these questions of competing forms of masculinity and masculine self-fashioning. Brontë carefully dated her novel: Markham’s letters to Halford are composed in 1847, but the events narrated occur in 1827, a moment when masculine identity in Britain was in flux. Remarkably, although biographically inclined critics beginning with Charlotte Brontë offer the decline of Branwell as the standard explanation for the source of Anne’s dark tale, the question of masculinity is never raised as a theme that Brontë engages; the biographical is used to reduce Anne to a scribe of life’s experiences, not to see her as engaging those experiences. This is a grave error as *Tenant* is an incisive critique of old forms of masculinity and a clear-eyed vision of the pain of birthing new forms.

The new masculinity that Markham reaches toward in the frame letters is sketched in contrast to the aristocratic masculinity of Grassdale. Huntingdon and his friends spend little time in the company of women and are neither domestic nor domesticated. Their pastimes—drinking, hunting, and gambling—are exclusively masculine, and women are only either wives or lovers. Helen notes that Huntingdon’s “notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not my notions . . . [H]is idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home . . . and when he is absent, to attend to his interests . . . no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime” (p. 244). She desires a companionate marriage centered around the romantic heterosexual couple, a novel—in both senses of the word—arrangement if ever there was one. In such a marriage, the “new man” spends considerable time in the company of women. After his reform, Hattersley, Huntingdon’s partner in debauchery, avoids “the temptations of town,” remaining contentedly “in the society of his happy little wife” (p. 458). And Markham, despite his many faults, has this in his favor: he is accustomed to and comfortable in the company of women and, aside from when he dashes across the fields to spy on Helen, he is almost always ensconced in the ladies’ sitting room, a room Huntingdon will not enter.

Yet, despite his comfort with women, Markham is emotionally undomesticated. He is unable to form an “intimacy” with Lawrence and is so emotionally clumsy that when Helen virtually proposes to him by handing him a rose, he freezes—“I dared not speak lest my emotion should over-master me”—for so long that she “misconstru[es] this hesitation into indifference” and angrily
withdraws her offer (pp. 40, 454, 483). The letters from Markham to Haldor are written twenty years after this near miss, and in them we glimpse Markham shakily trying to open up to another person. That the exchange is between two men—not a man and a woman, as in so many English novels in which a woman tutors a man to know his emotions—indicates Brontë’s interest, given her skepticism about women’s influence, in probing alternate avenues for the development of masculine sensibility. Tenant opens with a tiff between Markham and Haldor. The men have quarreled because, when last they met, Haldor, “not naturally communicative,” shared a confidence and “requested a return of confidence” (p. 9). The emotionally awkward Markham resisted, and Haldor was “deeply injured” (p. 9). The letter Markham writes—the story we read—is his attempt to “atone” for this injury (p. 21). He offers it as a “coin,” the “first installment of [his] debt,” challenging Haldor to read “the treasure” and “charge me with ingratitude and unfriendly reserve if you can” (pp. 21, 10). The exchange indicates that even after twenty years as Helen’s husband, Markham has not been cured of his emotional clumsiness—so much for women’s influence. Furthermore, while Markham’s and Haldor’s exchange is a step in the development of a new form of masculinity, this masculinity has birthing pains as it searches for a vocabulary and emotional register. Hence, Markham’s recourse to economic metaphors and masculine verbal backslapping, as when he calls Haldor “old boy” and “old buck” (pp. 9, 72). The process of emotionally revealing himself—a gesture labeled “feminine”—requires the reassertion of conventional masculinity. In this moment, residual and emergent masculinity rub shoulders uneasily. But the crucial point is that in sharing Helen’s story, Markham offers Haldor what is, in essence, “gossip.” This exchange of her story not only creates community as it did in Linden-Car, but also, more importantly, promotes masculine behavior that remedies the upper-class chill and aloofness that crippled social relations in Grassdale. As that reserve enabled a brutal masculinity, this “gossipy” exchange of narrative, imperfect as it is, is welcome for the new masculinity it ushers in.

Let me be explicit: not only does Brontë not reject what some term “gossip,” she instead maintains its centrality in creating fellowship and community. Communication and oral exchange between siblings, mothers and sons, and neighbors and friends keeps middle-class Linden-Car free of the isolation and brutality that thrive in Grassdale. Had Helen listened to the word-about-town on Huntingdon, had she learned to gossip, she would not
have undertaken her disastrous marriage, nor would she have been so isolated once in it. But Brontë’s most important recovery of gossip comes with Markham and his framing letters, where she makes it plain that only by learning to gossip—exchange talk, communicate, reveal emotions—can Markham redeem himself, become a new man, and, possibly, a worthy husband for Helen.

III

Finally, Brontë redeems gossip by herself narrating the unspeakable. Her unsavory tale of an abusive alcoholic husband and his debauched friends, of the limits of women’s influence, of the creative fiction that is marriage, is akin to “gossip” in that she puts into words—albeit written—what was only hinted at, surmised, imagined, whispered, but seldom spoken of in fiction. The response to her novel suggests that reviewers did not wish to hear these unpleasant truths. The Spectator considered the subject matter “offensive.”31 The North American Review opined that the novel gave unnecessary prominence to “the brutal element of human nature.”32 Sharpe’s London Magazine complained that there was a “disgustingly truthful minuteness” to it, and the Rambler believed that the author dwelt on “offensive” details.33 Even Kingsley, in his otherwise favorable review in Fraser’s Magazine, wrote: “The fault of the book is . . . the coarseness of subject which will be the stumbling-block of [sic] most readers, and which makes it utterly unfit to be put in the hands of girls.”34 While hoping that “every man in England might read and lay to heart that horrible record [narrated in Helen’s diary],” Kingsley contradictorily continued: “But what greater mistake . . . can there be than to fill such a diary with written oaths and curses, with details of drunken scenes which no wife, such as poor Helen is represented, would have the heart, not to say the common decency to write down as they occurred . . . The author . . . seems to have forgotten that there are silences more pathetic than words.”35 For Kingsley and other reviewers, Brontë had violated propriety; the things she spoke of might happen but should not be narrated. Yet, the very silence Kingsley enjoins on Brontë is the silence Helen retreats into and that isolates her. It is a silence that Brontë refuses.

Stung by the reviews, Brontë responded in an 1848 preface to the second edition of Tenant: “I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in [Huntingdon’s] steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has
not been written in vain” (p. 4). Rejecting silence or withdrawal, Brontë redefined her text as an act of witnessing that aims to be interventionist and meliorative. Yet, comparing herself to a maid who in cleaning a “careless bachelor’s apartment” receives “more abuse for the dust she raises, than commendation for the clearance she effects” (p. 4), Brontë allies herself with servants who were often accused of “carrying tales” or “airing dirty laundry.”

The analogy indicates that Brontë was aware that, like the maid, she too would be marginalized: "If I can gain the public ear at all,” she writes, “I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense" (p. 4; emphasis added). Her choice of the verb—“whisper”—to describe this exposé of the dearly held fictions of matrimony, domesticity, and women’s influence, indicates her poignant awareness that her tale will likely be relegated to the dismissed realm of the oral. As it was.

The greatest blow to Anne Brontë’s reputation and the novel’s survival was Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 “Biographical Notice” in which she wrote that “the choice of subject was an entire mistake.” The Tenant’s “unfavorable reception” led Charlotte to single it out: when her publisher offered to reprint her sisters’ novels in single-volume editions, Charlotte selected only Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey, declaring: “‘Wildfell Hall’ it hardly appears to me desirable to preserve.” Her decision was not, perhaps, made entirely for aesthetic reasons. Given Charlotte’s customary condescension toward her youngest sister—she regularly referred to Anne as a “poor child,” “quiet,” “sweet,” “patient,” “simple”—it must have stung Charlotte that reviewers compared Tenant to Jane Eyre, Huntingdon to Rochester. Even William Smith Williams, the man who “discovered” Charlotte, noted a resemblance, to which Charlotte responded testily: “You say Mr Huntingdon reminds you of Mr Rochester—does he? Yet there is no likeness between the two.” To be compared not to Emily—whom Charlotte considered a genius—but to Anne, who she believed was an “inexperienced writer,” must surely have rankled. Is it not possible that a little competitive rivalry or offense at being compared to the less-glamorous sister fueled Charlotte’s decision? But then, such speculation would be indulging in gossip.

NOTES

2 Barbara Taylor writes that Vindication has “misogynist” tones and inflections (Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003], pp. 198, 209, 216.)
3 Wollstonecraft, p. 80.
4 Wollstonecraft, p. 83. Chapter 1 of Wollstonecraft’s Vindication provides some instances of her critical stance vis-à-vis the aristocracy.
6 Taylor, pp. 248–50.

Jan B. Gordon does not directly reference Wollstonecraft, but his essay’s argument that “gossip devalues” and “threatens cultural values” and that Helen needs to embrace textual (letter and diary) forms to take control of her life equates talk with a femininity in need of correction and ascribes to Brontë a critique of talk that this essay argues against (“Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë’s Narrative Tenant and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel,” ELH 51, 4 [Winter 1984]: 719–45, 724–5).
9 Tenant, p. 85. The novel’s central character has no fixed name. She appears first as Helen Graham, a pseudonym she adopts on fleeing her husband. During much of the novel she is Helen Huntingdon, née Lawrence, and in the closing pages, we anticipate her becoming Helen Markham. The surfeit underscores women’s “tenancy” in masculine nomenclature. I refer to her as “Helen.”
10 Although Linden-Car is an agricultural town with a squire and “gentleman farmers,” the villagers’ faith in strictly demarcated gender relations, companionate marriage, and domesticity are firmly midcentury, middle-class values. For more on such values, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), especially pp. 18–28.
11 See Patricia Meyer Spacks, Gossip (New York: Knopf, 1985). Spacks traces the association to the Ancients, but notes that anxiety about women and talk intensified in the eighteenth century, when upper-class women had more free time and when the novel—the form that required minute observation and countless details—emerged (pp. 41, 148–53). Her book is a brilliant redemption of that “serious” gossip which creates intimacy and sustains relationships (pp. 5–6). Although Spacks briefly mentions Tenant, she views the novel’s use of gossip as disciplinary (pp. 7–8), a reading my article counters.
Not all nineteenth-century novelists had such a positive view of gossip: for “urban” novelists such as Charles Dickens gossip was more dangerous, largely because in the city, where anonymity prevailed, idle chat was often used to slander and blackmail. *Little Dorrit*, *Bleak House*, and *Our Mutual Friend* all have subplots in which slander is circulated or repressed with disastrous consequences. In smaller communities such as Linden-Car, however, where intimate knowledge of members makes slander foolhardy, gossip can have the positive function that Brontë ascribes to it.

Spacks, pp. 21–4. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, the “Amazons” thrive on endless small talk, but their chat, like the women themselves, is not generative or productive. Rather, it is restrictive, defining who can say what and when. Thus, while Gaskell shares Brontë’s indulgence of characters’ chat, she does not view it as serving a vital function, only as the remnant of a fast-disappearing world. In George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* talk is the circulatory system that predates more complex systems—railways, the post, banks, medical analysis of the heart—and, as Gillian Beer subtly demonstrates, when the old and new circulation systems collide, blackmail ensues (“Circulatory Systems: Money and Gossip in *Middlemarch*,” *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens* 26 [October 1987]: 47–62, 49–52).


Unlike Mr. B in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Huntingdon is persuaded not to fall in love with Helen upon reading her text, but rather to punish her. His friend, Hattersley, is transformed after reading Helen’s letters, but the letters, rather than being the motivating cause, are only the icing on the cake of his fear of descending into the same alcoholic hell as Huntingdon.


Jacobs, p. 226; McMaster, pp. 363–4; Langland, “The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” in *Gender


24 The letter begins: “the family are absent on a visit” (p. 10). While “visit” could suggest a social call, the fact that Markham sits down with “certain musty old letters and papers . . . musing on past times,” as well as the length of the letter suggests that the visit is of some duration, perhaps out of town. By 1800, “visit” meant both a social call and an excursion or a “short or temporary stay at a place” (OED, 2d edn., n. “visit,” 1a, 1d).

25 Victorian masculinity studies is a burgeoning field due to the pioneering work of, among others, John Tosh and Michael Roper in their edited collection Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800 (New York: Routledge, 1991) and James Eli Adams’s Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995).

26 Davidoff and Hall, p. 229.


29 Nancy Armstrong has argued that since Pamela “readers remain thoroughly enchanted by narratives in which a woman’s virtue alone overcomes sexual aggression and transforms male desire into middle-class love” (Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987], p. 6).

30 Spacks describes letters as “written gossip” in which writers exchange intimacies, chat, and create plot and narratives out of incidents (pp. 72–6).

31 From an unsigned review, Spectator (8 July 1848), pp. 662–3, rpt. in Allott, pp. 249–50, 250.


34 Charles Kingsley, from an unsigned review, Fraser’s Magazine (April 1849), pp. 417–32; rpt. in Allott, pp. 269–73, 270.

35 Kingsley, rpt. in Allott, p. 271.

subordinates, gossip about the dominant is a form of alliance and an “alternative discourse” (pp. 45–6). James Scott has developed this point brilliantly in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990) from an anthropological and postcolonial perspective.


40 Smith, 2:99, qtd. in Matus, p. 117.

41 Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 5 February 1850, 2:156.