Siblings and Suitors in the Narrative Architecture of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

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Anne Brontë's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall has been singled out most frequently for two elements: (1) its unusually complicated framing device (Gilbert Markham's epistolary account of his relationship with Helen Huntingdon surrounds her much lengthier diary account of her first marriage and flight from her husband) and (2) its strikingly frank and detailed description of a woman's experience in an abusive marriage. These two features of the text, one formal and one thematic, are intertwined in the experience of reading the novel. For, in proceeding through the multilayered narrative and remaining for a surprisingly protracted time in Helen's painful account of her nightmarish marriage, the reader experiences a sensation that might be labeled narrative claustrophobia. The text thus produces an effect on the reader that mimics the entrapment Helen experiences in her marriage.

"The book is painful," Charles Kingsley declared in his unsigned review in Fraser's Magazine, sounding a note that would be echoed by many contemporary critics. A notice in the North American Review complained that the reader "is confined to a narrow space of life, and held down, as it were, by main force, to witness the wolfish side of [Huntingdon's] nature literally and logically set forth." This language invokes the claustrophobic sensation that I have suggested is exacerbated by the narrative form. The reader's discomfort is likely to extend beyond Helen's diary account of her hellish first marriage, however. The events recounted in the framing narrative—Helen's courtship by and eventual marriage to Gilbert Markham—purportedly provide a happy ending for Helen, released from her disastrous first marriage and free to choose a better mate. But Gilbert is

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an oddly unsuitable partner for Helen. Though it may be tempting to read the events in the framing narrative as representing a recovery from the events recounted in the embedded one, such a meliorist view is challenged by the fact that the framing narrative finds Helen remarried to a man who, while not the rake that Arthur Huntingdon was, is capable, like Arthur, of violence and cowardice (as evidenced by his vicious attack on Frederick Lawrence, which he does not publicly acknowledge). Gilbert, like Arthur, has been spoiled by his mother and has an inflated ego, and he subscribes to all the standard Victorian stereotypes about female nature and female merit (as evidenced by his behavior toward and descriptions of both the "demon" Eliza Millward, his first flame, and the "angel" Helen).

Gilbert's shortcomings become less critical, however, when attention is shifted from the relationship he describes in his letters to Halford to the one whose forging Helen narrates in her diary—the relationship with her brother Frederick, whom Gilbert perceives as his antagonist and who is his opposite in character. The formal displacement that occurs when Helen's narrative undermines Gilbert's, exceeding it in both length and power, is thus echoed in a displacement of the exogamous romantic plot articulated in his account by the endogamous brother-sister plot contained within hers. The architecture of Brontë's narrative calls attention to alternate forms of domestic containment, one deriving from courtship and marriage, the other from the natal family. Rather than representing these two forms of domesticity as continuous or overlapping, as nineteenth-century novels of family life commonly do, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall stresses their disjunctions, an approach that is complemented by the narrative format.

Treatments of Tenant as domestic fiction have tended to focus on marital relationships, and hence, when examining the relationship of the framing to the framed narrative, to focus on the differences between Gilbert and Arthur as spouses. The critics I will discuss below, for instance, have suggested that the agenda Helen pursues unsuccessfully in her first marriage, an agenda consistent with prevailing domestic ideology, is realized in her second. It must be acknowledged, however, that the novel's relationship to domestic ideology is an unusually vexed one. In presenting Helen's attraction to her first husband, Brontë daringly implies that her heroine's culturally sanctioned role as the would-be reformer of a sinful man serves as a cover for her sexual attraction to him, but a hellish marriage punishes Helen for succumbing to her desire for Arthur. The novel makes a heroine out of a woman who runs away from her husband; but
this transgressive act is sanctioned by a conservative motive: Helen wants
to save her son from his father's corrupting influence. The more subver-
sive kind of rebellion enacted by Arthur's mistress, Annabella—a rebellion
that does not have a selfless motivation—is severely punished by her soci-
ety and by the text: “she [sinks], at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace
and misery; and die[s] at last ... in penury, neglect and utter wretchedness.”
But if Annabella's fate suggests that the novel's critique of domestic ideol-
ogy has its limits, her role in Brontë's treatment of domestic reform also
indicates the limited efficacy of that ideology.

Helen displays the ironic naiveté of a young woman who, subscribing
to the ideas about woman's moral influence articulated by Sarah Ellis and
others, ardently believes that as her husband's “angel monitress” she can
redeem him. While Helen's surveillance of her home and husband accords
with the function of the domestic woman posited by Nancy Armstrong in
*Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Helen is not nearly so effective as that pow-
erful creature. The futility of her efforts are underscored by Annabella;
while Arthur finds his wife's moralizing tedious, he can be kept in line by
his mistress’s strategy, which depends on his physical desire for her.
Annabella's brand of sexual management, ironically, has more pragmatic
reach than domestic authority. In this way, Brontë's novel exposes rather
than reproduces the myth of power embedded in cultural constructions
of the domestic woman.³ Helen's friend Millicent may be criticized for fail-
ning to provide the sort of moral management her husband needs, but the
example of Helen and Arthur suggests that there is a problem with the en-
tire notion of the wife as agent of reform.

The authorial preface to the second edition reiterates on a figural level
Helen's frustrated efforts at domestic purification. Just before asserting, “if
I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome
truths therein than much soft nonsense,” Brontë compares herself to a
cleaning woman who, “undertak[ing] the cleansing of a careless bachelor's
apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises, than com-
mendation for the clearance she effects” (p. 3). If her commitment to
acknowledging unpleasant truths links her to Helen, so too does this indica-
tion of the limits of her own success, since Helen's wifely attempts at
cleaning up Arthur's act are met with obdurate resistance.

This essay stresses the novel's ambivalent relationship to domestic ide-
ology because some of the best readings of this novel become entwined
with it when treating the relationship between Helen's and Gilbert's nar-
ratives. Inspired by Brontë's eloquent and compelling defense of a
wronged woman, and her invention of a heroine who heroically fights
back, N. M. Jacobs, Linda Shires, and Elizabeth Langland have all provided
insightful readings of *Tenant* as a protofeminist text. Each of these critics, however, credits Brontë’s heroine with the successful moral education of her second husband, maintaining that Gilbert is reformed by his exposure to Helen’s text and that their union redeems Helen’s disastrous first marriage; in so doing, they risk reinscribing the domestic ideology that it is a part of the novel’s accomplishment to problematize. Moreover, each has at some point to ignore, minimize, or recast elements in Gilbert’s narrative that qualify a positive account of Helen’s second marriage. It is my contention that these elements are linked to a narrative strategy that contrasts Gilbert the suitor, would-be hero of the framing narrative, and Frederick the brother, hero of the framed narrative. The strategy behind the narrative layering is not to show Gilbert’s reform and to celebrate a restored conjugal ideal, but to juxtapose siblings and suitors, to poise natal domesticity against nuptial domesticity.

In “Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” Jacobs initially seems set to view Gilbert’s framing narrative as part of a continuing critique of the domestic, rather than as the site of its recuperation. She notes that the enclosure of Helen’s diary narrative within Gilbert’s epistolary one mimics not just the division of male and female into separate spheres but also the law of couverture. The fact that Helen’s diary has become her husband’s possession and that he has the power to bargain with it in a bid to recover his friend’s favor reinforces this point, but Jacobs does not pursue that tack. Instead, she sees the relationship between Helen’s story and Gilbert’s as one that works not to contain her but to educate him. According to Jacobs, the “effect on Gilbert of reading this document—of being admitted into the reality hidden within and behind the conventional consciousness in which he participates—is revolutionary, and absolutely instrumental to the partnership of equals their marriage will become. Its revelations force him outside the restricted boundaries of an ego that defines itself through its difference from and superiority to someone else.”

If this were the case, however, then the access to Helen’s consciousness which Gilbert’s reading of her diary gives him should have altered his behavior and assumptions. Jacobs, however, provides no evidence in support of Gilbert’s moral growth. And far from demonstrating any such alteration, Brontë’s novel shows us that in the events following upon his reading of the diary, Gilbert is as egotistical and as sexist as he appears in the opening chapters. His immediate response when he has concluded the account of Helen’s harrowing domestic drama is pique that the pages detailing her initial impressions of him have been ripped out. While the diary might have restored Helen to his good graces, rendering her once again
"all I wished to think her . . . her character shone bright, and clear, and stain-
less as that sun I could not bear to look on" (p. 382, my emphasis), it has
not touched his tendency to demonize all attractive women who are not
the exalted Helen, as his continued shabby treatment and vilification of
Eliza make clear. His unreasonable resentment of Frederick continues, and
his egotism is still intact; his pride almost leads him to lose Helen, as he
refuses to make himself vulnerable to learn whether she still loves him.
Most disturbing, the violence he exhibited in his attack on Frederick is still
manifest in his behavior toward Eliza, the former object of his sexual inter-
est; when she says something that angers him, he responds: “I seized her
arm and gave it, I think, a pretty severe squeeze, for she shrank into herself
with a faint cry of pain or terror” (p. 444). Thus, there does not seem to be
any significant revision in Gilbert’s character that would encourage us to
disagree with Helen’s aunt when she says, “Could [Helen] have been con-
tented to remain single, I own I should have been better satisfied” (p. 470).
The absence of growth on Gilbert’s part was commented upon by Kingsley,
who questioned Brontë’s agenda: “If the author had intended to work the
noble old Cymon and Iphigenia myths, she ought to have let us see the
gradual growth of the clown’s mind under the influence of the accom-
plished woman, and this is just what she has not done.” Precisely. We can
only assume that Brontë knew what she was about when she chose to in-
clude details suggesting Gilbert’s persistent limitations.

While Shires concedes those limitations, she maintains that Gilbert and
his correspondent Jack Halford are both educated by their reading of
Helen’s diary: “[The novel] counsels an inscribed male friend that what he
may perceive as overly independent female behavior is a strong woman’s
only way to maintain integrity in a world where aristocratic male domi-
nance can easily slip into abusiveness. It is important that the text addresses
a man, for the counterhegemonic project of the text is not merely to ex-
pose a bad marriage but to teach patriarchy the value of female rebellion.”
Like Shires, Langland views the framing male narrative as one that serves a
feminist agenda, though in different terms. Writing in part in response to
Jacobs’s description of the relationship between Gilbert’s narrative and
Helen’s as one of enclosure, Langland argues in “The Voicing of Female
Desire in . . . The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” that “[a] traditional analysis that
speaks of nested narratives is already contaminated by the patriarchal ide-
ology of prior and latter and so cannot effectively question what I wish to
question . . . the transgressive nature of narrative exchange.” Thus she pro-
poses viewing the “narrative within a narrative not as hierarchical or de-
tachable parts, but as interacting functions within a transgressive economy
that allows for the paradoxic voicing of feminine desire.”
argument is the fact that the text as a whole is structured around an exchange of letters, and that the epistolary exchange is the prelude for an exchange of visits (Halford and Rose to Gilbert and Helen). She argues that an exchange structure is inherently destabilizing and thus can serve a feminist agenda. She does not allow the gender implications built into this particular exchange to give her pause. However, it is surely not irrelevant that the exchange of letters is an exchange between two men, nor that the material exchanged is a woman's story, though this is a point Langland's reading must ignore. It strikes the reader as curious at best that Gilbert would transcribe for another man the contents of his wife's intimate diary, and disturbing at worst that Helen's hellish experience is used for a homosocial end.

The transaction between Gilbert and Halford accords with the model outlined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men*, which describes how women are used as instruments with which those economic and affective bonds between men that structure society are forged. Gilbert's revelation of Helen's story to Halford is an act of debt paying. He has fallen out of Halford's favor because he did not respond to his friend's sharing of confidences with equal candor; the story he is telling him now, which is actually his wife's story, will acquit his debt. He instructs Halford: "If the coin suits you, tell me so, and I'll send you the rest at my leisure: if you would rather remain my creditor than stuff your purse with such ungainly heavy pieces,—tell me still, and I'll pardon your bad taste, and willingly keep the treasure to myself" (p. 18). The exchange between Gilbert and Halford is not only an economic one, it is also an emotional one, geared toward a restoration of affection. It is clear that Halford has replaced the women in Gilbert's life for the top spot in his affections. Halford is Gilbert's brother-in-law, and he has taken his sister's place in his affections. When in Gilbert's account he first refers to his sister Rose, he pauses to comment: "Nothing told me then, that she, a few years hence, would be the wife of one—entirely unknown to me as yet, but destined hereafter to become a closer friend than even herself" (p. 10). More intriguingly, Markham refers to his marriage to Helen Huntingdon as "the most important event of my life—previous to my acquaintance with Jack Halford at least" (p. 8). The story wins Gilbert his friend's love again, renewing the affective bond between the two men that was in danger of dissolving: "I perceive, with joy, my most valued friend, that the cloud of your displeasure has past away; the light of your countenance blesses me once more" (p. 19).

At one point Gilbert contrasts his warm friendship with Halford to his inability to feel that same kind of bond with Frederick Lawrence, Helen's brother: "[U]pon the whole, our intimacy was rather a mutual predilection than a deep and solid friendship, such as since has arisen between myself
and you, Halford” (p. 36). His jealousy of Frederick, whom he mistakenly assumes to be Helen’s lover, leads to Gilbert’s resentment of him and to his violent attack on him. But even after he learns of Frederick’s kinship with Helen and of how instrumental he has been in Helen’s escape from Huntingdon, Gilbert is unable to forge a connection with him or even to appreciate his merit. The antipathy between the two, much more virulent on Gilbert’s side, is significant, for Frederick is a man who will not engage in the sort of transactions over women that Gilbert wishes him to conduct. Frederick, while placing no impediments between Gilbert and his sister, is not willing to play the active role of go-between that Gilbert expects him to play. Gilbert resents Frederick and even considers him morally culpable for not intervening with his sister on his behalf: “[H]e had wronged us . . . He had not attempted to check the course of our love by actually damming up the streams in their passage, but he had passively watched the two currents wandering through life’s arid wilderness, declining to clear away the obstructions that divided them, and secretly hoping that both would lose themselves in the sand before they could be joined in one” (p. 450). Though Helen sees her relationship to her brother as an end in itself, Gilbert wants the brother to serve as their mediator, to channel the passion whose object and destination is himself.

Such a structure of channeling and mediation is embodied in the novel by gossip, whose central and suspect role in this novel has been elucidated by Jan Gordon: “[Gossip always appears as a threat to value: it either ‘speculates’ or exaggerates by ‘inflating’ . . . In short gossip devalues because it has nothing standing behind it. Lacking the authenticity of a definable source, it is simultaneously financially, theologically, and narratively unredeemable.”11 (It is in fact gossip, with Frederick as its unwitting subject, that brings Gilbert and Helen together; gossip’s misconstrual of Frederick’s wedding as Helen’s causes Gilbert to rush to the scene, a trip which ends in his engagement to Helen.) Gilbert implicitly links Frederick’s refusal to play go-between with his refusal to gossip when he complains to Halford that “[h]e provoked me at times . . . by his evident reluctance to talk to me about his sister” (p. 397). When Helen, on the verge of rejoining her husband, had suggested to Gilbert that he might know of her through her brother, she had specified: “I did not mean that Frederick should be the means of transmitting messages between us, only that each might know, through him, of the other’s welfare” (p. 386). In her formulation of the triangle, Frederick is less a mediating term than an apex. Gilbert’s contrasting expectation that Frederick will serve as an intermediary is thwarted by the literalism and lack of expansiveness with which Frederick imparts news of Helen: “I would still pursue my habitual enquiries after his sister—if he
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had lately heard from her, and how she was, but nothing more. I did so, and the answers I received were always provokingly limited to the letter of the enquiry” (p. 436). Significantly, Frederick is a character who resists transmitting gossip. He does not, for example, let the community know it was Gilbert who attacked him. He is most reluctant to gossip about women, a reluctance that baffles and aggravates Gilbert.

Gilbert’s conversation with Frederick about Jane Wilson is especially revealing in this regard. His narrative has painted Jane as a social climber who wished to ensnare Frederick. Gilbert takes it upon himself to warn Frederick of the danger Gilbert believes he faces from this predatory woman. Frederick checks Gilbert’s desire to gossip about the woman and to slander her: “I never told you, Markham, that I intended to marry Miss Wilson’... ‘No, but whether you do or not, she intends to marry you.’ ‘Did she tell you so?’ ‘No, but—’ ‘Then you have no right to make such an assertion respecting her” (p. 401). As Gilbert continues to press his point, Frederick, who is not interested in Jane, responds with gentle sarcasm to Gilbert’s diatribe. While Gilbert is miffed by Frederick’s refusal to join him in maligning Jane’s character, to engage in this particular kind of male bonding, he comforts himself by reflecting: “I believe... that he soon learned to contemplate with secret amazement his former predilection, and to congratulate himself on the lucky escape he had made; but he never confessed it to me... As for Jane Wilson... [h]ad I done wrong to blight her cherished hopes? I think not; and certainly my conscience has never accused me, from that day to this” (p. 402). The assumption of his own correct insight into Frederick’s attitude, steadfastly maintained in the face of a lack of evidence, and the callous indifference toward the unhappy Jane Wilson are both powerful indicators of Gilbert’s self-satisfied nature and the limits of his imagination and his empathy. Significantly, this smug reflection is made by the older Gilbert who has been married to Helen for many years; it thus cautions us not to assume too much about Gilbert’s improvement under Helen’s tutelage.

Frederick’s refusal to gossip about women is in contrast not only to Gilbert’s eagerness to gossip about Jane Wilson, but also to Gilbert’s sharing of his wife’s intimate diary with his male friend. As we have seen, attempts to read Helen’s second marriage as an event which redeems the domestic ideal compromised by her first marriage must ignore evidence about Gilbert’s shortcomings and the troubling implications of his transfer of the contents of her diary to his friend. It is significant that many of Gilbert’s flaws are made visible through interactions with Helen’s brother Frederick; this fact should encourage us to think further about the latter’s role. For all the famous violence of the domestic scenes in this novel, the
most violent moment in the novel is the one in which Gilbert attacks Frederick:

I had seized my whip by the small end, and—swift and sudden as a flash of lightning—brought the other down upon his head. It was not without a feeling of strange satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead, while he reeled a moment in his saddle, and then fell backward to the ground... Had I killed him?... [N]o; he moved his eyelids and uttered a slight groan. I breathed again—he was only stunned by the fall. It served him right—it would teach him better manners in future. Should I help him to his horse? No. For any other combination of offenses I would; but his were too unpardonable.

(p. 109)

Gilbert's physical attack on Frederick makes particularly vivid and concrete an opposition between Helen's suitor and her brother that is visible throughout the novel, yet Frederick's importance has been largely overlooked by critics.12

Frederick plays an instrumental role in the recuperation of Helen's unhappy history; it is he, not Gilbert, who redeems Helen's faith in humanity after her disillusioning experience with Arthur. She writes in her diary: "I was beginning insensibly to cherish very unamiable feelings against my fellow mortals—the male part of them especially; but it is a comfort to see that there is at least one among them worthy to be trusted and esteemed" (p. 356). Curiously, Frederick is exactly the sort of man the reader who wants a happier, more appropriate second marriage for Helen would expect her to marry. He, not Gilbert, is the gentle, sensitive, and supportive male that Helen has sought. If we are to look for an optimistic, meliorist plot in the novel, it is more likely to be found in the brother-sister relationship than in the husband-wife one. The opportunity for revision and recuperation lies not in the undeniably disappointing Gilbert, so curiously less mature than his bride, but in the brother. Improvement is effected not so much by Gilbert as a replacement for Helen's first husband as it is by her brother as a replacement for her father.13 Juliet McMaster notes a pattern of generational improvement in the novel's juxtaposition of characters who embody Regency values with those who embody Victorian values.14 She discusses this distinction primarily with reference to the replacement of the dissolute Arthur, with his aristocratic associations, by the gentleman farmer Gilbert (elevated to the squirearchy by his marriage to the newly
propertied Helen). But that pattern is most marked in the contrast between Helen’s irresponsible father and his virtuous son. The framing story is the wrong place to look for a positive alternative to Helen’s marriage with Arthur; we must look instead to her diary, to the account of her relationship with Frederick. By shifting attention from the suitor to the brother, we can account for the dissatisfactions of the courtship narrative while revealing Brontë’s display of alternate forms of domestic containment. It is Helen’s growing relationship with her brother, rather than the burgeoning relationship with Gilbert, that receives the privileged place in her diary after she leaves her husband. The containment of the brother-sister plot within the embedded narrative reflects the turn inward, toward the natal family. The claustrophobic narrative structure, originally linked to an imprisoning marriage, finds an alternate thematic corollary in a potentially incestuous relationship.

II

Poised between Helen’s first marriage and her second is the relationship she forges with her brother during her exile. As the person to whom Helen turns for help when she makes her escape, Frederick serves as a buffer between her and the world during her period of disguise. Helen and Frederick’s relationship is peculiar for a brother-sister one because they have been raised having only minimal contact with each other. Helen’s father, an alcoholic with no interest in daughters, abnegated his responsibility toward her, turning her over to relatives after the death of his wife, while keeping charge of his son. Helen’s flight from her husband provides the occasion for building a relationship with her brother that they have thus far not enjoyed. Becoming better acquainted as adults, their relationship is in some ways structurally closer to a courtship relationship than to a brother-sister one. The townspeople, ignorant of Helen’s true identity, construe their relationship as a sexual one, and Gilbert sees him as a romantic rival, suggesting, perhaps, the novel’s own flirtation with an incest motif. Helen, after all, is fixated on her son’s resemblance to the brother she loves. She reconceives her son as the progeny not of her husband Arthur but of her brother Frederick; she says to him: “He is like you, Frederick . . . in some of his moods: I sometimes think he resembles you more than his father; and I am glad of it” (p. 357). Helen’s flight from her husband’s to her brother’s house is followed, then, by the realignment of her son’s lineage in relation to her natal family. Previously, the son’s physical likeness to his father was stressed, and Helen has kept Arthur senior’s portrait (which had symbolized her physical desire for him) in order to
compare the child to it as he grows. In raising her son, she seeks to instill
the character she would create into the body she desired. Finding the em-
bodiment of manly virtue in her brother, she redesignates her son's per-
son as "like Frederick's."

Rather than exploring sexual overtones in the sibling relationship,
however, Brontë's novel foregrounds its relationship to domestic reform;
Frederick's virtue compensates for their father's neglectful treatment of
Helen, and their comfortable relationship, defined by mutual respect,
contrasts with Helen's problematic relationships with her husband and her
suitor. The implication that the brother-sister relationship has the poten-
tial to redeem a compromised domestic sphere bears some resemblance
to Jane Austen's employment of the sibling model of relationships as de-
scribed by Glenda A. Hudson in *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's
Fiction*. Emphasizing the nonsalacious nature of Austen's treatment of in-
cestuous relationships—"In her novels, the in-family marriages between
the cousins and in-laws are successful because they do not grow out of
sexual longing but are rooted in a deeper, more abiding domestic love
which merges spiritual, intellectual and physical affinities"—Hudson ar-
gues that for Austen, "the incestuous marriages of Fanny and Edmund,
Emma and Knightley, and Elinor and Edward Ferrars are therapeutic and
restorative; the endogamous unions safeguard the family circle and its val-
ues . . . Incest in Austen's novels creates a loving and enclosed family
circle."16 The idea of closing family ranks for protective and restorative
purposes can be applied to Helen's turn to her brother.17 Unlike what we
would find in an Austen novel, however, no warm relationship is effected
between Frederick and Gilbert through the latter's marriage to Frederick's
sister. The brother-in-law whose visit Gilbert eagerly anticipates at the end
of the novel is Jack Halford, not Frederick Lawrence. The alternate domes-
tic relationships of siblings and spouses remain quite distinct in Helen's
experience, rather than the former fostering marital exchange.

The endogamous quality of the brother-sister relationship is exagger-
ated in the case of Helen and Frederick: formed during her time in hiding,
it is necessarily an insular one which cannot incorporate outsiders. And it
coexists with a regressive project in which Helen engages upon her flight
from her marital home, for Helen's retreat from her husband is followed
by a return to her natal family origins, symbolized by her adoption of her
mother's maiden name as her alias and her return to the home in which
her mother died. Wildfell Hall, though "no[†] yet quite sunk into decay," is a
previous family home that has been exchanged for a more up-to-date one,
so she is not only symbolically returning to her family, but returning to a
prior stage in the family history (p. 355).
Together, Helen and Frederick revise their family history. Enjoying frequent contact with her brother, Helen reconstructs the family life she was denied as a child. Frederick's supportive and responsible fraternal behavior compensates for the poor behavior of Helen's father. The contrast between Helen's relationship with her father and the relationship she enjoys with her brother bears out claims made by Joseph P. Boone and Deborah E. Nord about Victorian brother-sister plots. They argue that the "[sister's] investment in the brother figure . . . originates as a means to combat her own devaluation within the family and society," frequently making up for paternal neglect in particular. They also note that the brother-sister relationship might be used to circumvent problems inherent in a conjugal relationship: "[I]n some cases, the sibling ideal becomes a utopian basis for figuring heterosexual relationships not based on traditional conceptions of gender polarity as the basis of romantic attraction. Theoretically, at least, the idealized union of brother and sister rests on a more egalitarian, less threatening mode of male-female relationship, precisely because the bond is one in which gender difference is rendered secondary to the tie of blood-likeness, familiarity and friendship." While one might question the assumption that there is something more inherently benign about brother-sister relations than other male-female ones, Helen and Frederick's relationship does seem intended to provide an alternative to the violence and power plays that contaminate the conjugal relationship. Frederick gives her both emotional and practical support and appears to be the only male in the novel who embodies the virtues she seeks in a mate.

Contrary to the case of the brothers and sisters Boone and Nord describe, however, the intimacy of Frederick and Helen is not born and nurtured in the nursery; it is not itself, therefore, cultivated by domestic arrangements. It is, we must suspect, precisely because Frederick and Helen have not been raised together that their sibling relationship presents a strong contrast to the others in the novel, such as that between Gilbert and his sister Rose, who complains of the favoritism with which the sons of the family are treated, and that of Esther Hargrave and her brother, who attempts to pressure her into an unsuitable match. The problem of triangulation within the nuclear family is called to our attention from the first page, when Gilbert commences his account of himself with reference to the competing agendas his mother and father had regarding their son; this is swiftly followed by an exposure to the sibling rivalry between Gilbert and his younger brother as well as that between Rose and her brothers. (The fact that Helen's son is conceived alternately as an improved version of her husband and a younger version of her brother suggests that her family will not be exempt from the kind of triangulation that plagues the
Markham family.) Because Helen and Frederick come together as adults, there is no parental mediation to promote rivalry or jealousy. Moreover, due to the early death of his mother, Frederick has not been spoiled by maternal indulgence in the way that both Arthur and Gilbert are said to have been. Thus, their exemplary sibling relationship is also exceptional. While Helen and Frederick’s relationship seems to present a model for domestic relations, it is a somewhat utopian one, and its strength, paradoxically, derives from the absence of domestic structures in its formation. Therefore, that model is unable to provide the basis for its own reproduction.

In this respect, Brontë’s treatment of the brother-sister motif differs from that of many other nineteenth-century novelists who privilege sibling bonds. Austen and Charles Dickens, for example, both use the sibling relationship as a model for the marital one by having the spouse metonymically connected to the brother (either by being him, as in *Mansfield Park*, or by having a special connection to him, as in *Dombey and Son*). In *Tenant*, this approach is visible only on the margins of the central plot, as, for example, when Helen arranges for Frederick’s marriage to Esther Hargrave, the young woman whom she has called her “sister in heart and affection” (p. 338). The marriage of Arthur Jr. and Helen Hattersly, a second “Helen and Arthur” marriage, is also a sort of fraternal/sororal match, since their mothers’ closeness has caused them often to play and take lessons together from childhood, as siblings would do. Gilbert and Helen’s marriage, however, does not adhere to the sibling paradigm. In the central plot, Brontë keeps the suitor and the brother steadfastly segregated: they are antithetical types and are, consequently, antipathetic to each other. Moreover, Gilbert is rendered analogous not to Helen’s brother, but to her son. Using his friendship with little Arthur as a way of accessing the mother, the petulant and immature Gilbert is, as Shires describes him, the “boy child who wants to take possession of the mother.”19 It is Frederick, not Gilbert, whom Helen perceives as Arthur’s ideal imaginary parent. This fact reinforces the extent to which Frederick appears to be Helen’s only male equal in the novel as well as the only exemplar of manly domestic virtue. Though it is incest that is traditionally associated with the disruption of normal generational sequence,20 Brontë reverses this association by figuring generational imbalance in the exogamous relationship.

Brontë’s treatment of the sibling motif contrasts not only with Dickens’s and Austen’s, but, closer to home, with her own sister’s. Numerous critics have traced the lines of kinship between *Tenant* and *Wuthering Heights*, which contains the more famous representation of sibling love.21 Paradoxically, while the incest motif appears less transgressive in *Tenant* than in
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall— it is where family values are housed—it is less translatable into the social sphere. In Emily Brontë’s novel (as in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre), the notion of kinship is used to figure the romantic love whose promise is a cornerstone of the domestic ideal. In Desire and Domestic Fiction, Armstrong alludes to the strategy behind the kind of romantic identification often associated with incest in the novels of the other Brontë sisters: “In the face of the essential incompatibility of the social roles they attempt to couple, [Emily and Charlotte Brontë] endow their lovers with absolute identity on an entirely different ontological plane.” Working against a critical tradition that “has turned the Brontës’ novels into sublimating strategies that conceal forbidden desires, including incest,” Armstrong associates Emily and Charlotte Brontë’s fiction with a development whereby “sexuality . . . become[s] the instrument of, and not the resistance to, conventional morality.” It is not surprising that Armstrong’s account does not include Anne Brontë, for, unlike Emily and Charlotte, Anne seems to juxtapose rather than to collapse kinship relations and sexual ones in Tenant. This makes Tenant a most unusual example of nineteenth-century domestic fiction, a fact that may account for the relative marginalization of Anne’s masterpiece within the Bronte corpus.

Helen’s relationship to her brother Frederick cannot ultimately solve the problems or contradictions that cluster around the concept of the domestic, for it apparently cannot be brought to bear on other familial relationships, or on anything outside its own circuit. While in Wuthering Heights the incestuous longing of Cathy and Heathcliff is replaced by the more socially acceptable (but, as William Goetz points out, sanguinally more affined) marriage of Catherine and Hareton, in Tenant, the sibling relationship seems to exist as an end in itself. The sense of narrative claustrophobia described above is the formal corollary of this self-containment. Helen and Frederick’s relationship remains insular, and it remains locked within the field of Helen’s diary.

Helen’s narrative itself is “locked,” for, once her diary is turned over to Gilbert, she never again narrates. This means that we have only his word for the success of their marriage. That he is satisfied is clear, but the reader has no firsthand access to Helen’s subsequent experience. It also means that in Helen’s diary the strongest affective relationship with a man that she describes after leaving Arthur is with her brother, in keeping with Brontë’s use of the brother-sister plot to cast a dubious light on Gilbert and his courtship. It is no doubt because the novel privileges Helen’s relationship to her brother, the record of which is confined to the embedded narrative, that Gilbert’s framing narrative strikes many readers as perfunctory.

But it is more than perfunctory; it is part of a sustained critique of mari-
tal domesticity and part of an oppositional structure that segregates the nuptial and the natal forms of domestic containment. *Tenant* is distinctive in its brilliant use of compartmentalized narratives to reflect this thematic opposition. It is even more distinctive in its refusal to reconcile sexual and kinship relations, and in its willingness to sustain the resulting note of unease.

NOTES

I would like to thank Deirdre d'Albertis for her valuable comments on the draft of this essay.


3 Others have commented on the novel’s ironic stance toward the notion of the woman’s role as “angel monitress,” particularly Maria H. Frawley, who in Anne Brontë (New York: Twayne, 1996), argues that Brontë “challenges the domestic ideology that encouraged women to construct themselves as ethereal agents of morality and virtue” (pp. 133–4). Though Elizabeth Langland, in *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (London: Macmillan, 1989), shows with respect to Helen and Arthur that *Tenant* “explodes [the] myth” that women “can serve as redemptive angels to . . . men,” she maintains that Helen’s diary “serves a . . . vital function in educating Gilbert” and that the “Gilbert who marries Helen must accede to . . . the probity of her ‘harshness’ in correcting [male] weakness,” thus suggesting that Helen’s reforming mission is realized with her second husband (pp. 141, 134).

4 In a footnote to “Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Novel* 30, 1 (Fall 1996): 32–55, Laura Berry comments, in a similar vein to mine: “Gilbert Markham’s likeness to Arthur Huntingdon is often elided in order to read into Brontë’s ending a conditional conjugal equality, and thus to make Anne Brontë’s novel a proto-feminist one. This understandable gesture . . . does not always do justice to the complexity of the narrative” (p. 45 n. 19). Berry, however, does not address the role of Frederick and the sibling relationship, arguing rather that Brontë “abandon[s] hope in marital pedagogy in favour of child training” (p. 47).

5 N. M. Jacobs, “Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *JNT* 16, 3 (Fall 1986): 204–19, 213.

6 Qtd. in Allott, p. 272.

7 Linda Shires, “Of Maunder, Mothers, and Feminized Males: Victorian Readings of the French Revolution,” in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Shires (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 147–65, 160. Shires explicitly acknowledges her own motivation in putting the slant she does on the novel: “Although [the text] can be read as shutting down women’s independent voices and actions, [it] should be read primarily as instrumental in enabling and promoting the next wave of revolutionary English feminism” (p. 162). What I am underscoring is the connection between this act of recuperating the text for and as a feminist history and a view of recuperation as what is at stake in the novel’s double marriage plot, since readings such as Shires’s and Jacobs’s imply that Helen’s second marriage, in contrast to her di-
sastrous first one, is benign.


9 Langland does, however, argue in her essay that Helen controls Gilbert’s narrative to Halford, that her diary “redeem[s]” his “bankrupt” narrative (p. 116).


12 For example, though Langland is interested in the way the novel “critiques the conventional manly ideal [and] criticises male indulgence,” she does not consider how the exemplary Frederick factors into the novel’s representation of male character (Anne Brontë, p. 137). Of Gilbert’s attack on Frederick she says: “Thematically and structurally in the novel, this episode develops the insidious effects of an indulgence that leads to masculine arrogance and abuse of power,” without commenting on the juxtaposition of these sharply contrasting specimens of manhood or noting that their opposition factors into the thematic and structural organization of the novel as a whole (p. 133). Langland’s approach is typical in seeming to view Frederick’s role in the novel as incidental. Shires notes that “[i]deologically, this text, like Jane Eyre, promotes gender and class equality which it figures in heterosexual marriage. Yet nearly every man in the book is susceptible to appearances, sentimental romanticizing, cant, or corruption” (p. 161); she does not consider the counterexample offered by Frederick, focusing instead on Helen’s two husbands.

13 If, as has sometimes been suggested, the original of the alcoholic Arthur is Branwell Brontë, then Anne Brontë, in substituting Frederick for Arthur, might be imagining for herself an improved brother. On Anne’s relationship to Branwell and her desire to rescue him, see Langland’s Anne Brontë, pp. 16–8; for the possible influence of Branwell’s character and history on Tenant, see Edward Chitham, A Life of Anne Brontë (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 157, 143, 146, and 148–50.


15 This pattern is iterated in Helen’s attempt to make Arthur Jr. a better man than the father he risks resembling. Again, improvement is sought within the natal family.


17 Tony Tanner, Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), acknowledges the function of incest in maintaining family values when he remarks, apropos of the ending of The Mill on the Floss: “There are cases when the bourgeois novel avoids adultery only by permitting or even pursuing something that is very close to incest” (p. 72).


19 Shires, p. 162.


21 Jacobs, for example, stresses the similar use of narrative layering in the two novels and what she calls “narrative cross dressing” in both. Other accounts suggest that a Bloomian rivalry is played out in the siblings’ novels. Chitham suggests that “Anne’s artistic and moral challenge to the content of her sisters’ novels comes in Wildfell Hall,”
noting, for instance, that she “parodied Emily’s scenes of violence” and arguing that “[a]sWildfell Hall developed from common ground with Emily, Anne used her story to show how very different was her ‘moral’ view from Emily’s ‘poetic’ one. This argument, involving matters of realism, morality, and indeed differing world views, began to per-vade [Tenant, which] does, finally, become Anne’s considered ‘answer’ to Wuthering Heights” (pp. 134, 145, 142). Gordon discusses Tenant as a novel which “encloses . . .Wuthering Heights, as it strives to supplant it” (p. 720). Gordon also suggests that the labyrinthine narrative format of both novels can be related to their shared interest in a potentially incestuous relationship when he comments that in both Wuthering Heights and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall “[t]he whole question of belatedness and priority threatens to collapse all the narratives back into a single narrative in much the same way that genealogy threatens to collapse back into the disappearance of difference that produces the monstrous, the ruin, or the fragment—the ontic status of lacking paternity or suc-
cession” (p. 737).


23 When Armstrong asserts that “the Brontës . . . had more to do with formulating universal forms of subjectivity than any other novelists” and that “the Brontës have come to be known for a literary language that allows emotion to overpower convention and become a value in its own right, blotting out all features of political person, place, and event,” her “Brontës” refers to Emily and Charlotte (pp. 187, 197). Anne is the odd sister out, as she is in Charlotte’s biographical notice that accompanied the reissue of Wuthering Heights. While Emily appears as the genius championed by her famous sis-
ter, Anne’s efforts are dismissed: “I cannot wonder [at the unfavorable reception of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall]. The choice of subject was an entire mistake. Nothing less con-gruous with the writer’s nature could be conceived . . . She was a very sincere and prac-
tical Christian, but the tinge of religious melancholy communicated a sad shade to her brief, blameless life” ([Charlotte Brontë], “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” in Wuthering Heights, ed. David Daiches [New York: Penguin, 1985], p. 34).

24 William Goetz, “Genealogy and Incest in Wuthering Heights,” SNNTS 14, 4 (Win-

25 For a contrasting point of view, see Langland’s claim in “The Voicing of Female Desire” that Helen’s voice is present in Gilbert’s narrative, that she is the focalizer of his account of Huntingdon’s death (pp. 119–20).