The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender

In the past decade and a half, feminist critics—including Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter—have focused on Charlotte and Emily Brontë and their literary treatment of contemporary issues, especially their concern with women’s education, women’s employment, and women’s identity during a period in which both law and custom gave women significantly fewer rights and privileges than men. Their younger sister, Anne, has not fared as well with either readers or critics, and the consensus seems to be that she is not worth reading. Tom Winnifrith, for example, describes her as the “most obvious and crude” of the three sisters and as a moralist, not an artist:

For in her views on marriage as in other spheres Anne Brontë is a much more blatant preacher of unorthodox attitudes than her sisters; she is also a much less good novelist and therefore gave reviewers less opportunity of softening their attacks on the doctrines which she appeared to be thrusting down their throats. (116)

Though the feminist critics who have done so much to explore the works of the other Brontës have rarely given Anne more than passing notice, an earlier critic, Inga-Stina Eubank, devotes more attention to Anne and argues that The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a feminist novel though not in “the obvious sense.” Contrasting Tenant to other nineteenth-century feminist novels, Eubank suggests that Anne may not always be in control of her feminist sentiments, for she does not focus her novel on the question of married women’s rights to control their own property, to enter the universities, or to seek employment except in a few limited professions:

And yet, through the very nature of its central concern, this novel is feminist in the deepest sense of the word. Without any thought of what ought to be the proper sphere of a woman writer, it analyses passion (and Helen even ‘tells her love,’ first to Huntingdon and then to Markham), exhibits profligacy and demonstrates vice, as demanded by its theme. (84)

Almost a century and a half after the publication of Tenant, it is difficult to use external evidence to prove the degree of Brontë’s feminism, for—unlike Charlotte—Anne left few letters that clarify the views expressed in her novels. How-
ever, by suggesting that Brontë’s feminist impulses are largely unconscious, Eu-
bank diminishes both Brontë’s awareness of the issues that confronted women
and her skill as a writer. Though it does not argue specifically for her feminism,
her preface to the second edition certainly suggests that Brontë had thought
deeply about the “proper sphere of a woman writer” and argues persuasively
that women writers should receive the same kind of treatment as men writers:

I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author
may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I
am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that
would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for
writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man. (31)

Expecting to be treated as a writer rather than as a woman writer because she
and her sisters had chosen pennames (Currer, Ellis, and Acton) that were sexu-
ally neutral, she was surprised at the censure her truthful portrayal of depravity
received when reviewers suspected that she was a woman.

Though the preface argues for equal treatment, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall
reveals Brontë’s understanding of the unequal positions of men and women dur-
ing the nineteenth century. In particular, she carefully manipulates narrative and
narrative silences to focus the reader’s attention on questions of gender, particu-
larly on the manner in which male authority shapes women’s lives.

Much of the critical commentary on Tenant focuses on its distinctive nar-
native structure, described by Jan B. Gordon as “the longest single-narrative,
enclosing epistolary novel of the nineteenth century” (719). The novel consists
of two letters written by Gilbert Markham, a prosperous farmer, to his brother-
in-law, Jack Halford. The first letter includes the explanation of why Markham
is writing as well as Chapter One, which asks Halford to go back “to the autumn
of 1827” (35); the second contains more of Markham’s introduction and, as
Arlene M. Jackson observes, “a journal covering six years, letters within letters,
and finally the information that the entire story is being told from a retrospective
view some twenty to twenty-six years after the events described” (198–99). Al-
though the story initially seems to focus on Markham and his love for the myste-
rious Helen Graham, the bulk of the story concerns an entirely different group of
characters in a different part of the country. In fact, the central portion of the
novel, Helen’s journal, includes information about people Markham has never
met, among them Helen’s drunken first husband and his aristocratic followers.

Adding to the possible confusion caused by this multiplicity of unrelated char-
acters are textual problems observed by G. D. Hargreaves, who notes that the
opening section and “also the chapter headings of the novel are omitted in no
fewer than thirteen British editions, ranging from 1854 to 1969 and including the
standard editions in the World’s Classics, Everyman and Collins New Classics
series” (113). These omissions tend to make Brontë’s approach appear less de-
liberate and also tend to undercut the fact that Markham’s narrative reveals
important information about himself and about relationships between men and
women. He describes the story he plans to relate as “the most important event
in my life—previous to my acquaintance with Jack Halford at least” (34).
A number of critics object to Brontë’s narrative strategy. Eubank, for example, finds it unnecessarily complex:

[T]here is no intrinsic reason why the framework should be in the form of letters (to a person who has no function in the novel). . . . Anne Brontë made herself unnecessarily uncomfortable by using a needlessly elaborate device. On the other hand, she does achieve an interesting effect in playing off the detachment of the framework sections . . . against the immediacy of direct experience in the diary chapters. (71–72)

Even George Moore, one of Brontë’s strongest supporters, characterizes her narrative structure as a mistake:

Anne broke down in the middle of her story, but her breakdown was not for lack of genius but of experience. . . . any man of letters would have laid his hand upon her arm and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer, saying, ‘Here is my story; go home and read it.’ Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling. Moreover, the presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given to them, would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story. The diary broke the story in halves. (240)

In short, Moore objects to Brontë’s narrative strategy because it detracts from the romantic interest. Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, objects to the narrative structure because it focuses on the romance of Helen and Gilbert:

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall encloses Helen’s first-person version of the marriage to Arthur within Gilbert’s own account of this, and his courtship in general, to his friend Halford. The effect of this structural device is unfortunate: it seems to convert the novel’s most substantial, emotionally engaging section . . . into a mere mechanism to further Gilbert’s courtship. . . . What is literally and imaginatively central . . . is formally de-centered by the novel’s curious structure, which throws into formal predominance the courtship: the stereotyped Romantic saga of the cold mistress and the baffled lover. (135)

However, both Moore and Eagleton overlook the fact that Tenant is much more than a love story, for numerous characters—Lord Lowborough, Gilbert’s mother and sister Rose, Helen’s son, and Rachel, for example—have little to do with either the marriage of Arthur and Helen or the later courtship of Gilbert and Helen. Furthermore Eubank, Moore, and Eagleton seem unaware that Brontë’s decision to enclose Helen’s story of several unhappy marriages—her own, Lord Lowborough’s, and Milicent Hattersley’s—within Gilbert’s story of his own happy marriage to Helen encourages readers to look beyond Helen and Gilbert. More attuned to questions of gender, contemporary readers can also evaluate the significance of Helen’s narrative silence after her marriage to Gilbert.

In fact, it is illuminating to compare Brontë’s narrative strategy to that of a contemporary woman writer, Margaret Atwood. A Handmaid’s Tale is the history of a woman called by the nonname Offred simply to indicate that she belongs to a man named Fred. Apparently recorded clandestinely, Offred’s story ends with her apparent escape from Gilead, the new name for the United States after a takeover by men who turn women into virtual slaves. However, Atwood concludes the novel not with Offred but with the commentary of James Darcy Pieixoto, Director, Twentieth- and Twenty-first Century Archives at Cambridge.
Pieixoto, who obviously misunderstands so much of what Offred’s narrative has revealed about the relationship between men and women, suggests that he approves of Gilead’s repressive treatment of women: “If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand” (302).

He further reveals his insensitivity to the women in his apparently academic audience—his discussion is part of a conference on Gileadean Studies, supposedly held in 2195—by his overt sexist comments, referring to the method by which Offred escapes to Canada as “The Underground Frailroad” (301). Atwood thus suggests a distinct inequality in the relationships between men and women. Brontë too makes the reader wonder whether any two individuals could achieve the kind of equal partnership that Gilbert seems to desire in a society that encourages inequality. Certainly Helen’s silence is in some ways as troubling to twentieth-century readers as Offred’s, though Gilbert is much kinder and more thoughtful about his superior position than Pieixoto.

While no critic has specifically addressed the way that Brontë’s narrative strategy raises questions about the relationships between the sexes, a number have commented on the skill and subtlety with which she handles her narrative. T. K. Meier, for example, observes that Brontë shifts skillfully from Gilbert’s story to Helen’s and that she “covers the lack of extraneous matter in the journal by having Markham write that he has excised anything which does not bear on the narrative” (61). W. A. Craik observes that Brontë’s complex narrative helps her explore the complexity of real life, just as Emily Brontë’s equally complex narrative had done in Wuthering Heights (248–49). Both Craik and A. Craig Bell discuss how Brontë’s narrative strategy contributes to the realism of Tenant. Craik in particular focuses on the way that Brontë’s decision to have Gilbert look back at certain events after a twenty-year period diminishes the novel’s Gothic elements—Huntingdon’s dissipation and sadism especially. Furthermore, Brontë’s narrative strategy provides the reader with the opportunity “to see the heroine . . . before becoming absorbed in her own history; and to see her for the first time when most of her troubles are over” (250). Therefore suspense does not prevent the reader from concentrating on the significance of what happens.

Bell, on the other hand, is especially interested in evaluating the way Brontë’s narrative strategy helps her to create believable characters. Addressing Moore’s objection that Brontë should not have let Helen give Gilbert her journal, he argues that Brontë could not let her heroine reveal to Gilbert “the intimate details of her marital life, describe the debauchery of her husband or the profligate society she has been forced to consort with as his wife and hostess” (32). Bell also observes that having Helen keep a journal is a plausible way for her to reveal both her feelings and the events that had led to her present state. Finally Bell explains that keeping a journal is consistent with Helen’s character and with the peculiar aspects of her existence—her husband’s frequent absences and her lack of confidants (32–33). Adding to Bell’s discussion of plausibility, Jackson discusses the psychological plausibility of Helen’s silence after her marriage to Gilbert: “Even so many years of marital happiness . . . seem not quite enough
to right the past wrongs done to Helen’s psychic life.’” Observing that Brontë’s portrait of Helen reveals her awareness of the long term effects of psychological stress as well as her “understanding of women’s vulnerable position in marriage,” Jackson goes on to argue that Helen’s story, rather than her first husband’s scandalous life and frightful death, is the novel’s raison d’etre (206).

Jackson is correct to replace the nineteenth-century view of the novel, one that focused inordinately on the dissolute Arthur Huntingdon, but her argument that it is merely Helen’s story also oversimplifies the novel. In fact, Brontë’s novel could most accurately be described as the portrait of an age rather than of one individual, and the characters she paints represent almost every kind of individual who might have inhabited the English countryside during the third decade of the nineteenth century: aristocrats like Lord Lowborough, members of the gentry like Huntingdon and Hargrave, commercial newcomers like Ralph Hattersley, and servants like the kindly Benson, who befriends Helen in her distress. Likewise Tenant presents a wide variety of women—young married women like Milicent Hattersley, spinsters like Mary Millward, heiresses like Annabella Wilmot, impoverished women of the gentry like Esther Hargrave, and servants like Rachel. Craik, who contrasts Tenant with Agnes Grey, discusses how the second novel creates a greater variety of settings, events, and characters but adds that “the distresses and neglect of the earlier episodes and the horrors of Helen’s later married life are firmly based in domesticity” (233). Like the unique narrative structure, the wife’s story framed by that of her husband, this emphasis on domestic life—especially on the relationships of men and women during courtship and marriage—encourages the reader to focus on questions of gender, especially to see the way that nineteenth-century notions of marriage consigned women to silence.

Delving into the novel, readers quickly see that both law and custom give greater power (and voice) to men, though Brontë is both historically and psychologically correct to show a wide range of masculine response to these conditions. But few men—even the most kindly—see women as equals. Markham, for example, edits Helen’s story to his liking. Walter Hargrave, despite condemning Arthur’s treatment of Helen, obviously sees her as something to be conquered rather than as an articulate fellow being, a fact revealed by Helen’s journal:

He greeted me with a smile intended to be soft and melancholy, but his triumphant satisfaction at having caught me at last, so shone through, that it was quite a failure. . . . I turned away and walked on; but he followed, and kept his horse at my side: it was evident he intended to be my companion all the way. (341)

Brontë’s emphasis on Hargrave’s dissimulation as well as her subtle suggestions of the chase—Hargrave and the other men are avid hunters when they are not carousing—reveals his desire for power over others; and Helen, like the hunters’ prey, is neither permitted to speak nor to escape. Though Hargrave does nothing more than make Helen uncomfortable—initially with his presence and ultimately with the suggestion that she elope with him—such inequality can extend to wife abuse. For example, Helen describes an episode in which Ralph Hattersley brutalizes his young wife and, though she never mentions that she and Milicent dis-
discuss wife abuse, suggests that Milicent is accustomed to receiving worse treatment at home.

Such physical abuse, though reprehensible, is nothing compared to the psychological abuse that Arthur heaps on Helen. They have been married only three months when Helen confides that his favorite amusement is telling her “stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl” (221) and, when she expresses indignation, laughing at her supposed jealousy. Arthur soon goes beyond merely telling Helen of his affairs, however, when he commits adultery with the wife of one of his putative friends and later employs one of his mistresses as a governess. When the angry Helen asks to leave, he refuses to let her; and later, when he discovers that she plans to leave in secret, he confiscates all her money and jewels and burns the art supplies with which she had planned to earn a living for herself and their son. Legally, of course, Arthur is entitled to all of Helen’s property; prior to the passage of the Married Women’s Property Acts of the 1870s and 1880s, married women had no control over their own property. And Brontë shows that Arthur, having squandered his fortune, has good reason for not wanting to relinquish power over Helen and her fortune. Indeed his desire to silence her is rooted in his contempt for women and in his awareness that his power over her is sanctioned by both law and custom:

“You are breaking your marriage vows yourself,” said he indignantly rising and pacing to and fro. “You promised to honour and obey me... If it were not for your situation, Helen, I would not submit to it so tamely. I won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife.” (248)

Although Arthur Huntingdon’s contempt for women is revealed as more severe than that of other men, Grimsby, Hattersley, and Hargrave seem to share it; Markham, Lawrence, and Halford, on the other hand, seem more inclined to treat women with respect. Such inconsistent treatment of women is typical of the nineteenth-century view that tended to separate women into two categories, angel and demon, the one to serve as inspiration, the other to be destroyed. Moreover, Tenant reveals that men could also be divided into two categories according to their treatment of women—those who use the law to oppress and silence women and those who use the law to protect them.

Much recent critical commentary has emphasized that Gilbert Markham, Helen’s second husband, is radically different from her first. Both Hazel Mews and Juliet McMaster focus on the equality in Helen and Gilbert, McMaster arguing that Gilbert’s story restores “faith in the possibility of a relationship between a man and a woman that is one of equals who are capable of mutual accommodation and beneficial modification” (363). However, Brontë, true to the times that she describes and to the relationships between men and women at that time, reveals that even kind men like Gilbert, while significantly more appealing than Huntingdon and his coterie, are also influenced by social views that stress the inequality of men and women. For example, Gilbert toys with the vicar’s pretty daughter even though he has no serious interest in marrying her. On seeing Helen for the first time, he observes that her appearance suggests “no very soft or amiable temper” (41) and confesses that he would rather admire her at a dis-
tance; and he repeats his mother’s sage advice on marriage—that it is the wife’s business to please the husband—to Halford.

To be fair to Brontë’s treatment of Gilbert, one should note that he holds these views before he is touched by Helen’s terrible story and learns from it the misery that such unequal treatment can produce. Moreover, Gilbert seems genuinely to like women. Even as a young man, he argues with his mother that he expects to take more pleasure in making his wife “happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her” (79), and he later admits to Halford, when he quotes his mother’s views on marriage, that he personally expects more. Brontë suggests that Gilbert’s expectations are met, for the novel concludes with his happy marriage to Helen: “I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other’s society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up about us” (490).

Though promising, the reference is all too brief; and Gilbert’s vague reference to their offspring smacks too much of a traditional marriage in which women are wives and mothers, not equals. As Mews suggests, the modern reader wants to see more equality in their marriage:

Anne Brontë realizes . . . that such a marriage depends upon that being the view of it taken by the husband—he is the accepted position of dominance in marriage and unless he, as the acknowledged holder of power, is willing to abrogate it, there will be a gradual slipping back to the accepted view; it is, therefore, essential that Gilbert Markham hold progressive views. Because she did not carry on the novel after the marriage of Helen and Gilbert, the author did not work out what effect the social attitudes and pressures surrounding the couple would have upon their relationship on a new plane. (138–39)

Therefore, although modern readers are correct to question Helen’s later silence, they should still see the Markham marriage as far less oppressive to women than the marriages depicted in the early sections of the novel. In fact, the younger generation—Lawrence, Halford, Gilbert’s younger brother Fergus, and even the reformed Hattersley—all seem to treat their wives with kindness and respect. This change suggests that Brontë believed that attitudes toward marriage were evolving.

Brontë’s women characters also represent a wide variety of character types—perhaps as wide as that of her men characters. Although Helen is the central woman character, her circumstances, especially her marriage to the drunken and sadistic Arthur, are clearly extreme. Moreover, the presence of other women in the novel helps readers to focus on issues that pertain to all women. For example, the Hargrave sisters and their mercenary mother reveal the degree to which middle class women in the early nineteenth century depended on men for economic support. Milicent Hargrave reveals that her reasons for marrying a man she does not love are purely economic:

Mr. Hattersley . . . is the son of a rich banker, and as Esther and I have no fortunes and Walter very little, our dear mamma is very anxious to see us all well married, that is, united to rich partners—it is not my idea of being well married, but she means it all for the best. (235)
The desire for economic security rather than for love or respect thus clearly motivates many women’s choice of husband, though Milicent Hattersley discovers that economic security is no protection from physical abuse.

Not all wives are physically abused, however, although even apparently happy marriages give all the power and privilege to the husband. Thus, Gilbert’s mother sees the relationship between husband and wife as that between master and housekeeper:

I’m sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, and after the first six months or so were over, I should as soon have expected him to fly, as to put himself out of his way to please me. He always said I was a good wife, and did my duty; and he always did his. . . . he was steady and punctual, seldom found fault without a reason, always did justice to my good dinners, and hardly ever spoiled my cookery by delay—and that’s as much as any woman can expect of any man. (79)

No wonder Gilbert hopes for more from his own marriage.

In farm families like the Markhams, women have not been reduced to utter redundancy; and the elder Markham at least appreciates his wife’s skill at domestic management even if he seems not to care much about her as a person. Among the gentry and aristocracy, however, because women are asked to contribute less to the family, they are less important. Certainly Helen’s uncle, an aging rake, pays almost no attention to the wishes of his pious wife:

My aunt is greatly against his [Huntingdon] coming. . . . she earnestly endeavoured to dissuade my uncle from asking him; but he, laughing at her objections, told her it was no use talking for the mischief was already done; he had invited Huntingdon and his friend Lord Lowborough before we left London, and nothing now remained but to fix the day for their coming. (169)

Though she is not literally silent, Helen’s aunt might as well be, for her husband totally ignores her views. Other women, ignored and laughed at by their husbands, attempt to achieve lives of their own by going behind their husbands’ backs. Such a woman is Arthur’s mother, described by Helen as a foolish woman who indulged her son “to the top of his bent, deceiving her husband for him, and doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress” (191). Helen, evidently blaming Arthur’s mother for his atrocious behavior, doesn’t attempt to understand the reasons behind Mrs. Huntingdon’s behavior. More inclined to understand than simply to condemn, the modern reader may see her surreptitious behavior as an attempt to live vicariously through her son, as a way to undercut her husband’s authority, or simply as the inability to assert her own values. However, whatever the reasons for it, her lack of self-respect may have contributed to Arthur’s contempt for women.

The woman who most epitomizes the degradation that the unequal relationship between the sexes can produce is Annabella Wilmot, later wife of Lord Lowborough. Having internalized the male standard that sees piety and kindness as weakness, Annabella tries to act like a man, and she begins her road to ruin by an adulterous affair with Huntingdon before finally eloping with another man to the continent. The rest of her life is obscure:
She went dashing on for a season, but years came and money went: she sunk, at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness. But this might be only a report: she may be living yet for anything I, or any of her relatives or former acquaintances, can tell; for they have lost sight of her long years ago, and would as thoroughly forget her if they could. (459–60)

The life of Annabella Wilmot is as extreme in its way as that of Helen Huntingdon Markham. However, in rejecting all aspects of the role assigned to respectable nineteenth-century women, she even more effectively consigns herself to narrative silence; and if Helen no longer speaks for herself after her marriage to Gilbert, Annabella is the pariah for whom no one will speak.

Helen Huntingdon, the character around whom the novel is organized, reinforces many of the questions of gender raised by the other women characters. Supporting herself and her son after escaping from her husband of course raises the question of employment for women, while her observations on equal education for girls result from her own painful experiences:

Now I would have both [boys and girls] so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will, to watch and guard herself. (57)

The most important of these questions is what nineteenth-century notions of marriage do to men and women. Jackson notes that Brontë’s novel “answers a question that other novels of her time do not ask”:

[What happens to a marriage and to the innocent partner when one partner . . . leads a solipsistic life, where personal pleasures are seen as deserved, where maleness and the role of husband is tied to the freedom to do as one wants, and femaleness and the role of wife is linked to providing service and pleasure. (203)]

What Jackson describes, of course, is a typical nineteenth-century marriage. Arthur Huntingdon carries these ideas to their legal and economic limits by confiscating his wife’s fortune for his pleasure, forbidding her to attend her father’s funeral, hunting her down when she finally escapes with their son, and attempting to prevent her from making her story known.

The legal and economic inequality is, however, not the worst of Helen’s problems, for she is fortunate enough to have a brother who permits her to live modestly on some property he owns and also talented enough to support herself and her son by painting. Worse is the psychological damage caused by such treatment, as the formerly loving Helen begins to hate the man she had chosen freely. Jackson observes the “gradual hardening of Helen’s personality. . . . She begins to manifest a superior attitude, a moral righteousness that increasingly alienates what remains of Arthur’s good intentions” (204). Yet, even before she begins to hate him, she resents his casual treatment of her and wishes he would treat her as an equal:
I could do with less caressing and more rationality: I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend. . . . I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ardour. I sometimes liken it to a fire of dry twigs and branches compared with one of solid coal,—very bright and hot, but if it should burn itself out and leave nothing but ashes behind, what shall I do? (215)

A less creative and intelligent woman might have begun to hate herself as well as her husband; and even Helen obviously changes because of her terrible experiences. Even though only six years have passed—Helen marries Arthur in December 1821 and meets Gilbert in October 1827—Helen is no longer the light-hearted and somewhat cheeky girl who boldly rejects her first suitor, Mr. Boarham, and who openly professes her love to Arthur. The thin, compressed lips that Gilbert observes on their first meeting, her overprotectiveness of little Arthur, and her reticence about her past contrast tellingly with her earlier, freer speech. The passage in which Helen compares herself to a winter rose reveals her awareness of the change in herself:

This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear: the cold rain of winter has sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it. (484)

Helen’s next act, offering herself to Gilbert, reveals that her experiences have not entirely silenced her.

After proposing to Gilbert, however, Helen ends her narrative in silence; and the reader should remember that Agnes Grey’s memoirs also end with silence:

I could go on for years; but I will content myself with adding that I shall never forget that glorious summer evening, and always remember with delight that steep hill, and the edge of the precipice where we stood together . . . with hearts filled with gratitude to Heaven, and happiness, and love—almost too full for speech. (157-58)

Whether Gilbert Markham brings a similar joy to Helen’s life remains unanswered, for Helen’s silence is unbroken after she proposes to Gilbert. Furthermore the very structure of Brontë’s novels reveals that such a narrative pattern is typical of women’s lives: their histories are likely to remain shrouded in silence unless the men in their lives say otherwise.

On the other hand, Brontë herself chose not to remain silent, and she and her sisters chose every means available to make their voices heard. They selected neutral pennames so that their works would be treated seriously, not simply as ladies’ novels. They chose to use their narrative voices to treat difficult or unpopular subjects rather than simply to copy the voices and strategies they found in other novels. Anne in particular chose to treat unpleasant subjects, including drunkenness and dissipation, and her novel adopts a narrative structure that focuses on the way that women’s views on such subjects are usually silenced. (And certainly many contemporary reviewers believed she should have remained silent on such subjects.) Unlike the fictional Helen, who consigns her deepest anger and fears to a journal, Anne Brontë proves that women can be heard: she writes a novel, a form designed to be read and talked about. The Ten-
ant of Wildfell Hall lets Helen’s voice be heard as it reveals how often and how effectively women are silenced by the men in their lives.

Works Cited