

LEAVING HER STORY: THE PATH TO THE SECOND MARRIAGE IN *THE*
TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL AND MIDDLEMARCH

by

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ABSTRACT

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During the Victorian period marriage proved to be a dominant theme in fiction. Female writers especially focused on the topic of marriage and wrote stories of women whose first marriages were imperfect. Anne Brontë and George Eliot dedicated themselves to portraying in their stories realistic heroines who deal with their own flaws as well as those of the men they marry. Their heroines distance themselves from their expected roles, moving beyond their first failed marriages to wiser second marriages.

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* follows Helen Huntingdon as she attempts to fulfill the self-appointed role of Savior to her husband. Her rash first marriage opens her eyes to her frank inability to redeem and reform her reprobate husband. Along the same lines George Eliot warns readers in her prelude to *Middlemarch* that Dorothea Brooke will never fulfill all her saintly capabilities because of the unaccommodating social structure of her time. She marries an elderly scholar in the hopes of being

enlightened intellectually and spiritually by the alliance. Instead she finds herself stymied in a claustrophobic marriage. Both women are liberated, in a sense, by the deaths of their husbands and regain their free will at that point.

This thesis explores the psychological pathway from first to second marriage. Marriage serves as the prime educator for Helen and Dorothea. Both women move from blind adoration to despair and hatred at the failure of their first marriages. Both eventually seek a second marriage and wed men who are in turn wiser for their association with these women and who love and respect them. The treatment of marriage in the two novels hinges on the realistic portrayal of life and reflects the era the authors lived in as well as serving as a vehicle for the heroines' character development and growth. Brontë and Eliot create remarkably similar stories beginning with marriage and focusing on heroines who survive the refiner's fire and in the end attain a sense of self as well as a measure of peace.

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For my Aaron and my William—I love you more than all the books. And for Mom and Dad—you've supported my reading habit all these years. Without you I would be without words.

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Leaving Her Story:

The Path to the Second Marriage in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Middlemarch*

Introduction

Twentieth century author May Sinclair said that the slamming of Helen Huntingdon's bedroom-door against her husband was "the first that was ever so slammed in English fiction" (vii). Helen's audacity shows up in sharp contrast to the relative sedateness of heroines in previous novels, particularly the conduct book style novels of Samuel Richardson. Richardson's *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* tells the story of a virtuous girl who spends the entire novel successfully evading the advances of her employer's son, only to have her virtue rewarded in the end by marriage to him. His *Clarissa* examines the flip side of Pamela's story by recounting the tragic downfall of a young girl who, despite numerous attempts, is unable to escape her seducer and whose culminating death is her reward for the horrors she was forced to endure. These two rather polarized outcomes represent fairly limited fates for such dynamic literary heroines.

Over half a century later, Jane Austen's satirical novels of manners likewise revolved around the marriages of eligible young women. However, in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen details both the genuine happiness and equality achieved when Elizabeth Bennet marries Mr. Darcy as well as the awful consequences which ensue when Lydia Bennet marries Mr. Wickham. In Austen's novels marriages of happiness are depicted alongside marriages of unhappiness, marriages of convenience, and marriages of inequality. In *Pride and Prejudice* the character Charlotte Lucas marries the foppish Mr. Collins for the sake of being married despite the fact that she is not in love with him and

is his intellectual superior. Austen reflects upon Charlotte's composed attitude toward her engagement:

Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still, he would be her husband.—Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.

(163)

Charlotte's marriage was intended as a depressing example of an unhappy marriage. In fact, of the seven total marriages represented in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Darcy's is the only one presented as truly happy. It is, therefore, noteworthy that for every happy marriage in Austen's novels, numerous unhappy ones lurk behind the felicitous couple, and Austen's novels always close with the happy joining of the hero and heroine with no further inquiry into their future life together except a possible glimpse of the heroine years later, surrounded by her children, the picture of domesticity.

In her book, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong delineates the change that came about in female representations in fiction between the 18th and 19th centuries:

The conduct book ideal of womanhood provided the ideal against which novelistic representations of women asserted themselves as being more true to life. On the premise that no one really measured up to this ideal, Victorian fiction took on the task of retailoring the representation of

women to indicate that each individual had slightly different desires. (252)

Many of those writers of fiction during the Victorian period were women and their stories steadfastly continued to focus on marriage and domestic issues. The two novelists I shall consider here created female characters that can be held up as true to life fictional figures and, through their unique desires, they develop throughout their stories into characters quite different from the stereotypical eighteenth century novel heroine.

In November of 1819 Mary Anne Evans, the woman who would grow up to be known as George Eliot, was born in Chilvers, Coton Warwickshire. Just over a month later Anne Brontë was born in Thornton, Yorkshire. Both girls (who share the name Anne) lost their mothers early on in life and were raised primarily by their fathers and educated at home and at a series of boarding schools for girls. After the death of her father, coincidentally in the same year that Anne Brontë died, Mary Anne Evans traveled extensively through Europe and finally established herself in London, becoming the center of a literary circle which included George Henry Lewes—her lifelong companion. In contrast, Anne Brontë's was a life confined to Yorkshire and the areas surrounding the parsonage at Haworth, punctuated by one notable trip to London with her sister Charlotte to prove that Currer and Acton Bell, the pseudonymous authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, were indeed separate individuals.

Early on in their lives Mary Anne Evans and Anne Brontë were trained to hold similar Evangelical religious views. Anne was highly influenced by her aunt Elizabeth Branwell who raised the Brontë children after her sister's death. Mary Anne's principal governess, Miss Maria Lewis, provided her prime education in religious matters. Joan Quarm in her article, "Purified by Woe—On Faith and Suffering," outlines the

evangelicalism leanings of the period: “Evangelical theory was simple but demanding. It held that all mankind was sinful and in danger of hell, but that God offered deliverance through Christ, and those who accepted the gift and experienced ‘the great change’ of conversion would be forgiven and saved” (18). Both Elizabeth Branwell and Maria Lewis taught their young charges a gentler form of Evangelicalism more like the early Wesleyans than the Calvinists, emphasizing love and salvation over fire and brimstone. Gordon Haight notes that Eliot’s unique style of prose is rooted in a complete familiarity with the King James Version of the Bible (9). Mary Anne would eventually come to reject the adamant evangelical faith of her youth in favor of a form of compassionate humanism. Anne, though undoubtedly the most pious of the Brontë siblings, developed a unique blend of compassionate Methodism which would sustain her throughout her short life as well as pervade her two volumes of fiction. These early religious inculcations, as well as their mutual focus on compassion, are especially evident in their heroines, their desires, and their actions toward their fellow human beings.

Anne published two novels and a collection of poems. She never married and died of tuberculosis at the age of 29. Only five of her letters survive. Mary Anne edited a London literary magazine and published one collection of stories and six novels. She carried on a lifelong love affair with the married Lewes. After his death, she finally married the American banker John Cross (20 years her junior), only to die directly after the honeymoon of a kidney ailment at the age of 61. Though it is clear that Mary Anne Evans read the works of Anne’s sister Charlotte Brontë and appreciated them, we do not know if she ever read the youngest Brontë’s fiction. Anne Brontë was dead before Evans

published her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, under the pseudonym George Eliot.

Though they led radically different lives, these true contemporaries wrote two novels with startling similarities. Anne Brontë and George Eliot were two Victorian women writers who attempted a form of re-tailoring female representation by writing a follow-up story to the story of women who chose the *wrong* husbands. They provided the rest of the story, including the rejection of the first husband and marriage, the psychological process of realization and acceptance leading up to that rejection, and eventual second marriages for the women who chose poorly the first time around. Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (*Tenant*) and *Middlemarch* each begin with an unhappy marriage reminiscent of those only lurking in Austen. The difference is that these two novels begin with them. In the finale of *Middlemarch* George Eliot notes, "Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning" (510). Anne Brontë begins *Tenant* where her sister Charlotte left off in *Jane Eyre*. The famous, "Reader, I married him," could be the first line of Anne's stormy novel. Rather than focusing on the build-up to the first marriage, or even the second, the bulk of these two novels centers on the consequences of the first marriage for the young heroine and on the ways in which she grows and becomes her own person, separate from her husband, as a result of that first marriage—in other words, the path the heroine takes in between first and second marriages.

Both heroines must wait for the death of their first husbands to truly be free from that alliance as divorce was rarely an option at the time. These novels were written and/or set in a time period before the case *Kelly v. Kelly* of 1870, which established for the first

time the fact that physical violence was not the only form of marital cruelty. In “‘The Other Side of Silence’: Matrimonial Conflict and the Divorce Court in George Eliot’s Fiction” Andrew Dowling addresses the legal difficulties involved in obtaining a divorce at the time: “Until the late eighteenth century, actual physical brutality was the sole criterion used in legal discourse to establish the existence of matrimonial cruelty, and this overwhelming stress on the physical remained clearly visible when the law was finally altered in 1790 in the landmark case of *Evans v. Evans*” (324).

Since *Tenant* and *Middlemarch* deal extensively with psychological abuse within marital relationships, these laws are of significance in understanding the social and legal mores of the time. In *Evans v. Evans* the presiding judge, Lord Stowell, is open minded enough to consider “mental feelings” in divorce cases but finds that words which do not threaten bodily harm do not qualify for legal notice. He states, “Under such misconduct of either of the parties, for it may exist on the one side as well as on the other, the suffering party must bear in some degree the consequences of an injudicious connection; must subdue by decent resistance or by prudent conciliation; and if this cannot be done, both must suffer in silence” (Dowling 325).

By 1857 the Divorce Court would grant a divorce to a husband if his wife had committed adultery alone, but would only grant a divorce to a wife if her husband’s adultery was combined with “either incest, bigamy, or rape in the case of his relationship with the other woman, or by sodomy, bestiality, desertion for two years, or cruelty in the case of his relationship with the wife” (Dowling 326). Given the divorce laws governing marriage at the time, it is understandable that female novelists might write stories of women suffering under the heavy burden of psychological abuse and unhappiness in

marriage, women who were doomed to “suffer in silence.” And it is also significant that the husbands depicted in *Tenant* and *Middlemarch* commit no physical abuse. The abuse is entirely emotional and psychological, but the portrait of suffering and torture is deliberately painted as no less demeaning or harmful to their wives.

Many female Victorian authors dealt with the subjects of marriage and female roles. Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, and Anne Brontë’s own sisters Charlotte and Emily all addressed similar issues in their fiction, each from a different standpoint.

Marion Shaw notes that as opposed to the novels of the early part of the century, which feature women’s apprenticeship to become suitable wives, the novels of the mid-century “are equally or more concerned to train men into becoming suitable companions to the new, spiritually independent and morally superior heroines” (128). The “new” heroines, however, were not completely fresh creations but composites made up of all the “suitable” fictional female characters. Susan Gorsky identifies many of these traditional roles for female characters as portrayed by Victorian women novelists. They range from the angel, the saint, and the martyr to the vixen, the fallen woman, and the demon. She states that some combination of these stereotypes show up in some form or another in the majority of Victorian female-authored texts.

However, George Eliot is an exception according to Gorsky in that she includes stereotypical representations, but she also includes striking “new” main characters who do not necessarily fit one stereotype but portray traces of many different roles as well as different and unusual characteristics (33). The opening line of *Middlemarch* introduces the heroine in a unique way: “Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress” (Eliot 5).

Similarly in the first chapter of *Tenant* Gilbert Markham, the narrator, gives his first impression of the heroine Helen Huntingdon. She too is considered beautiful, but there is something unusual about her as well. He states, “there was a slight hollowness about the cheeks and eyes, and the lips, though finely formed, were a little too thin, a little too firmly compressed, and had something about them that betokened, I thought, no very soft or amiable temper” (14). In each case, a beauty that is accentuated by poor trappings and a beauty that seems to barely hide a rougher quality underneath indicate that here the reader is encountering a specimen somewhat different from the expected. These two uniquely independent heroines Helen Huntingdon and Dorothea Brooke walk willingly into doomed marriages rather than falling, or being duped, into the “trap” of the wrong man. Their stories detail the innocence these heroines lose, the lessons they learn, how they are liberated or escape from their marriages, and briefly the second marriages that follow.

In this thesis I shall deal with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Middlemarch*—two novels which have heretofore never been compared in any depth. The discovery that two such disparate contemporaries not only made remarkably similar choices of subject matter and plotline but also wrote so adamantly of their dedication to their brand of realism in fiction reveals a fascinating parallel and opens up a literary commentary worthy of discussion. In the first two chapters I will examine the individual paths Helen and Dorothea take away from that first marriage and to finally arrive at a second matrimony. The focus of the third chapter will remain on the ways in which both women “leave their stories” behind by differentiating themselves from their husbands and on the way this leaving is a reflection of their authors’ explicit commitment to the faithful

portrayal of real life in fiction. I will also outline the consequential experiences the authors give to their heroines because of the choices they make in both marriages. The final chapter provides a discussion on the purpose of the second suitors as well as the value of each second marriage for the purposes of the two novels.

The Savior

In her preface to the 2nd edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë implores, “O Reader! If there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience” (4). There could be no better introduction to her tempestuous novel in which there is very little of peace and much of sin and misery. The voice Brontë refers to as whispering, “Peace, peace,” is a familiar one in the literature produced by women from the Victorian period onward.

In Tennyson’s poem “The Princess,” published a year before *Tenant*, he outlines proper male and female roles:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:

Man for the sword and for the needle she:

Man with the head and woman with the heart:

Man to command and woman to obey;

All else confusion. (373)

The same sentiment is echoed over seventy years later in Virginia Woolf’s essay, “Professions for Women,” in which she recounts the difficulties she encounters as a woman writer. In this instance, the whispering voice she analyzes is the infamous “Angel in the House” of Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem. Woolf describes the Angel:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was intensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there

was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (278-9)

This domestic ideal of womanhood appears countless times in Victorian male and female-authored fiction along with other entrenched female stereotypes. Anne Brontë creates characters which, though often derived from a stereotype, develop into separate and whole individuals in their very male and femaleness. They do not alter their stripes for the convenience of each other, their plot, or their author. Arlene Jackson notes that Helen “is not prone to hysterics or exaggeration, and neither is Gilbert a paragon of ‘masculine’ virtues of objectivity, wisdom, and silent strength” (201). In her biography *Anne Brontë*, Winifred Gerin praises Brontë’s characters in *Tenant*, “The characters develop; they grow, they deteriorate; they age; they do not remain untouched by experience. They learn, not by any theorizing of the author’s, but from the lessons of life itself” (qtd. in Andrews 29).

When Brontë offered the manuscript of *Tenant* to her publisher, Thomas Cautley Newby, he gave her £25 for the manuscript and promised another £25 when the sales reached 250 copies. Within a month of publication Newby had to prepare a second edition for which the author provided her famous Preface (Andrews 26). Though Brontë’s second novel sold quite well, it garnered its share of blistering criticism. In Charles Kingsley’s “Recent Novels” in *Fraser’s Magazine* he states, “The fault of the book is coarseness” which it believes will “be the stumbling-block of most readers, and which makes it utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls” (423). The *Spectator* echoed *Fraser’s Magazine* insisting that “there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse,

not to say the brutish so that his level subjects are not very attractive” (662). *The Rambler* condemned the book for its “uncalled-for and unhealthy representation of the vilest phases of human life” (66). Most adamant of all its disparagers, *Sharpe’s London Magazine* declared the book “unfit for perusal [. . .] we will *not* believe a woman would have written such a work,” with its “disgustingly truthful minuteness” (181). Brontë is therefore indicted for presenting and indeed having an affinity for unattractive subjects and characters. Her novel is to be shunned because it is unfit for the very audience she declares it is meant to address: the youth of both sexes. Implied in each of these critiques is that these unattractive subjects and characters do in fact exist. Her scenarios are disgusting, but truthful. However, they are judged inappropriate subjects for a novel and certainly not a novel written by a woman.

In her preface to the second edition of the novel, Brontë responds to some of these critiques stating, “I wished to tell the truth [. . .] and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense” (4). Her opinions appear to fall in line with Samuel Johnson’s in his “Rambler Number Four” that it is certainly within the novelist’s prerogative to represent wicked characters as they really appear in life and to represent them in such a way as to disgust the reader and discourage her from following such an example. Brontë’s feelings are unequivocally and eloquently put:

When we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light, is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue, but is it the most honest,

or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveler, or to cover them with branches and flowers? (4)

As an answer to her critics, this response reveals Brontë's commitment to realism, to instructing her readers as well as delighting them, and her belief that a lack of education in the ways of the world only leads to unnecessary errors in judgment by young people.

Judging from Brontë's comments, this form of sheltering the reader merely fails to warn her of the possible traps that await her in real life. Helen's story is meant to educate those young readers in the ways Helen was not educated so that they might avoid her pain and mistakes. Speaking as though from personal experience, perhaps within her own family or the families for which she worked as a governess, she declares, "I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain" (4). Given her stated purpose in writing *Tenant*, it is not surprising that she decided to write her Preface to the second edition to prevent further speculation and misunderstanding with regard to the darker aspects of her story.

Brontë declared herself shocked by the violent censure her novel received, especially since critics seemed more offended at the thought it could have been written by a woman. Brontë addresses the attacks on her novel's having been written by a woman, asserting that "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” (5). In this passage it is easy to read Brontë’s strong belief that “novels of conduct” or any other kind should address men and women equally, rather than privileging one above the other in endeavoring to instruct and/or delight the reader. Her intended audience is truly the youth of both sexes, her purpose to prevent them from falling into the degrading and harmful vices of Arthur Huntingdon, or from rushing headlong and uninformed into a marriage which cannot benefit or bring happiness to either party.

Unfortunately, many of the critiques Anne attempted to dispel in her Preface have been perpetuated to the present day as a result of her sister Charlotte’s “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell.” Attaching it as a preface to the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte wrote this notice after the deaths of both her sisters in order to deflect some of the misconceptions about the three sisters’ identities as well as to clarify their purposes in publishing their works in the first place. Much blame is placed at Charlotte’s feet for the ill reception *Tenant* continues to receive by literary critics, and the evidence is rather damning. In reference to their choice of pseudonyms, she subtly calls attention to the critics’ obsession with gender stating, “we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice” (vi). With regards to *Tenant* and her sister Anne, she acknowledges its unfavorable reception and admits,

At this I cannot wonder. The choice of subject was an entire mistake [. . .]

The motives which dictated this choice were pure, but, I think, slightly morbid. She had, in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate,

near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused: hers was naturally a sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail (of course with fictitious characters, incidents, and situations), as a warning to others. She hated her work, but would pursue it. (viii)

The fact that Anne was dead at the time this notice was written gave Charlotte the last official word on the subject and prevented any further defense of Anne's motives and choice of subject for years to come.

Charlotte's words reiterate and sustain some of the critics' objections to *Tenant* and go so far as to hint at an autobiographical background for the events of *Tenant* as well as a mental instability on the part of her youngest sister as an excuse for the disturbing events portrayed in her novel. Elements of Arthur Huntingdon's debilitating faults can certainly be seen in Anne's brother Branwell's decline and eventual death, but there is no concrete evidence outside of Charlotte's insinuations for a direct link between the character and the man. Though the writing of *Tenant* could not have been pleasant fodder for continual concentration on Anne's part, there is also no evidence of mental decline or deterioration on her part.

In *A Life of Anne Brontë*, Edward Chitham points out that Anne went about the composing of *Tenant* in a very methodical and logical way. Certainly her articulate comments in the Preface to the second edition substantiate Chitham's claim. He states that in many ways *Tenant* was "Anne's artistic and moral challenge to the content of her sisters' novels" (134). Characters like Mr. Rochester and Heathcliff, with their unsettling

ability to inspire both hatred and pity in the hearts of readers, did not suit Anne's perception of and stated commitment to realistic characters and she refused to perpetuate their romanticized portrayals in her own fiction.

Jan B. Gordon described *Tenant* as "the longest single-narrative, enclosing epistolary novel of the nineteenth century" (719). In *Wuthering Heights* Emily Brontë makes an unusual narrative choice by enclosing the strange tale of Cathy and Heathcliff within the rational voice of a virtual outsider narrator. Similarly, Anne Brontë uses a framed narrative style in having Gilbert Markham, her heroine's second husband, tell the story of Helen Huntingdon as opposed to having Helen telling it herself. By framing a female story within a male framework, Brontë adds another layer to the dark account she has to give. N.M. Jacobs makes the astute observation that this narrative structure in effect underscores Brontë's theme of going through the more official, male version of the truth to reach the truth culture would like to deny—the female account of the story (204). Gilbert narrates the story to a friend of his with the goal of giving him, "a full and faithful account of certain circumstances connected with the most important event of my life" (Brontë 7-8). Included in his letters to his friend are transcripts of the original journals Helen gave to him in order to explain her reluctance to become romantically involved with him.

The journals recount the horrors of her marriage to the wild and abusive Arthur Huntingdon and end with her eventual escape along with their son to Wildfell Hall. They are the only voice Brontë gives Helen in the novel and they are framed within the context of Gilbert's viewpoint in his letters. Though many critics find fault with this format for the backseat role it gives the heroine, it recently gained some advocates as it does suit

certain themes in the novel, revealing that which is hidden for the purpose of informing the reader of less-than-palatable truths about society and human nature. One half of the novel is the diary portions which are intense in their first-person, direct and intimate view they reveal of Helen (and Arthur) Huntingdon. The bookends are provided by Gilbert Markham's letters and serve to soften somewhat for the shocked Victorian reader the hard truths Helen inscribes in her diary. Elizabeth Langland points out that "Gilbert's perspectives merge with Helen's as he incorporates her letters into his narrative" ("Voicing of Feminine Desire" 119). Through Gilbert's letters, the reader is privileged to see his growth and maturation as a result of reading her journal and learning her story. The fact that Helen's story is recorded in the form of a journal lends it additional credibility, for she could have little reason to color or alter the truth in any way in her own journal, and when she wrote it down she certainly had no idea of anyone but herself perusing its pages.

Brontë sets her Helen apart from other, less autonomous literary heroines by having her make the unequivocal choice to marry the rake Arthur Huntingdon—a man whose prior conduct has qualified him for the role of confirmed predator. Helen makes this decision expressly against the ardent advice of her aunt and uncle and fully aware of his flaws and foibles. By making Helen decisive and perhaps willful, Brontë removes the possibility of any retraction she could otherwise have employed in defending Helen's character to her readers. Helen's espoused reason for marrying a flawed man is her strong desire to dedicate her life to his improvement and reformation. Maria Frawley says of Helen in her article, "The Female Savior in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," "She is led into a hasty and unwise marriage because she cannot resist the impulse to play ministering

angel, and her marriage fails when she realizes her own inability to function as angelic minister” (134). Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House” persona is alive and well and thriving both in the Huntingdon household and in Helen’s surrounding society. Arthur indeed refers to Helen as his angel numerous times throughout the text. This ideology suggests to women it is the role of men to be as impulsive and reckless as they can be, and it is the role of women to restrain and reform them. What Frawley proposes is that nowhere is it mentioned whether or not women are capable of fulfilling the role of savior and whether or not it is their natural and societal duty.

Lee Edwards notes that by the time *Tenant* was published in 1848, “the question faced by women in the plots and societies of novels changes from ‘How to catch a man?’ to ‘How to avoid the perils of matrimony and still survive?’” (27). This is an accurate assessment of Brontë’s story as Arthur Huntingdon is never transformed by the power of Helen’s virtue despite all her best efforts. Huntingdon soon tires of his virtuous wife and begins to ridicule her at every opportunity, public or private. He even goes so far as to hire his mistress as their son’s governess. Helen’s journal account of one night in the Huntingdon household clearly delineates how far Arthur is beyond her help or ministrations as he catches her preparing to leave him, take their son, and try to make a living for herself as an artist:

‘Now then,’ sneered he, ‘we must have a confiscation of property. But first, let us take a peep into the studio.’ And putting the keys into his pocket, he walked into the library. I followed, whether with the dim idea of preventing mischief or only to know the worst I can hardly tell. My painting materials were laid together on the corner table, ready for

tomorrow's use, and only covered with a cloth. He soon spied them out, and putting down the candle, deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire—palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish—I saw them all consumed—the palette knives snapped in two—the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney. He then rang the bell. 'Benson, take those things away,' said he, pointing to the easel, canvass, and stretcher; 'and tell the housemaid she may kindle the fire with them: your mistress won't want them any more.' [. . .] 'And so,' he said at length, 'you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself by the labour of your hands, forsooth? And you thought to rob me of my son too, and bring him up to be a dirty Yankee tradesman, or a low, beggarly painter?'

'Yes, to obviate his becoming such a gentleman as his father.' (Brontë 285-7)

Included in the one poisonous word "gentleman" are all the gross and hedonistic qualities the debauched Huntingdon embodies as a member of the Regency period aristocracy Brontë criticizes in her novel. Gradually Helen is able to accept her failure to reform Arthur Huntingdon, and with this acceptance comes understanding and, with Huntingdon's eventual death, redemption and the ability to heal and move on to a life after Arthur and a marriage with Gilbert Markham.

Indeed, life picks up for Helen from the moment she escapes with little Arthur. Anne Brontë portrays a heroine whose life does not wither up and die apart from her husband. Helen is to be neither the savior nor the damned. She is in effect the "new

woman” who leaves the story dictated for her by society. Siv Jansson remarks that “Brontë’s account of her marriage to Arthur is one of the most savage indictments of both the legal and economic constraints which supported Victorian marriage, and the mythical ideology which deceives Helen into it” (36). Jansson emphasizes that just as it was clearly Helen’s choice to marry Huntingdon, it is just as significantly her choice to leave him; “she is empowered by her desertion of him, rather than weakened by it [. . .] Anne Brontë’s revisionary reinterpretation allows Helen to occupy the higher moral ground because she has left her husband, rather than because she remained with him” (42).

Elizabeth Langland expresses the same idea when she credits Anne Brontë for rewriting “the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence” (*Anne Brontë* 119). Langland concludes that the very reason Victorian readers were so shocked when Helen Huntingdon not only slammed the door in her husband’s face, but actually left him for good was that Helen went on to be rewarded, in a sense, for defying convention.

The Saint

Langland says that Helen Huntingdon's initial story could read quite simply: "a young and idealistic young woman marries a man whose character is already in need of reformation" (*Anne Brontë* 119). If this is the case, then Dorothea Brooke's initial story could read: young woman of great capabilities and high aspirations marries an old man whose life is in decline and whose entire work has been in vain. In the Prelude to her novel, George Eliot likens her heroine to Saint Teresa of Avila, but tells the reader that unlike the Saint Dorothea will find no outlet for her dreams of reform and good intentions. Eliot intimates that the difference between the two women is the time period they lived in and the opportunities available to them. She says, "Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action [. . .] for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (3). Throughout the novel Dorothea is identified as one of these later-born Theresas, a would-be saint.

The Finale of the novel hearkens back to the Prelude as Eliot reveals to her reader how the various marriages turn out in later years and, more importantly, what becomes of Dorothea. Eliot reiterates that Dorothea's early mistakes "were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state" (514). Again society is declared to be the reason Dorothea was unable to completely realize her aspirations.

Like Anne Brontë, Eliot felt compelled to write the truth as she saw it in her fiction, to create characters as realistic as possible. In an 1856 essay on realism Eliot declares that

Our social novels profess to represent people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil. Their greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies [. . .] Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. (610)

Eliot's purpose then in writing is to form a connection between human beings through her fiction. It is important to Eliot that her readers be encouraged, even pushed, to go beyond their own small circle of experience and participate in the larger sphere of humanity.

Eliot believes the artist exists to portray the reality of human existence with all its little indignities, idiosyncrasies, and foibles. The benefit lies in her readers' subsequent knowledge of humanity and their place in it.

Eliot gives her comments a rather religious element by comparing inaccurate representation to actual evil. Monica L. Feinberg notes that Eliot's fanatical sense of obligation to realism conflates aesthetic concerns with ethical ones. Feinberg states, "By borrowing a religious idiom, Eliot not only suggests that artistic representation is equivalent to sacred religious belief, but translates misrepresentation as a synonym for heresy" (23). In this instance Eliot's childhood evangelical educational roots are evident in her artistic fervor and emphasis on her duty to a higher purpose. Seen in this light her statements are not so far removed from Brontë's tenacious faith and her comments in her

Preface to *Tenant* on the obligation she felt to her readers to honestly depict characters as they actually exist in real life. Later in her essay Eliot states,

The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him. We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness. (611)

This statement again echoes Brontë's preface to *Tenant* and her defense of her choice to portray vice and vicious characters as they really are, rather than as they would like to be portrayed. Eliot addresses the same issue related to authorial prerogative and prefers to portray characters as their corollaries do act in real life, as opposed to as their author thinks they ought to act.

Both authors claim they follow this credo for the good of mankind and their readership. Brontë seeks to warn the unsuspecting youth of both sexes away from the evils of indolence and ignorance. Eliot seeks to tie together the various diverse portions of mankind in an effort to create fellow-feeling among them. Interestingly Eliot's use of the terms "coarse apathy" and "suspicious selfishness" bring to mind the inflamed critiques of *Tenant* for its focus on the coarse and the base side of humanity. Both authors appear to believe that this side of humanity does exist and it is therefore important that it be accurately represented in fiction and not glossed over in favor of the heroic and the sentimental.

Just as Anne endeavored to avoid writing “soft nonsense,” George Eliot addressed a similar desire of her own in an essay she wrote for the *Westminster Review* in 1856 entitled, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” In the essay she attacks what she refers to as “mind-and-millinery” species of novels by women which have no factual basis and whose characters and plotlines bear no resemblance to real life. The heroine of such novels is indistinguishable from the angel stereotype. George Eliot feels that by propagating this myth this particular class of lady novelists does a disservice to not only the reading public but women in general. Like Brontë, Eliot spends time discussing the education of young ladies. She discusses the proper education of a woman desiring to be a novelist:

She does not make it a pedestal from which she flatters herself that she commands a complete view of men and things, but makes it a point of observation from which to form a right estimate of herself [. . .] She does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture—she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence. (155)

This list of desirable qualities in a female novelist describes George Eliot’s fiction with its grasp of real and, above all, sympathetic portrayals of characters. Eliot also takes on the literary critics’ response to legitimate female writers. “No sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, than she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticized” (161). Her words combine with Brontë’s comments in her Preface to expose the fickleness of the male literary critics of the period and their sometimes-violent reactions to the possibility of true talent displayed in a female-authored text.

From a young age, George Eliot felt strongly the bond of fellow-feeling between human beings. Particularly close to her father, her older brother Isaac, and her teacher Miss Maria Lewis, Eliot found it difficult to relate to other children when she was sent away to a series of boarding schools for young women. At the age of nine or ten Eliot was at a children's party when she was asked if she was having a good time. She replied, "No, I am not. I don't like to play with children. I like to talk to grown-up people" (qtd. in Haight 8). Forty-eight years after *Middlemarch* was published, Virginia Woolf described it as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (George Eliot 201). Eliot's fiction became known for its psychological analysis and introspection, which tendencies can be traced back to the author's childhood.

Unlike Helen, Dorothea is an heiress from the beginning who longs to put her money and her mind to good use. Like Helen, Dorothea is described as too religious for those around her. Her faith is almost inevitably coupled with a degree of naiveté. Eliot tells her reader, "Poor Dorothea! Compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise" (7). Indeed the savvy Celia doubts Casaubon's merits as a husband for her older sister from the very beginning, but Dorothea must learn the same lesson from actual experience. Raised by a benevolent uncle after her parents' death, Dorothea, much like Helen, marries a man against the better judgment of her uncle, sister, and neighboring friends and despite the vast difference in their respective ages. She declares to her uncle, "I should not wish to have a husband very near my own age. I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgment and in all knowledge" (Eliot 26). In many ways her description of a desirable husband could also fit the requirements for a desirable father. As a young woman George Eliot described her love

for her father as “the one deep strong love I have ever known” (qtd. in Haight 21). It is perhaps natural that her young heroine, who lacks a father, should go looking for certain paternal qualities in a prospective husband. Dorothea has no intention of reforming Edward Casaubon, of being his savior in any way. Rather she would learn from him, from what she imagines to be his great intellect and wealth of experience, and would help him in his academic endeavors. The measure of devotion, however, is the same in both Dorothea’s and Helen’s desires.

As opposed to Helen’s desire to save Huntingdon, Dorothea in many ways appears to want to be saved herself through her marriage to Casaubon, saved from her own self-perceived ignorance and saved from the mundane Middlemarch society and its expectations that she cannot fulfill. Though the roles they attempt to fill are different, both women seek fulfillment through marriage and find, instead of clarity and a straightforward path, confusion and a dark road that seems to lead nowhere. Dorothea mourns her wealth of resources shackled by her lack of education and she desires more than anything to be of good use, to improve her own mind and faculties, to be involved in intellectual pursuits, to learn how to use her resources for the benefit of others. In this respect she is very like her author, who also felt inadequate within the confines of society. Eliot “could not help thinking how much easier life would be to her, and how much better she would stand in the estimation of her neighbors, if only she could take things as they did, be satisfied with outside pleasures, and conform to popular beliefs without any reflection or examination” (Haight 34). Like Eliot, Dorothea’s life would certainly have been easier had she been like her sister Celia, able to conform to society’s

expectations without feeling unfulfilled. But though Dorothea was not able to lead as rebellious a life as her creator, both refused the easy path of conformity and popularity.

Before marriage Dorothea feels trapped in her society, the heiress to a tidy sum but because of her gender and position unable to find acceptable ways of devoting herself to the reformation of the ills she views in the surrounding society. As a means to vent her exhaustive energy and ambition, Dorothea spends her time ceaselessly devising plans for tenant housing and building structures on their property. In her article, “Women, Energy, and *Middlemarch*,” Lee R. Edwards notes: “Dorothea sees knowledge as offering the only way out of the labyrinth” (627). Knowledge takes shape in the form of the learned Dr. Casaubon for Dorothea Brooke, and she jumps at the chance when he makes her an offer of marriage after an acquaintance of no more than a few weeks. To no one’s surprise but her own, Dorothea’s marriage falls short of her expectations when she comes to the realization that her revered husband requires no help from her in his pursuits and in fact is working on a project which has been long resolved by other academics. Instead of being a way out of the labyrinth for Dorothea, Casaubon proves to be merely another dead end.

This startling awakening comes on their honeymoon to Rome in the unlikely form of Will Ladislaw, her husband’s wayward young cousin. While visiting her in Rome, Will mentions that a group of German academics have already accomplished what Casaubon intends to do in his book *The Key to All Mythologies* but, because Casaubon does not speak German, he remains ignorant of that accomplishment. Dorothea’s response is immediate and distressed: “‘How can you bear to speak so lightly? If it were as you say, what could be sadder than so much ardent labour all in vain?’ [. . .] She was

beginning to be shocked that she had got to such a point of supposition, and indignant with Will for having led her to it” (Eliot 142). But this first moment of disillusionment offers no retreat for Dorothea. From this moment on she continues to offer her aid and support to Casaubon, knowing he will never finish his useless work. As he constantly refuses her aid and support, constantly berates her for her ignorance and assumptions, Dorothea’s life slowly becomes a mockery of her once-bright dream of making a lasting contribution to the world around her. Inevitably, resentment forms on both sides. Dorothea’s only solace is found in her occasional meetings with Ladislaw, who has fallen in love with his stiff benefactor’s bride. Recognizing her burgeoning marital unhappiness, Will endeavors to see her as often as possible, even moving to Middlemarch and working on her uncle’s campaign just to be near Dorothea.

Unlike Helen, Dorothea can see no justifiable way out of her demoralizing marriage. Though she has no children to tie her to Casaubon, her husband is not having an affair, thus giving her a moral out. And so she lives her days in a fog, transcribing her husband’s notebooks, gazing out the window on the world upon which she is able to make no impression. “The tears came and rolled down her cheeks, but she did not know it. The world, it seemed, was turning ugly and hateful, and there was no place for her trustfulness” (Eliot 389). The pain of innocence meeting hard experience is evident and heartrending in this passage. Despite the circumstantial differences between Dorothea’s and Helen’s situation, the psychological abuse and disdain of their husbands combined with their own lack of an intellectual outlet is the same in both cases, and both women continue to grow ever more stifled and claustrophobic in their marriages.

Eventually, like Helen, Dorothea's liberation comes in the form of her husband's death. However, she is kept from true freedom by Casaubon's codicil in his will, which states that her inheritance is forfeit should she marry Will Ladislaw—an event Casaubon had come to fear with each passing day. Richard D. McGhee remarks that “her liberator is nearby, in the person of Will Ladislaw, but she is not yet prepared to admit to herself that she needs a liberator more substantial than the one she mistakenly believed to be Casaubon” (88). The young girl's original ideals are difficult to relinquish and again, like Helen, Dorothea requires and is granted by her sympathetic author, a period of rest between husbands in which she is able to make the decision for herself and choose which path she will tread next.

Interestingly, both women use that time to see to their financial affairs. Helen sets up her studio in the mysterious Wildfell Hall and attempts to make a living as an artist in order to support herself and her young son. Dorothea, in the interim between Casaubon's death and her eventual decision to renounce both her wealth and her role, be free of her shackles, and marry Will, sets to distributing her late husband's wealth about the community. Her power of discernment never fails her in trying to judge the worthy man from the fraud among the myriad of intricacies running through the small community of Middlemarch, and countless people benefit from her generosity and compassion. And when Dorothea too decides to marry again, she sets propriety at naught by giving up her fortune and position in society in order to marry a penniless artist of no particular note. In this respect she differs from Helen, who retains her inheritance as she enters her second marriage while it is Gilbert who rises in status through the alliance. Helen sets propriety at naught by leaving Huntingdon in the first place, taking their child, and attempting to

make a living on her own. Similarly Dorothea makes her own choice to evade any hold Dr. Casaubon had on her; she effectively leaves the story of saint she was expected to act out in order to embrace another of her own design.

Realization and Escape

In “Women, Energy, and *Middlemarch*” Lee R. Edwards points out that “George Eliot does not even consider the possibility of educational reform as a way out of Dorothea’s dilemma, marriage becomes the educating institution” (627). This education begins when Dorothea, far from romantically attached to Edward Casaubon, leaps into her own bad marriage because she sees him as guide, teacher, father-figure, an escape route from the oppressive expectations of the narrow-minded, tradition-bound Middlemarch society. In Brontë’s *Tenant* Helen leaps into the wrong marriage infatuated with handsome, dashing Arthur Huntingdon, eager to play out her socially sanctioned and admittedly self-imposed role of the angel/savior to his sinful mortal. Both Helen and Dorothea begin their stories as naïve, but very decided young women eager to do some good in the world and to leave good impressions on that world and those around them.

Both characters call to mind certain aspects of Brontë’s own life and final hopes as she prepared to die. Just over a month before she passed away, Brontë wrote a letter to her close friend Ellen Nussey. At this point she knew she was dying and she confided: “I wish it would please God to spare me not only for papa’s and Charlotte’s sakes; but because I long to do some good in the world before I leave it. I have many schemes in my head for future practice, humble and limited indeed, but still I should not like them all to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose” (qtd. in Chitham 182). These same yearnings are especially applicable to Dorothea with her endless plans and schemes, for which her sister Celia always chides her. Though death was the stifling agent in Anne Brontë’s case, an unwise marriage contract serves the same constraining purpose for Helen and Dorothea.

Interestingly, both authors choose the institution of marriage as the prime educator for their heroines. Instead of focusing on the conduct book's emphasis on education *for* marriage, Eliot and Brontë emphasize their heroines' education *by* marriage and later on their education *of* their second husbands. An 1840 conduct book declares, "a female's real existence only begins when she has a husband" (qtd. in Dunbar 17). Simply insert the word "education" for "existence," and this statement would perfectly describe the plots of *Tenant* and *Middlemarch*. Marriage, especially entered into hastily and ill informed as theirs are, is a harsh taskmaster for these two young idealists who seem to be ahead of their time. But, as the divorce court laws of the time indicate, marriage was often the prime educator of young women, certainly of those who made early and ill-advised marriages. George Eliot meditated on ill-matched marriages in her day and age, saying, "How terrible it must be to find one's self tied to a being whose limitations you could see, and must know were such as to prevent your ever being understood!" (qtd. in Haight 56). This scenario is precisely the situation in which Dorothea and Helen find themselves and may have been in Eliot's mind when she set to outlining *Middlemarch*.

To a certain extent, it seems both Helen and Dorothea make the first marriages they do in search of a certain self-importance, or rather in search of a set role which lends a certain legitimacy to the person that fills it. After the death of the young girls' parents, obliging aunts and uncles raise both young women to this point. Their lives have seen some of tragedy and much of advice, but very little of real world experience, and they long to take some action, to stretch their wings in a way. Marriage appears to provide the perfect avenue to fulfill those dreams. Jacobs notes that Helen accepts Arthur's proposal

of marriage “because it offers her a personal importance that amounts to an almost divine power” (210).

They must go no farther than the honeymoon in *Middlemarch* and *Tenant* to find initial wifely adoration quickly turning to dismay and despair. Both women doggedly attempt to keep their ideals alive by fulfilling their wifely role, by serving and aiding their husbands in whatever manner possible. Unfortunately, neither husband wants help and their wives become disillusioned despite their best efforts. Both women must come to terms with the fact that they are virtually useless in the roles to which they aspired in marrying. Helen cannot succeed in saving her reprobate husband. Jansson calls this realization “the subversive notion that she is forced to fail him as an Angel in the House because he fails her as a husband” (33). Helen may have been following an impossible ideal, and she certainly experiences feelings of shame and failure, but the fault equally falls on the man who in no way honored his marriage vows. Helen writes of Arthur in her journal early on in their marriage:

His notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not my notions. Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife, is a thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home—to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her; and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return; no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime. (Brontë 192)

The passage implies that Arthur was unfaithful right from the beginning of their marriage and that Helen’s is a marriage of inequality of both hearts and minds. Huntingdon

requires servitude and compliance from Helen but is unwilling to keep up his end of the marriage bargain. Passages such as this are eerily reminiscent of Richardson. One passage in particular, from *Pamela*, in which Squire B enumerates various injunctions to his new wife aptly mirrors Helen's marital experience thus far:

I expect from you, whoever comes to my house, that you accustom yourself to one even, uniform complaisance: That no frown take place on your brow: That however ill or well provided we may be for their reception, you shew no flutter or discomposure: That whoever you may have in your company at the time, you signify not, by the least reserved look, that the stranger is come upon you unseasonably, or at a time you wished he had not. But be facetious, kind, obliging to all [. . .] for thus will you, my Pamela, cheer the doubtful mind, quiet the uneasy heart, and diffuse ease, pleasure, and tranquility, around my board. (392-3)

Where Pamela's response to such expectations is an obsequious profusion of gratitude and eternal compliance, Helen is able to come to the telling realization that "his notions of matrimonial duties are not my notions." Through Helen's marital experience Brontë refutes the idea that virtue and goodness alone are capable of wholly altering a spouse who is unwilling to be altered. Novels of conduct such as *Pamela* present plotlines that are too neat, too improbable, and too *fictional*. Brontë is uncomfortable with the young people in her age and society believing the platitudes condoned in those novels. Her text blames both marriage partners for entering into such a commitment without truly knowing the other person.

Dorothea must also accept the fact that Casaubon is not the man she thought him to be and the fact that in marrying him she sought out a socially acceptable role to solve a socially unacceptable problem. When Dorothea agrees to marry Casaubon, he rather ominously praises her “characteristic excellences of womanhood” informing her: “The great charm of your sex is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own” (Eliot 32). At this point in time Dorothea agrees wholeheartedly with her husband-to-be and fervently believes that through her self-sacrifice she will set Casaubon and herself on a path to a complete existence. Unfortunately for Casaubon, he did not anticipate being alienated, rather than completed, by Dorothea’s sacrifice, for Dorothea grows to desire her own rounded-out existence, which Casaubon is incapable of providing. This inequity drives a wedge between them almost from the start and like Helen’s the marriage is doomed before it begins.

In her article “Mill, *Middlemarch*, and Marriage” Suzanne Graver points out how Eliot illustrates the ill-fated nature of this marriage. She notes the many instances of the metaphor of miscarriage in *Middlemarch*. Like Rosamund’s unborn baby, the Lydgate and Casaubon marriages begin to self-abort long before the partners are aware of the imminent threat to their union. Graver writes, “The scrutiny of the doctrine of living for others is so thorough as to show self-sacrifice itself miscarrying” (59). The same can be said of *Tenant* as Helen and Arthur are forced to come to terms with the fact that her self-sacrifice is insufficient to buy back his soul.

Both authors take their heroines past the point of no return when they introduce an element of hatred into their marital relationships. This hatred leads to the pivotal moment

of realization for each woman, for each one is gentle and loving by nature and must be unused to such ugly emotions, especially toward men they formerly adored and admired. Each heroine arrives at a scene of tension in which her emotions alter and the realization comes that she is not entirely culpable for the failure of her marriage. In *Tenant* Helen is sitting at the breakfast table one morning contemplating how she will endure the long days until her husband and his party of friends depart again. She says:

Oh! When I think how fondly, how foolishly I have loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I have laboured, and studied, and prayed, and struggled for his advantage; and how cruelly he has trampled on my love, betrayed my trust, scorned my prayers and tears, and efforts for his preservation—crushed my hopes, destroyed my youth’s best feelings, and doomed me to a life of hopeless misery—as far as man can do it—it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband—I HATE him! The word stares me in the face like a guilty confession, but it is true; I hate him—I hate him! (Brontë 243)

Two chapters later she comes to the decision that “he may drink himself dead, but it is NOT my fault!” (Brontë 253). The idealistic young girl who dreamed of reforming Arthur Huntingdon is gone, replaced by a woman emotionally more mature who is able to differentiate herself from her husband’s failures and vices. Siv Jansson cites this particular scene as the moment when “Brontë’s careful construction of Helen’s angelic image and determined redemptive posture has its greatest power” (38). It is here that Helen’s illusion is shattered and rather than being a tragic loss, it is a painful but empowering realization. She relinquishes responsibility for Arthur and assumes

responsibility for her own. The death of her “youth’s best feelings” is indeed to be mourned in the case of Helen, though Brontë shows that she will not make the same mistake again. Helen returns one last time to nurse Huntingdon as he is dying of gangrene. But the chains have already fallen from her wrists, and his death is only the final blow to the shackles that Helen herself severed by making the choice to escape to Wildfell Hall, thereby winning financial and emotional independence from Arthur.

Dorothea Casaubon does not physically flee her husband’s home until she actually chooses to marry Will Ladislaw against her deceased husband’s wishes, releasing herself from his grasp beyond the grave. As Casaubon nears death, Dorothea, like Helen, nurses him during his decline. This is when her cup finally runs over with dissatisfaction leading to a refusal to play lackey any longer to her husband’s selfish needs. While in conversation with Will upon his parting, Dorothea shares with him her personal longings and trials: “Sorrow comes in so many ways. Two years ago I had no notion of that—I mean of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak” (Eliot 337). The image of Dorothea as a prisoner with hands bound, silenced by her sorrow, is indeed a piteous replacement for the enchanting Miss Brooke, who most men found “bewitching when she was on horseback” (Eliot 7). The idea of enforced silence is present in *Tenant* as well. Repelled by the delight her husband takes in tormenting her with stories of his former conquests, Helen’s thoughts are forced inward as a reaction to his taunting. She observes, “I used to fly into passions or melt into tears at first, but seeing that his delight increased in proportion to my anger and agitation, I have since endeavoured to suppress my feelings and receive his revelations in the silence of calm contempt” (Brontë 163). To her shock

and dismay, married life to Arthur Huntingdon proves even more constraining than life in the formal social circles in which she used to move.

In a scene startlingly similar to Helen's at the breakfast table, Dorothea turns from pitying her husband to hating him for his faults. Without any attempt at verbal communication, once again Casaubon retreats alone to his library and shuts the door upon his young wife. In the face of another dismissal Dorothea flees to her boudoir, and Eliot deliberately prefaces Dorothea's subsequent outburst by pointing out that instead of tears, words came flooding into her mind. The alteration in her response is significant. Like Helen, a scene with her husband that previously would have thrown her into tear-filled woe now produces words laced with bitterness and born of contempt.

‘What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything I do? He wishes he had never married me.’ She began to hear herself, and was checked into stillness. Like one who has lost his way and is weary, she sat and saw as in one glance all the paths of her young hope which she should never see again. [. . .] Now she said bitterly, ‘It is his fault, not mine.’ In the jar of her whole being, Pity was overthrown. Was it her fault that she had believed in him—had believed in his worthiness? —And what, exactly, was he? —She was able enough to estimate him—she who waited on his glances with trembling, and shut her best soul in prison, paying it only hidden visits, that she might be petty enough to please him. In such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate. (Eliot 265)

The psychological pattern of thought and emotions is almost identical in both women's cases. In each case desperation to know in what manner she has failed is followed by a nostalgic and bitter longing for "the paths of her young hope" and her "youth's best feelings." The pivotal moment for Dorothea occurred when she "began to hear herself." This overhearing, or eavesdropping, of her own thoughts stops her headlong rant and sends her down a different path from the hitherto desperate, submissive one she was following. Both women address the issue of culpability and come to an acceptance of the reality that the failure is not their fault but their husbands', a realization that leads each woman to a cynical but accurate assessment of the altered state of her marriage relationship and thence to hatred at the injustice and the loss of maidenly ideals and adorations. They verbally deny fault and renounce their assumed roles of savior and saint. By doing so both women take a step on the path toward emotionally distancing themselves from their husbands.

Guilt and disillusionment play major roles in each scene described above; Helen likens her newborn hate to a guilty confession while in *Middlemarch* Eliot employs a chilling metaphor by having Dorothea recall the unnatural way in which she was forced to shut her "best soul" away during life with Casaubon, paying it only occasional and stolen visits. Dorothea's reference to her "best soul" finds a parallel notion in *Tenant* when Helen mourns, "how many of my thoughts and feelings are gloomily cloistered within my own mind; how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried" (Brontë 191). With Helen's reference to her "better self" Brontë makes an interesting assertion that there can exist within a marriage a portion of a woman which remains "unmarried," or unfulfilled when two unequal partners are joined together.

In her last diary entry before marrying Huntingdon, Helen pens her burgeoning concern about life with the frivolous Arthur: “I do wish he would sometimes be serious. I cannot get him to write or speak in real, solid earnest. I don't much mind it now, but if it be always so, what shall I do with the serious part of myself?” (Brontë 157). This is one of the first instances in which her diary reveals Helen as more than just an empty-headed teenager infatuated with a dangerously dashing young man. Her diary entry shows that even though she has committed herself to the marriage, she has a serious element to her personality and is able to discern a disturbing lack of sobriety in her fiancé. Just as a man who gets married can reasonably expect to have certain needs fulfilled by his wife, Brontë intimates that a woman requires the same sort of fulfillment.

This notion of marriage portrays the state of matrimony as an institution that involves a set of services each partner performs for the other. The idea that one half of the alliance may find himself or herself performing all of the services and having none rendered in return again alludes to the Pamela myth, which perpetuates the idea that after the marriage vows are uttered, the bulk of the marriage may consist of instruction and dominion on the husband's part and obedience and service on the wife's. Richardson's novel seems to imply that Pamela enjoys a lifetime of wedded bliss. However, the key notion in both *Middlemarch* and *Tenant* is an emphasis on the negative results of such inequity. In both cases, that result is an internal division of personality or self on the woman's part.

The irony in these two texts is that both young wives long to be Pamela, to perform those tasks generally expected of them by their husbands and their society. However, neither woman succeeds in rendering the services she would like to perform for

her husband. Helen's and Dorothea's repeated attempts to "help" their husbands inadvertently reveal to those husbands their own particular flaws over and over again until they are sickened by their wives and their incessant need to "help" them. Both women invest everything in their early notions of what marriage will offer them. Disastrously those notions prove to be entirely incorrect. Their extreme incompatibility with their husbands, added to the fact that they also both desire intellectual and spiritual stimulation in exchange for their wifely services, results in a tragedy of errors for the two sets of newlyweds.

Saleel Nurbhai notes that in *Middlemarch*, "Casaubon and Lydgate marry because they see, in Dorothea and Rosamund, their ideals of perfection [. . .] Each ideal has an element of control about it: each wife can have only the attributes the husbands want them to possess" (21). And thus nobody gets what he or she expected out of marriage in these novels; therein lays the root of the problem. The absolute disparity between expectations and reality reduces each marriage to a nonentity in which both partners are forced to coexist in silence, each suffering alone the terrible consequences of personal choice. As Eliot remarks, "Poor Lydgate! Or shall I say, Poor Rosamund! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (106). People exist in separate worlds, and in the case of the Casaubons and the Lydgates, the partners were unable to find a happy medium somewhere in between, having no prior knowledge of the other's world and unable to learn. Such a pitiful existence takes its toll on all parties involved, and Brontë and Eliot represent the rapid decline of each marriage in excruciating detail. Casaubon retreats further and further into his mysteries while Arthur Huntingdon advances further and further down the road of sin and debauchery. Both Helen and Dorothea find

themselves splintering, their outer personas becoming hardened and tough, while their inner, best, or better selves are spirited away into hiding so as not to be fully contaminated by the degradation their marriage engenders. Such a schism predictably causes great quantities of psychological and emotional pain and anxiety as well as inhibits their ability to function in the outside world as they would like to. Marriage indeed proves more stifling to Helen and Dorothea than their prior lives.

However, all the suffering in each novel does appear to eventually lead to something positive. Significantly, both Helen and Dorothea seem to recognize that their dying husbands will take their wives down with them if they sit by and do nothing. Helen sees it in the way things that used to shock and appall her no longer have the same effect, as though she has been desensitized through Arthur's raucous company and corruption. So far from being able to reform her husband, the unhappy Helen begins to realize the exact opposite is happening—that his vice is actually contaminating her virtue. She writes of the way she sees this dreadful process taking place:

I am so determined to love him—so intensely anxious to excuse his errors, that I am continually dwelling upon them, and labouring to extenuate the loosest of his principles and the worst of his practices, till I am familiarized with vice and almost a partaker in his sins. Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. (Brontë 206)

Helen is ever-burdened by concern for the ill effects of his life on her impressionable son and herself. In her book *Anne Brontë's Radical Vision: Structures of Consciousness* Elizabeth Hollis Berry explains why in *Tenant* there must be an end to the first marriage in order for Helen to survive and finally begin to thrive. Berry writes, “Anne Brontë

makes it clear that no matter how humanely concerned with his fate Helen might be, as long as Huntingdon lives, she cannot lead a completely fulfilling life” (79). In like manner Dorothea nearly fails to break free from her husband even after his death. Fortunately she sees this danger quite literally in his request that she dedicate her life to finishing his work, the work that has swallowed up one ineffective life already. Both Huntingdon and Casaubon totally consume their young wives’ original dreams and creativity. Huntingdon actually physically destroys Helen’s paintings and journals while Casaubon remains completely uninterested in Dorothea’s ideas for social reform. Neither man is capable of sustained interest or belief in anything outside of himself. Indeed, each man would have dragged his wife into his own decline had Helen and Dorothea not been strong enough of mind to realize the danger and differentiate themselves from their husbands in time.

Gorsky asserts that women novelists such as George Eliot and Anne Brontë “demonstrated in their own lives that they did not believe in all the social conventions and that they did not accept the notion that a woman must lose her identity and intellect when she married.” (51). Eliot and Brontë communicate this belief through their texts by creating heroines who learn more after their marriages than they did before. Like Lydia Bennet they marry the wrong man, but unlike Lydia their story is not effectively ended by the marriage. Like Pamela Andrews their real education occurs after the marriage takes place, but unlike Pamela, their intellect and independence are not snuffed out by that education but rather they grow and develop in ways they perhaps would not have, had their authors gifted them with less dire, more congenial marital circumstances.

In fact, the fruit of all the suffering and the ordeal of the first marriage in each case is self-knowledge. Dorothea refers to her marriage to Casaubon as “a perpetual struggle of energy with fear” (Eliot 243). The prolonged inwardness, the constant warring with oneself and one’s place in life, which constituted marriage for Helen and Dorothea, provided them with an insight into their own characters that they definitely did not possess at the outset of their stories. Unlike their doomed husbands, Helen and Dorothea face up to and deal with their own faults and flaws in addition to their husbands’. Their husbands’ ignorance of their wives’ most basic needs and strengths forces those wives to consider their own position for once, to see it for what it is worth, separate from its association with Casaubon and Huntingdon. This consideration and self-study is the very impetus that leads them through a period of recovery and recuperation after their husbands’ deaths and on a path toward second marriages.

Brontë and Eliot place this knowledge of self squarely within their characters’ domains as women and wives. It is their first and foremost right. It is their reward in a way for enduring after paying penance for their youthful mistakes. Along with this comes the ability to step out of the ill-fated roles of savior and saint to which they so ardently aspired. In the end those roles could only suppress and stymie them. This newly acquired self-knowledge is the reason there is a second chance for these weary women, and it is another example of the way in which they leave their own stories by becoming more than those original stories could ever have allowed.

The Second Marriage

Two literary debates have been waged over the suitability and/or worthiness of the two suitors in *Tenant* and *Middlemarch*. Henry James said of Will Ladislaw, “Ladislaw too has not the concentrated fervor essential in the man chosen by so nobly strenuous a heroine” (580). The best Leslie Stephen could say of him was, “He is no doubt an amiable Bohemian” (584). Lee R. Edwards’ famous reproach intones, “The objection is not that Dorothea should have married Will but that she should have married anybody at all, that she should ultimately be denied the opportunity given Will to find her own paths and forge her energies into some new mold” (628). The common thread running through all of the complaints seems to be that George Eliot denied her dynamic heroine the same liberties and freedom she herself enjoyed in her lifetime. In *A Room of One’s Own* Virginia Woolf laments, “She never writes her own life,” and countless feminist critics have laid the same blame at George Eliot’s feet. Nevertheless, George Eliot warned her readers in the Prelude to her book that Dorothea Brooke would be a *modern* Saint Teresa, and therefore she would be constrained by modern social mores, unable to achieve the same goals as her saintly predecessor, thus ever unfulfilled. Dorothea was able to marry a second time, and that in itself is sufficiently subversive for Eliot’s element of social criticism in the novel. George Eliot was in many ways an anomaly within the society in which she lived, and *Middlemarch* is not an autobiography, however much of Eliot we see present in her heroines.

Much of the same complaint has been laid at the foot of Gilbert Markham. After Helen’s harrowing experience with Huntingdon, Markham seems a mere puppy for Helen to play with as she so chooses. In fact, Marion Shaw’s “Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist”

is critical of Markham: “Indulged by his doting mother, dominating his siblings, he is hot-headed and foolish and poised to make an unsatisfactory marriage with the stereotypically feminine Eliza” (130). Within the text itself he is described early on as a “fop” and an “empty-headed coxcomb.” Arlene Jackson describes Gilbert as “shallow and all too prone to faults of pride and petulance” (205). Carol Senf makes it clear 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” (451). Much like George Eliot’s treatment of Will Ladislaw, Anne Brontë deliberately paints Gilbert as a flawed hero not because her imaginative powers failed her at the task of conjuring a perfect one, but because she decided to remain faithful to her own real life observations of mankind.

In the same vein, Brontë and Eliot find themselves unable to give their novels unambiguous endings in the manner of Jane Austen, partly because their heroes are so ambiguously portrayed and their heroines occupy the gray margins between stereotypes (Westcott 222). The real question lies in whether or not Helen and Dorothea in second marriages gave up everything they won through the internal battles of their first marriages. Did they merely settle for safety and security the second time around? After their husbands’ deaths, both Helen and Dorothea lead independent lives for perhaps the first time ever. Both do their healing in relative solitude, broken only by occasional visits from their individual suitors.

Both authors seem keen to point out that by this point in the narrative, Gilbert and Will have changed significantly through their associations with Helen and Dorothea. It is important that these women not remarry men as solipsistic as their first husbands.

Therefore the prospective young men grow up. Their relationships and eventual courtships with Helen and Dorothea serve as the main educating force in their lives, a shadow of the education the women receive through the course of their first marriages.

Upon first meeting their future wives, neither Gilbert nor Will was much impressed with the young women. The women too expend little time or effort judging the men. Initially the first thing Dorothea notices about Will Ladislaw is his “pouting air of discontent.” After registering that her mind hardly stays on him long enough to develop any deeper impression. At the same encounter Ladislaw, “made up his mind she must be an unpleasant girl, since she was going to marry Casaubon” (Eliot 51). Again, beyond the association between his cousin and his cousin’s youthful bride and the fact that she has a lovely voice, Ladislaw loses interest and divines nothing further about Dorothea’s character.

When asked his opinion of the mysterious Mrs. Graham, Gilbert Markham, like Will, acknowledges her beauty but pronounces her “too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste.” At their first sighting Helen meets Gilbert’s eyes and then immediately returns to perusing her book after bestowing upon him “a momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn” (Brontë 14). Gilbert’s impression of her is confirmed a couple of days later when he is again the recipient of the same disdainful glance, “a look of repellent scorn, so easily assumed, and so entirely without the least distortion of a single feature, that, while there, it seemed like the natural expression of the face” (Brontë 20). In this moment Gilbert experiences an unusual moment of clarity in assessing the young widow, and the reader, through his reaction, is given an intimate glimpse of the change that has come

over Helen as a result of her first marriage, cruelly evident in Gilbert's feeling that this look of scorn is her natural or default expression.

Clearly, at these initial encounters the bohemian artist and the young country farmer fail to make lasting impressions upon either woman. Dorothea is too wrapped up in her new husband and the capacities in which she might serve him. Helen, having borne enough invasion of her personal privacy, is steadfastly shunning any human contact at this point, especially the unwanted notice of importunate gentlemen. But through their further meetings and discussions, both men (Brontë and Eliot would have us believe) recognize each woman's inestimable value and become enamored of them very quickly. While both suitors ardently seek to marry their loves, they also realize each woman needs space and time for healing. The authors bestow these men with this quality, setting them apart from the previous husbands and the other men in the novels. Will leaves Dorothea and seeks to better himself and find work in order to have something worthy to offer her upon his return. Helen, in fact, offers her journals to Gilbert as an explanation for refraining from jumping into another marriage so soon after being freed from her first. And in the process of reading her story, Gilbert himself is educated through the first-hand account of one woman's life within their constrictive social realm.

Jill Matus contrasts this education of Gilbert Markham with Helen's lack of influence on Arthur Huntingdon, "Gilbert, on the other hand, is affected by Helen's narrative in a way that suggests a capacity for growth and maturity, if not perfectibility" (106). Gilbert, Matus concludes, occupies a pivotal, but frequently misunderstood, place in the novel. He serves an important purpose both for his heroine and for his creator. "He is never an idealized antidote to Arthur Huntingdon, but a means by which Anne Brontë

puzzles over the question of masculine adequacy—what makes a worthwhile, redeemable, ‘good enough’ man” (108). He is not posited as the definitive “good enough” man, but he exists within the realm of possibility within his author’s imagination when it comes time for Anne Brontë to put together a character to take over the role of Helen’s husband.

Though both men eventually return to these now older and wiser women still in the hope of uniting, it is in fact the women who do the final courting. Elizabeth Hollis Berry remarks that Helen’s offering of a rose reverses the traditional courtship roles and confirms her reclamation of her own life (105). Helen stands before her anguished admirer, reaches out the window, and plucks this Christmas rose from the bush as a representation of her love and readiness to begin a new marriage with Gilbert.

In another drawing room in a remarkably similar scene in *Middlemarch*, Will Ladislaw comes to Lowick to inform Dorothea of his intention to leave Middlemarch. He intends to go to London to make his way in life and win an honorable position in the political arena if he can. Prevented from broaching the subject of marriage by Casaubon’s codicil to his will, Ladislaw is unable to come out and say he desires some sign from Dorothea that she loves him, that she will miss him when he is gone. He settles for asking if she approves of his plan to leave for good. While Will wars with his emotions, Eliot gives her reader a glimpse into Dorothea’s mind: “She was not aware how long it was before she answered. She had turned her head and was looking out of the window on the rose-bushes, which seemed to have in them the summers of all the years when Will would be away” (336). Here the rose on the bush represents not only countless summers of loneliness but all of Dorothea’s “youth’s best feelings,” the love she feels for Will, and

all the vitality once silenced in her by her marriage to Casaubon with its unexpected and far-reaching consequences.

In both scenes we see the heroine looking out of a window for some outward sign or symbol to express an inward emotion that heretofore has been constrained and unexpressed. In Helen's case the symbol of a rose, usually associated with youth and innocence, is instead aligned with age and experience, and this rearranging of symbols mirrors the reversal of roles in which Helen proposes to Gilbert (Langland, "Voicing of Feminine Desire" 121). The rose is offered and her future second husband accepts it. In a similar scene in *Middlemarch* Dorothea is not yet assured of Will's regard and is unprepared to verbally address the implications of her dead husband's will with the only other person it directly affects. But in the end, like Helen, Dorothea assumes the primary courtship role in deciding to give up her inheritance and forcing him to accept her love instead of leaving her in despair. Where both heroines made their own choice of first marriage partner, they once again face that choice in the end, if they will. Brontë and Eliot leave no room for arguments of ignorance or force with regard to these second marriages.

And for all intents and purposes both women choose more astutely the second time around. Frederick R. Karl classifies Dorothea's decision to marry Will as "momentous" in that it was made after her incredible "ordeal" with Casaubon. In choosing Will she is finally able to "make intellectual truth agree with the truth of feeling" (79). The aspect of choice here is key, but there remains the valid question as to Dorothea's (and Helen's) state of mind when she is making this choice to marry again. Each prior relationship was indeed an ordeal, and it would be fair to say both women

were mentally and emotionally exhausted and that their choices were in fact made simply to find relief now as widows in a socially acceptable way. This suspicion about real motive grows because the reader is able to believe Gilbert truly loves Helen, but sees him in many ways a boring character, provincial in his country ways, and hardly up to Helen's strength of spirit and will to survive. In her book *Anne Brontë*, Maria Frawley suggests "in the novel's conclusion that it is Markham's ability to appreciate the intensity of his wife's need for quiet seclusion that makes him capable of providing her with happiness" (130). Frawley also hints at a form of post-traumatic stress and recovery in the novel's heroine. Perhaps Helen *is* content with a husband who will not abuse her or her son, who understands her background to a certain extent, and who will let her live out her days in peace and seclusion, a desire she seems to share with her author.

In any event Gilbert "has become what the novel applauds: a man without arrogance and a man full of restraint" (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 137). Going one step further, Juliet McMaster identifies the Gilbert of the end of *Tenant* as a more mature, seasoned man (368). Gilbert himself refers to this seasoning process of maturation in the final pages of his letter to Halford, "I have learned to be merry and wise, to be more easy with myself and more indulgent to my neighbours, and I can afford to laugh" (Brontë 356). These are indeed the qualities we as readers are intended to admire and applaud in Anne Brontë's "hero," so different from those of her sisters' Byronic demon-heroes. Helen's education of Gilbert has apparently extended beyond the wedding day, as Gilbert has learned to be the anti-Huntingdon, to stop taking himself so seriously, to stop judging his neighbors, and to stop being insanely jealous of other men. He has learned to be merry and if he is not all hero, he is certainly no demon. His form of laughter is a form of

which Helen approves of and can clearly be contrasted with Huntingdon, whose sadistic laughter so tormented Helen.

In the same way Eliot fashions Will into a hero, albeit a realistically imperfect one. Edwards said *Middlemarch* was “neither tragic nor comic but simply realistic [. . .] merely a realistic assessment of the best that can be done in the world, both fictional and real” (625). Seen in this light, Dorothea’s marriage to Will Ladislaw fits the message of the novel completely. Of course in the twenty-first century Dorothea might never have married Will for she would have seen a myriad of other options available to her after Casaubon’s death. However, in her time it is the most likely assumption that she would indeed have married Will, for in marrying him she finally achieved a measure of what she wanted all her life: to escape from Middlemarch and the confines of a society to which she was totally mismatched. In a moment of keen insight, Dorothea recognizes a key aspect of Will’s character. She sees him as “a creature who entered into every one’s feelings, and could take the pressure of their thoughts instead of urging his own with iron resistance” (Eliot 309). In Will she finds the antidote to Casaubon’s iron resistance to her ardent desires to be of use, to be loved, to be appreciated. In Will she finds a haven from her own psychological pain. Being realistic, George Eliot could not allow Dorothea to scorn Will and merrily set about turning Victorian society on its end. Eliot had her make the only choice available to her within that society, short of giving her Eliot’s own infamous life.

Leading to that choice of Will as a second marriage partner, it is also very important that Dorothea make that final break with Casaubon in renouncing his money and legacy, as pivotal as is Helen’s decision to steal away from her first husband to

seclusion at Wildfell Hall. Dorothea would otherwise never have felt truly free in her new life and might never have accomplished the good she did. JoAnna Stephens Mink asserts that “certainly, Dorothea has the capacity to become heroic; the forces of a conservative, repressive society are what keep her from achieving her potential” (18). And George Eliot makes this point very clear: it is society’s fault and not Dorothea’s that she is unable to become another Saint Teresa. In the same way it is not Helen’s fault in *Tenant* that the dissolution of Arthur prevents her becoming a Savior. Their achievement is therefore not diminished but heightened in the light of tragic consequences and how they reacted to hard-won wisdom. An implicit message in both these novels is that the worthiness of the second suitor is relatively immaterial in the face of the lives and choices of Helen and Dorothea, given the social conditions of their time. Their characters would have developed with or without the second partner.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Langland refers to Helen Huntingdon as “that woman who has violated Victorian convention by leaving her husband and her story” (*Anne Brontë* 120). Helen Huntingdon and Dorothea Casaubon are two female literary characters who leave their stories and venture into uncharted territory. Neither woman is simply *good* like the Clarissas and the Jane Bennets. Each one starts off her tale with a colossally bad mistake: the choice of the wrong husband. Both girls are “not yet twenty” when they make this monumental decision but, despite their youth and naiveté, manage to create and earn the heroic role in new stories that are as compelling, if not more so, as the first portion of their tales. As the stories continue Brontë and Eliot give to their readers concentrated, realistic depictions of life in the nineteenth century, of young women whose lives are not always idyllic and whose narratives are perhaps more moving and memorable than others of that time *because* their heroines grow up.

Young Helen marries Arthur Huntingdon in the hopes of saving him from certain dark proclivities she is already aware he possesses. Brontë portrays her choice of marriage partner as unwise and proceeds to sketch the consequential married life for the Huntingdons. Arthur refuses to submit to Helen’s angelic ministrations, and Helen’s matrimonial vision evaporates under the onslaught of her husband’s indiscretions. Once she succeeds in removing herself enough from the shambles of her dream to recognize with horror the contagious vestiges of Arthur’s vices in her own personality, Helen makes the monumental decision to take her son and flee from her husband to the safe haven of Wildfell Hall. From this solitary locale Helen is able to support herself and her son as an artist, further removing herself from dependence on Arthur. In addition this time of

recuperation develops Helen's budding relationship with Gilbert Markham, culminating in her turning over her journals to him in order to explain her reluctance to pursue that relationship with him. But after going back once more to her husband's deathbed, Helen returns to Wildfell Hall and proposes to a chastened Gilbert.

Dorothea Brooke anticipates enlightenment and intellectual expansion from her marriage experience. Instead of choosing a man in need of saving, she chooses Dr. Edward Casaubon and casts him in the role of an exalted teacher and guide. Just as Arthur could not submit to Helen's "saving" ministrations, Casaubon, unaware of his young bride's expectations, is unable to fill the fatherly mentoring role for Dorothea. Instead of the sage father-figure she hoped for, Dorothea ends up with a dried up old academic who has become "indifferent to sunlight." This metaphor paints Casaubon as a husk of a man, unable to impart knowledge or give life to his younger wife who is searching so desperately for both. Dorothea, in her turn, fails to meet Casaubon's expectations of a biddable wife. As a result Casaubon, though less volatile than Arthur Huntingdon, punishes his wife as Huntingdon does through his cold silences and deprecating comments.

As Charles Kingsley said in his commentary on *Tenant*, "There are a very few quite perfect people in the book, but they are kept as far out of sight as possible; they are the 'accidentals,' the disagreeable people, the 'necessary' notes of the melody; and the 'timbre' of the notes themselves is hard and rough" (30). Kingsley is quite right. The reader of Anne Brontë and George Eliot is not destined to find portraits of perfection in women *or* men. It is as if both authors felt those people were not the interesting ones. In both novels, the most interesting, well-rounded characters are marked as such. Those

characters grow and take the difficult path and are regularly given insight into the other characters around them. Helen and Dorothea are two of those characters and each occupy the gray areas in fictional representations of women. They are endowed with passions, ideals, minds of their own, desires, and frustrations—all in massive quantities. At the end of their respective stories they are new women by virtue of the growth they have achieved and the sound and informed decisions they make with the hard-earned knowledge won from raw life.

When Helen plucks a hearty Christmas rose off a bush outside her window and offers it to Gilbert, she likens the flower to 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. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals—Will you have it? (Brontë 378)

Helen openly admits she is not without her own battle scars, *but* Brontë and Eliot seem to imply that such a woman should be much more desirable for the trials she has withstood, for the knowledge of life she has gained. The “none of *them*” refers to the fragrant summer flowers, the angels, saints, and martyrs of female characterization who would undoubtedly have found their arsenal of tools insufficient for the task at hand—that of survival in a marriage to Arthur Huntingdon. In contrast even with the cold snow on its petals, the Christmas rose, or the “new” woman, manages to survive when a marriage sanctioned by society beats down upon her down. Phoenix-like she rises from the ashes

and, if only by virtue of the fact that Brontë lets her live on after the death of her husband, begins a new story uniquely hers.

In the cases of the two novels I have examined, neither the first nor the second marriage ended the heroines' lives/stories. If the second suitor seemed weak and anticlimactic, the modern reader should remember that Brontë and Eliot were strongly committed to depicting in fiction reality as they saw it. It is interesting that two women who had so little experience with marriage themselves should focus so intently on marriage and its effects. Anne Brontë never married, and George Eliot spent most of a lifetime in love with a man she was never able to marry; when she finally did marry Cross, she died a few short months later. Brontë was twenty-eight when she wrote *Tenant*, only a few years older than her heroine, cognizant at an early age of the numerous potential pitfalls of life that await ignorant young men and women. Younger than her sister Charlotte was when she published *Jane Eyre*, one cannot help but wonder what the youngest Brontë would have written had she lived as long as her contemporary George Eliot, who wrote the bulk of her work between the ages of thirty and sixty. Eliot was fifty-two when she penned *Middlemarch*, sufficiently removed in age from the youth, "their ignorance of life, and the narrowness of their intellectual superiority" as she put it (qtd. in Haight 44).

Both authors seem to be powerless not to include the second partners—as though they wanted to make a statement about a good—if not perfect man. The inclusion of the second marriages may have been Brontë's and Eliot's statement about their basic belief in marriage, certainly in the basic need for a mutually satisfying, intimate companionship between a man and woman—and this despite the authors' own personal falling short of

that experience. Regardless of the preponderance of bad, failed marriages in the world and literature around them, there is in these two novels the hope of a satisfying one in which the partners don't need to be perfectly matched in intellect or interests, but at least need to be keyed in to each other's basic needs and unselfish about wanting to meet those needs. The second marriages in *Tenant* and *Middlemarch* are almost a Balm of Gilead, a reward for enduring the worst of marriages and being willing to learn from them. The two women went into their first marriages in a precipitous and impossibly idealistic way, whereas they take a long time to decide to try the second time around and consequently choose men who have become their friends first and who have earned their trust and love. The "give and take" relationships in these second marriages give the impression of being starkly more mature and much more balanced than those of their first marriages. The rough education Helen and Dorothea receive through their first marriages has a positive effect on their second husbands, educating them as well. The second husbands may not have been essential to the development of the heroines, but they may have been essential to the authors' plans as a way of making a statement about the "real" hero—a good, but flawed man who serves as a complement to a real-life heroine who is wiser for her scars.

Though written under markedly different conditions and springing forth from minds divided by both age and experience, these two novels focus on flawed marriages and the various ill effects they have on those people involved. Their authors render eerily similar tales in their effort to reflect reality, portraying what happens when innocence meets the unforgiving wall of experience. Lee Edwards states that "focused on marriage, choice of mate, and intimate sexual and familial relationships, the novel's lens studies social power, exposes autocracy at work in daily life, and illuminates, as well, the

dangers of enforced passivity and of an order that systematically confuses virtue and inertia” (35). From this viewpoint marriage serves as the focusing lens, a vantage point from which to study and expose the real point of interest: the process of becoming, of growing up, of attaining self-knowledge, women and men trying to weather the vicissitudes of their daily lives, struggling with the war between being selfless while exerting self, interacting and coexisting with one another—a subject we know was of particular interest to both authors.

Helen and Dorothea each make a match which fails miserably because of initial naiveté and later because of the “enforced passivity” of the wife that ensues after marriage. In these two novels it is important that the reader not confuse virtue with inertia, or the heroine’s inability or unwillingness to act for her own good and in the interest of her own well-being. Unappreciated and under stimulated in their respective lives before marriage, each woman seeks to escape her mundane story and attempts to find both appreciation and stimulation in societal roles she innocently finds appealing. Both women pay a hefty price for seeking a form of escape through marriage, for making impossibly idealistic demands on their marriages and on these particular spouses. Dorothea remains with Casaubon until his unexpected death, and she is under his control even after his death through his unusual codicil to his will. She spends her time alone in her husband’s manor deliberating over how to dispense his wealth and whether or not to void her inheritance by marrying Will Ladislaw. When she finally comes to a conclusion, she turns to Will, and they escape Middlemarch together for parliamentary life in London.

In the end both Helen and Dorothea make wiser second choices as evidenced by their second husbands who at the very least allow them their own range of activity and independence of mind. It seems clear both Brontë and Eliot genuinely like their heroines, and they demonstrate their affection through the second chances they provide for them. Though both novels do end with another marriage that seems to have promise of being happy and long as a seeming reward for all the heroine's trouble, the problems with the first bad marriage are never resolved. Arlene Jackson makes the point that *Tenant* "is quite unconventional in its allowing the sinner to remain unrepentant, even on his deathbed, and its revealing a marital discord full of suffering, agony, and even ugliness" (200). *Middlemarch* does not portray a sinning husband like Arthur Huntingdon, but Casaubon and Dorothea's marriage is equally as unconventional in its representation of distress and pain. On the other hand, the authors give the reader more hope in the second marriage. There promises to be more reward for the investment of the heroine's heart. Helen gives up her painting career and brings her inheritance to her second marriage. In contrast, Dorothea gives up her inheritance in favor of her second marriage. Though both women sacrifice much for their second marriage, both have some satisfaction through influencing the world for good, especially by educating their husbands and children to be more rational, humane participants in the public sphere (Carnell 17).

Helen and Dorothea fail in fulfilling their initial expected roles, but their authors allow them to eventually fulfill other roles well-suited to their desires to help their fellow human beings. It is clear at the end of both novels that these women serve as counselors to their second husbands throughout their later lives. However, it is also made clear in scenes at the end of the novels that they will influence others in their lives outside of their

personal spheres. At the end of both stories, characters come forth to solicit advice from Helen and Dorothea as they contemplating marriage or struggle with marital problems. Helen's and Dorothea's past experiences, their prolonged exposure to marital discord, and their later success in second marriages make them apt and qualified advisors on the subject.

Helen entreats the young Esther Hargrave with words of hard-won wisdom and experience, "You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life" (Brontë 292). The innocent young girl confides her hopes and expectations for wedded bliss to Helen, "I shall expect *my* husband to have no pleasures but what he shares with me; and if his greatest pleasure of all is not the enjoyment of my company—why—it will be the worst for him—that's all!" Helen replies gravely, "If such are your expectations of matrimony, Esther, you must indeed, be careful who you marry—or rather, you must avoid it altogether" (Brontë 294). An older, more cautious Helen speaks here in an attempt, in perfect accord with her author's stated desire, to prevent other young people from repeating her own mistakes.

Toward the end of *Middlemarch* the desperate and weary Dr. Lydgate comes to Lowick at Dorothea's summons, and the two discuss what he should do about his mistaken involvement with Bulstrode and how Dorothea might help him clear his name and help support his hospital. Through the course of the conversation Lydgate reveals to Dorothea, and perhaps to himself for the first time, that the root of his problem revolves around his unhappy marriage to Rosamund. He consents to trust the young widow saying, "Why should I not tell you?—you know what sort of bond marriage is. You will

understand everything' [. . .] Dorothea refrained from saying what was in her mind—how well she knew that there might be invisible barriers to speech between husband and wife” (Eliot 472-3). The negative connotation implicit in his use of the word “bond” to describe marriage is telling at this late stage in the novel where paths have become unclear, even tortuous, for these two characters who began the story so full of verve and high and noble aspirations. In this exchange the acknowledgement of their mutual suffering allows the proud Lydgate to lean on Dorothea’s wisdom for aid, while her sympathetic understanding born of hard experience endows her with a special ability to help a fellow human being in pain and therefore fulfill a portion of her great desire to make a difference in her lifetime.

And thus we come to the conclusion of both novels, not just the end of the story, but the conclusion that much can be learned in the crucible of a bad marriage. And if the refining produces a woman who can choose more wisely the second time around in the light of the first, she can help another avoid the same pitfalls—a luxury she never enjoyed. Words of experience from the novels’ heroines echo hauntingly through both tales, ringing the truth of Anne Brontë’s and George Eliot’s texts in which the voice of innocence, impossible ideals, and improbably outcomes are demystified for male and female readers alike in favor of the voice of experience, practical truths, and accurate representations.

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