

LOVE, POWER AND THE QUEST FOR INTEGRITY
IN THE NOVELS OF ANNE BRONTË

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HILARY RUTH KNIGHT
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Dr. Victor A. Neufeldt, Supervisor



Dr. Margot K. Louis, Departmental Member



Dr. Angus G. McLaren, Outside Member



Dr. Elaine Limbrick, External Examiner

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University of Victoria

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Supervisor: Dr. Victor A. Neufeldt

ABSTRACT

Agnes Grey is a study in female powerlessness. Agnes's happy childhood is shattered by the false values adopted by her father, values originating in his very Victorian determination to exercise patriarchal power. His inability to co-exist with manifestations of female power leads to the impoverishment of the family and his complete impotence, with the result that Agnes must seek employment in a hostile world. The mortifications she undergoes emerge as a spiritual testing-ground, and ultimately she is rewarded by the happiness of marriage to Weston, a truly moral man. But, although they are very alike in virtues and principles, Agnes the woman can only endure, accomplishing nothing in the way of useful work, while Weston as a man and cleric is able to order his life in the service of God, humanity, and his future wife. It is he who restores Agnes to integrity and to the "home" central to the Victorian ideal, empowering her so that she can finally put to good use the qualities she shares with him. Anne Brontë gives no indication that she finds this state of affairs unjust, apparently contenting herself with a tale of poetic justice.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall presents a complete turnabout. Here Anne Brontë explores the dilemma of a powerless and moral woman who cannot find a truly moral man. Helen Huntingdon errs in believing she can reform the rake she has married. Whereas Agnes is rescued from her predicament, Helen must face hers head on, and act to save herself and her child. In doing so she encounters all

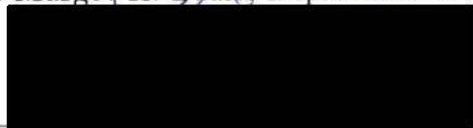
the prejudices of patriarchal society which arise when a woman defies convention. Rejecting as worse than useless the Victorian rôle of “angel in the house,” Helen restores the image of the angel to its original puissance as the servant of God, strong and free to act beyond the confines of mere domesticity. In this novel it is the woman who ultimately empowers the man, the woman who acts while the man remains essentially passive. Power politics can have no place in a happily integrated family; she demonstrates her contempt for the patriarchal power structure by giving away her newly-won power. It is a great risk, for her new husband will, by the law of the land, gain control of her person and her new wealth. But Anne Brontë intends us to understand that Helen has assessed the risks and chosen wisely—despite the very obvious flaws of her suitor Gilbert.



Dr. Victor A. Neufeldt, Supervisor



Dr. Margot K. Davis, Departmental Member



Dr. Angus G. McLaren, Outside Member



Dr. Elaine Limbrick, External Examiner

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Dedication

To Adrian, my *sine qua non*.

Part I

Introduction

In her novels *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Anne Brontë challenges both her society's idea of marriage and the education given the young to prepare them for life and wedlock. Men and women, she insists, are different but equal. The basis of their union must be mutual esteem and loyal friendship—qualities which can arise only from the self-esteem and integrity of both parties. Unfortunately, society does little to encourage either. Demonstrating “an intellectual daring which repudiated certain semi-sacrosanct opinions of her age” (Stanford 239), Anne explores the societal forces which militate against personal integrity and happy marriage, and delineates the true values necessary to forge responsible adult relationships.

In choosing a mate, one must “first study, then approve, then love” (*Tenant* 150). However, the ability to discriminate depends upon a sound moral education and experience of the world. Virtue, in the sense of conscious goodness, is admirable but inadequate to cope with the gins and springes of life. Then, too, being “in love” may be delightful, but the emotion can prove treacherous in a society which yokes partners till death. One needs an educated sensibility and the wisdom of experience, and Anne Brontë claims that the upbringing of neither boys nor girls in her society fulfils that goal. The education of girls errs on the side of over-protection; society decrees that their delicacy must be shielded from the coarse realities of life—and so their devoted parents leave them vulnerable to the malice and depredations of others. Boys, on the other hand, are permitted to explore the

world without adequate advice and protection; they thus run the risk of corruption and of corrupting others. Clearly, if moral sanity is to prevail, and if marriage is to be based on companionship—if the partners are not, indeed, to be respectively horrified and bored by their spouses' conduct—a golden mean is required. Boys and girls must receive identical moral educations. And Anne Brontë takes this philosophy to its logical conclusion: in the words of her chief biographer Winifred Gérin, she “made it one of the capital issues of her book to proclaim that one equal moral law was binding for men and women alike” (254). The sexual double standard represents to Anne not only consummate hypocrisy but also a sickness gnawing at the heart of what is to her a sacred union.

Germane to her concept of proper relations between the sexes is her understanding of gender rôles. Although she holds no quarrel with the traditional spheres of woman and man—wife as homemaker, husband as breadwinner—she considers their responsibilities complementary and equal in importance. She firmly rejects the exaggerated mannerisms which constitute in her society “masculinity” and “femininity.” Female intrigue she deplures as trivializing and degrading, and acts of male aggression are dismissed as self-indulgent or ridiculous. Not for her the Byronic grand passions beloved of the time: relentlessly and refreshingly realistic, Anne portrays as futile and miserable the domestic lives of *soi-disant* romantics. She insists that there is simply no room in marriage or society for such posturing; it is antithetical to the integrity she demands. Wise men and women eschew

society's little games and comport themselves with dignity: Edward Weston finds these antics almost incomprehensible, and thus earns the love of Agnes; Gilbert Markham's penchant for histrionics provides material for much authorial and narratorial satire, and by the end of the novel he has been sobered by the genuinely dramatic circumstances of Helen's marriage.

In a marriage of equals, both partners must be free to speak their minds. If women are the moral beings the Christian church requires them to be, they must be permitted for the good of all to use their influence, even unto disobedience to their husbands. Here the duty of a wife parallels that of the artist. In the Preface to the second edition of *Tenant*, Anne Brontë writes, "When I feel it is my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it." In other words, frankness on moral matters is an ethical imperative. But Anne's keen sense of balance prompts her to explore also the contexts wherein honesty and perseverance cannot effect reform. Wholesale moral prescriptions and simplistic solutions do not lie within her artistic purview. The world is not a morally problematic place for Anne Brontë; there is never the least doubt concerning the rightness or wrongness of human actions. But—and in Anne's world it is a very big "but"—one's individual capacity to effect change must be assessed with ruthless, and sometimes depressing, objectivity. Helen's strenuous efforts to reform Huntingdon come to nothing; only by the simple act of lending Gilbert her diary, the testament of experience, can she help him to gain wisdom—but only because the seed falls on fertile ground.

In order to achieve the self-esteem necessary to gain moral strength and to become an asset to society, every man, woman and child needs useful and meaningful work. In a very Christian sense, one's talents must be put to their fullest use. Too often, however, society divides itself between the exploited poor who work too hard for too little money, and the pampered rich who lead unfocussed and pointless lives which ensure disaster for themselves and their dependants. "Dissipation" in its wider sense means the scattering of energies. Anne Brontë does not agitate for reformation of the existing class hierarchy, but she perceives that the rich are far more likely to behave immorally because they have nothing to do and are never held responsible for their actions. Their money and rank save them from all reckonings except the final and implacable ones of death and judgment.

Independence Anne regards as a virtue and a strength, but, interestingly, she does not consider it an end in itself. Both her heroines sojourn as outsiders in hostile territory, proving their courage and perseverance; however, they are ultimately rewarded for their efforts by integration into a loving family. The experience gained outside the home finds its best use within the home, directed toward the balanced education of children. For Anne Brontë, "a room of one's own" is useful only in the context of "a home of one's own." In other words, personal strengths find their best and highest use within community. This philosophy applies not only to women, of course: the men who win Anne's approbation belong to a thoroughly domesticated species. Merryn Williams comments, "Anne did not expect a reformed rake to

become a good husband, and had not the faintest wish for a master. None of the men she admires is violent to women" (104). Dominance and submission have no place in the companion-marriage.

Anne Brontë presents in the two novels an intriguing tension between social and personal responsibility. To what extent is the reader to view her works as an indictment of patriarchal tyranny? Françoise Basch maintains that, "like other contemporary protests, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* criticizes not the husband's privilege within the framework of marriage, but the abuse of his powers" (81). This seems to be the case with *Agnes Grey*. Agnes's happiness is compromised by her father's irresponsibility, but she is only too delighted to let the benevolent Weston compensate her for all the ignominy she has had to endure as a poor and exploited spinster. And, in a way quite foreign to modern sensibilities, Anne perceives no essential *inferiority* in women's role in the patriarchy. Her orientation is deeply Christian; in the Christian world view, the humble are exalted, and she hints that Weston recognizes this essential Christliness of Agnes, the "lamb" of God. Ironically, however, it is the patriarchal power of the comparatively humble Weston which liberates Agnes to be a better servant of God. As long as one man can be found who will behave himself properly, nought will go ill. Agnes does not withdraw demurely from the great stage of life—it is made very clear that she can engage more fully with society than has hitherto been possible—but she is denied the opportunity to make the splendid statement which Anne demands from Helen.

Tenant proves so much more interesting a work because Helen cannot find a man who will comport himself according to his patriarchal responsibilities. But then, to complicate matters, Helen both requires and does not require such a man. She certainly wants a husband who will behave as he should—but it is she who wants to mould him into that paragon. Helen seeks an egalitarian basis for marriage, then, but misuses her talents and energies. Her attempts at reform ultimately lead her into the seamiest sides of patriarchal oppression; here Anne Brontë castigates the marriage laws of her day, seeming indeed to criticize “the husband’s privilege within the framework of marriage.”

Gail Cunningham points out that, “the Infants’ Custody Act was passed in 1839, granting non-adulterous wives the privilege of retaining the children of a broken marriage, provided they were under seven years old” (5). One might therefore conclude that Anne Brontë had had to set the action of her story in the Regency period, before the passage of this Act, in order to portray the tribulations of an illegally decamped wife—and that, therefore, the novel represents no agitation for reform. However, even after 1839 the husband was required to give his consent to the separation, and that Huntingdon emphatically refuses to do. Hazel Martin sums up the bleak hopelessness of the unhappily married woman:

If the husband was a wastrel, bore or sadist, she was irrevocably bound to him for life. The Victorian marriage contract offered no escape from the “better” or the

“worse”—except death! Even after the revision of the divorce laws of 1857-58, separation was extraordinarily difficult and costly. (27)

There can be no doubt that Anne Brontë felt the stinging injustice of such a fate—an injustice inflicted not only upon the woman but also upon her children. Yet there is never any soapbox ranting, never any editorializing. She lets Helen’s story speak its own truths. Ultimately, Anne Brontë probably agreed with Dickens that, if real change were to come, it must be a change of heart: take care of the spirit and the laws will look after themselves. Once both husband and wife understand that their first duty is to please God, everything else will fall into place; they *cannot* fail in marriage. Anne is not naïve. She knows that society resists change and that the best legislation in the world can never prevent the exercise of malice by those who do not obey the higher law. She campaigns on both fronts.

Part II

Agnes Grey

Chapter 1

Home Improvements

At the heart of *Agnes Grey* lies the concept of home. “Home,” for Agnes, signifies the ability to live with complete integrity: to integrate her love of God and the natural world with domestic happiness, useful work, and the life of the mind. The story of Agnes Grey is not, as Eagleton would have it, one in which she merely “re-enacts her parents’ settlement [and] returns to spiritual base” (128). Rather, she is rewarded for her courage, high principles and persistence by a new home in which she can use these qualities more effectively. However, she cannot bring about this happy state of affairs through her own direct efforts. Just as it is a man, her father, who breaks the integrity of her childhood home through adherence to perverse values, it is a man, Weston, who raises her to a higher and more complete domestic joy through the pragmatic exercise of correct ones. Agnes herself remains largely powerless. Until rescued by Weston she must languish in exile, first as the

exploited tutor of moral idiots, then as the neurasthenic instructress who cannot tell her love. Her virtues and principles are Weston's own; her understanding of human nature at least equals his. Yet, because she is a woman and he a man, Victorian society will not permit her to act independently to fulfil herself in work and in love. She labours in silence and obscurity. Agnes can only endure and wait for Weston to restore her to a genuine home. In marrying him she exchanges a childish dependence upon her mother—and the possibility of renewed dependence upon immoral exploiters—for dependence upon one loving and moral man. Agnes and Anne Brontë view this outcome as the best of all possible worlds.

The closely-knit and loving Grey ménage seems at first the very type of familial contentment. The conflict surrounding the supposed *mésalliance* of the parson and the squire's daughter appears only to have strengthened the couple's commitment. But Agnes begins to hint at flaws that presage trouble. The daughters, Mary and Agnes, have been "brought up in the strictest seclusion" (4). They have little experience of the more distressing aspects of human nature, and consequently lack the understanding to deal with them. Then, Agnes's mother has neglected to instruct her in household management, because "whatever was the business at hand, she was apt to think that no one could do it so well as herself" (8). Most critically, Mr. Grey, despite his wife's constant professions of satisfaction, cannot gracefully accept the material sacrifices she has made to become his wife, and concocts "endless schemes for the augmentation of his little fortune" (4) — ostensibly to provide

more handsomely for his family.

The actions of Mr. and Mrs. Grey are disturbingly self-serving. Both act to consolidate and augment the power exercised in their respective spheres—spheres rigidly determined by gender. Alice Grey may relish her rôle of bustling goodwife all the more because it is one she has chosen, but in her pride in her own competence she undermines Agnes's self-esteem and equips her inadequately for her presumed future career of wife. The damage is limited, however, because as a wife her power to work real mischief is circumscribed. Executive power resides in the husband, and Richard Grey hazards the family fortunes at sea, losing everything.

In investing his money, Grey is trying to strengthen his puissance as provider and head of the household. He cannot leave well enough alone because he feels he must always prove himself to his wife. Mrs. Grey actually enjoys her "fallen" status in society for the very reason that she can be useful. Her past life of luxury, with its "carriage and . . . lady's-maid" (3), she represents to her children as a silly irrelevance in comparison with the love of a good man. As a cleric's wife the hard-working Mrs. Grey can make a real difference in the world. By marrying Richard she has indeed made a splendid social and spiritual statement—but he regards this essentially moral act as giving her a kind of unspoken superiority in the relationship.

Grey's moral sense has been cankered by the patriarchal equation of money with power. He perceives that in marrying Alice he has failed in his rôle, becoming in essence an "anti-provider" because he has "deprived" her of material benefits.

The fact that Mrs. Grey¹ dismisses these benefits as irrelevant can only gall him further because, in effect, she has “emasculated” him by denigrating his very means of achieving power. Her renunciation of the ironically described “good life” erodes the foundations of the patriarchal equation. Love, of course, is the real endowment a couple brings to a marriage; it empowers both in the giving and the taking. That Richard Grey rejects this mutual empowerment in favour of a materialistic path to greater personal power reveals a sad incapacity for genuine love. His wish to grow rich reflects not his concern for his family, who lack for nothing needful, but his own pride.

His gamble lost, Grey retreats into the self-indulgence of grief and despair, emerging as a kind of anti-Vicar of Wakefield. Put to the test, his love for his family cannot compete with the demands of his own ego. He betrays them. Mrs. Grey’s inevitable reaction, after a very human interval of sober assessment, is to become still more relentlessly cheerful and efficient—which depresses Grey further. His wife and daughters still love and esteem him, but he believes he has lost all moral authority. He abdicates his position of head of the household, becoming effectively his wife’s child and a drain on the family’s fiscal and emotional resources. The ominous possibility exists that he is punishing his wife for “usurping” his rôle of family head—even though he himself has forced this function upon her. Though the family is now very poor and meals are usually skimpy, Mrs. Grey and her daughters still cater to the fallen patriarch. His favourite dishes must still be prepared, and

Agnes expends her energies to “amuse him with singing his favourite songs” (42). Their deference to him would be appropriate had he retained his proper position, but now it smacks of the need to humour him. He knows it, and degenerates further.

In reaching for greater personal power, Richard Grey plunges his whole family into the powerlessness of poverty. Agnes will shortly come to understand the bitter totality of that powerlessness. Employment cannot be provided for family retainers, and loved and helpless dependants cannot be succoured: the faithful old pony must be sold, just as Agnes’s canine friend Snap will be taken from her. The futures of Mary and Agnes seem forfeit to the need for income. Lacking dowries, they will experience difficulty in finding mates, and cannot remain at home as a drain on the family coffers. Addressing her husband’s concerns about the absence of marriage portions, Mrs. Grey replies blithely, “It’s no matter whether they get married or not: we can devise a thousand honest ways of making a livelihood” (42). But it does matter. Mrs. Grey, the happily married mother, has apparently forgotten that her daughters might like to experience love and motherhood too. And these “thousand honest ways” are unlikely to prove very materially and emotionally fulfilling. Elizabeth Hardwick comments, “In the novels of Charlotte and Anne there is a firm grasp of social pressures and forces: they understand from their own experiences that opportunities for independence were likely to be crushing in other ways to the essential spirit and the sense of self” (6–7). The options open to the genteelly impoverished Victorian spinster were few and uninviting: she

could become a governess, a companion, or (if lucky) a teacher, or she could make her own home a sweat-shop by hand-colouring Valentines, crocheting doilies or manufacturing other such items for piece-work wages. Small wonder that women looked to matrimony for the answer to their dilemma.

Alice Grey errs in the very kindness she accords her husband, a kindness which is essentially patronizing. Richard Grey is never blamed, never reminded of his responsibilities. He needs to be told to snap out of it and to persevere until the debts are paid and the family has retrenched, so that his daughters *will* stand a chance of happiness. Perversely, Grey interprets her efficiency and high spirits as a constant reproach to his depressive impotence. When his strength is most needed to restore family morale and fortune, he—no less than Arthur Huntingdon in *Tenant*—literally indulges himself to death. As a result, his family suffers further grief and debilitation. Richard Grey allows himself to be killed by the very thing his marriage stood to repudiate: the inherent divisiveness of class and wealth. In Victorian society a woman can achieve power over a man only if she belongs to a socially—and therefore materially—superior class. Ultimately Grey reveals himself to have subscribed to this definition of superiority, though his wife soundly rejects it. He fails when he plays by these rules, and his masculine pride cannot withstand the blow.

Before Grey's fall, childhood in the parsonage on the moors is represented by Agnes as nearly Edenic: it combines with perfect integrity love of God, of nature,

of the family. Agnes is a joyful pantheist—in the least exacting sense of one who perceives the omnipresence of God in the natural world—at home in the earthly beauty which promises the heavenly home to come. There is nothing lacking for the young Agnes but the satisfaction of useful work. But as Agnes reaches maturity, the snake stirs in Eden. Her father succumbs to the temptation of false patriarchal values, with the immediate consequence that she becomes an exile, earning her living by the sweat of her brow—quite literally, given the pugilism of Master Bloomfield and the passive resistance tactics of his sister Mary Ann. Agnes goes to some pains to reassure the reader of her enthusiasm in this independent venture, but, with the sad hindsight of the mature narrator, her excited determination to give satisfaction to employer, family and self is perceived as so much youthful naïveté. In the two hostile “homes” of her employers no good work can be done because they will not permit it. They see no benefit in their children becoming pious, courteous and reflective; these are traits of inferior classes, cultivated in the absence of wealth and power to ensure patronage from their superiors. There is no integrity, and Agnes begins to observe her own dis-integration. The happy pantheist toughens into a silent and stoical Puritan. “Home” becomes a childhood seemingly lost forever.

“An alien among strangers” (51), Agnes finds herself in a looking-glass world of inverted values, where she must confront, in the words of Anne Brontë’s “birthday note,” “some very unpleasant and undreamt-of experience of human nature” (Spark 122). Here, the virtuous are overruled by the vicious. Society’s leaders reveal

themselves as inferior to the poorest cottager in principles, sensibilities and even basic manners. Governesses are dominated by their charges, suffering psychological and even physical persecution. Religion becomes a vehicle for ostentatious display, for entrenching the rights of the privileged and cowing the poor. Love plays no part in marriage; rather, marriages are contracted for the hardest mercenary and social reasons, and the end of education for young ladies is the attainment of such superficial accomplishments as will attract the kind of rich and titled idlers who admire such froth. All parental feeling is perverted, to the extent that a new mother can speak of her baby and her poodle in the same breath—and evince marked partiality for the dog because it cannot be considered a rival. In short, it is a society of vampires, feeding upon the poor and each other. Nobody works. Everyone seems unhappy.

Children learn from the example of their parents, and thus the upper-class children of *Agnes Grey* are doomed to repeat their seniors' futile, selfish lives and in turn to generate more such monsters. That they *are* monsters—unnatural, grotesque creatures—is illustrated best by six-year-old Mary Ann's utter indifference to the presence or absence of affection. Before taking up her duties with the Bloomfields, Agnes convinces herself, "the clear remembrance of my own thoughts in early childhood would be a surer guide than the instructions of the most mature advisor" (10). In other words, she ingenuously models all children on memories of her own childhood self, and therefore "could not imagine a more afflictive punish-

ment than for my mother to refuse to kiss me at night" (26). In Mary Ann she must confront a disturbingly different order of being. The little girl, like her parents and siblings and like every wealthy child or adult in the book, cannot be morally educated because she perceives no use for such an education. In her pampered social position she can satisfy her immediate wants by sheer force of will alone, without respecting others and apparently without the need to be genuinely respected. The hired inferior Agnes cannot, therefore, wield even this most basic tool of moral suasion. Love or even affection is, in this context, a nonsense.

Mary Ann and the others devote their energies to ego gratification, then, to the single-minded determination to dominate for the sake of dominating. Agnes demonstrates that the will to such morally hollow power is completely perverse: to gain her objective of avoiding lessons, Mary Ann lies for tedious hours on the schoolroom floor, and thus misses the chance to play outside; Mr. Bloomfield's petty tirades at the dinner table, staged to demonstrate his domination of wife and servants, only ensure him a miserable meal and the unspoken contempt of his dependants; Rosalie devotes her young life to the gratification of her vanity and finds herself the neglected prisoner of a detestable roué. Materially unassailable and superficially respected, none of them for a moment feels the need to consider the wants and pleasures of others—and so they live their lives chillingly alone. The implications are dire for their own happiness and for the wellbeing of the society they dominate.

It should be understood that Anne Brontë is no leveller. She seems never to have departed from the passionate High Toryism which held sway in the Haworth parsonage, and nowhere in her work does she call for abolition of the social hierarchy. Somewhat ingenuously, Anne identifies the problem as spiritual, not social. She has been characterized by many critics as a quintessentially eighteenth-century writer (her insistence on benevolence as the pre-eminent Christian duty allies her with Goldsmith and Fielding), and perhaps her failure to criticize the *institution* of class hierarchy derives from an attachment to "the country-house ideal" of that era. Championing the sentiment of *noblesse oblige*, Pope and others apotheosized the good squire who cares for his lands and tenants and makes of his well-ordered home a sanctuary of hospitality and culture.

The Bloomfields, the Murrays, the Ashbys and their ilk represent the antithesis of this ideal. Neither Anne Brontë nor Agnes questions their right to their lofty stations, but both deplore the use made of privilege. *Agnes Grey* was written in part as a sharp reminder to the upper classes that privilege exercised without responsibilities fulfilled debilitates every stratum of society. Anne never reaches the conclusion that great wealth can be corrupting in itself. She appears to feel that wealth and virtue can co-exist (witness Helen Huntingdon) if the possessor has been properly educated to administer that wealth for the good of oneself and one's dependants.

It is her condition of profound loneliness, coupled with an inchoate awareness

of her precarious spiritual state, that make Rosalie Murray perhaps the most interesting character in the novel. Among her class she alone is portrayed as capable of genuine affection and a degree of moral sense, and more than any other she invites our pity. At exactly the same time, however—and here Anne Brontë's characterization is superb—the reader despises the wilfully deluded self-interest which leads her to exploit others for her own transient gratification.

The conflicting impulses of Rosalie's personality find their most telling expression in her letter to Agnes. It is at once a desperate plea and an imperious command, a troubled confession of moral frailties and a defiantly cynical assertion of ego. The letter, and Rosalie's latter dealings with Agnes in general, are characterized by pithy self-analysis immediately vitiated by flippancy. Thus:

‘you shall bring [my baby] up in the way it should go, and make a better woman of it than its mamma. And you shall see my poodle, too . . . you shall see my new home—the splendid house and grounds I used to covet so greatly. Alas! How far the promise of anticipation exceeds the pleasure of possession! There's a fine sentiment! I assure you I am becoming quite a grave old matron: pray come, if it be only to witness the wonderful change.’ (138)

Similarly, the sincerity of Rosalie's expressed sentiments is undercut by her sub-

sequent behaviour. She begs Agnes to come "in mercy to" her (138), and then neglects her disgracefully once she is at Ashby Park. Wretched as she is, Rosalie is unwilling to put herself in Agnes's power (as Rosalie would see it) by abandoning her cynicism and egotism and confessing her obvious need for love and advice. The reader can only conclude with Agnes that Rosalie's is a hopeless case and leave her to her own desperate devices.

In a novel of contrasts, which pits the powerful against the powerless, true values against false, and loving union against self-seeking alienation, Rosalie serves as Agnes's pre-eminent foil. The movement of the plot for Agnes is from limited power through utter impotence to full empowerment and happiness; for Rosalie, from limited power through the deceptively successful exercise of a specific kind of power, to powerlessness and debilitation. One finds irresistible parallels with the story of Cinderella. Good, hardworking Agnes sits among the metaphorical cinders of Horton Lodge, while the (morally) ugly sisters Matilda and Rosalie exploit and abuse her. Though the governess "shall not be present at the ball" (60), the egregious egotist Rosalie rubs Agnes's nose in the opulence of the preparations. But the prince rescues Agnes and Rosalie gets the booby prize of Sir Thomas Ashby. Ultimately it is Rosalie who must languish among the ashes of her pride and power in Ashby Park.

Again and again, Rosalie's actions prefigure those of Arthur Huntingdon. Their particular circumstances differ only because he is a man and she is a woman.

The besetting sin of each is deemed to be "thoughtlessness," assessed by Weston as "no trifling fault to be sure, since it renders the possessor liable to almost every other, and exposes him to so many temptations" (123). When Agnes first meets Rosalie her charge is "lively, light-hearted, and could be very agreeable with those who did not cross her will," but exhibits a "sad want of principle" because "she had not been taught to moderate her desires, to control her temper or bridle her will, or to sacrifice her own pleasure for the good of others" (52). Helen Huntingdon will offer an almost identical assessment of her young husband. Anne Brontë is not so heavy-handed as to wreak on Rosalie the kind of vengeance meted out to Huntingdon. Rosalie lacks opportunities for the dissipation which kills him, of course, even should she desire it. More importantly, the injuries she inflicts on Agnes—humiliation and the anguish aroused by the attempted Weston "fix"—are of a different order from Huntingdon's persecutions. Then, too, once Agnes has removed herself from her pupil's contaminating influence, she can forgive the younger woman. But, when we last see Rosalie, she may well be going the way of Lady Lowborough: bored, uninterested in motherhood and able to find satisfaction only in coquetry and conquests, she has resumed the old flirtation with Harry Meltham (142).

Rosalie can thrive only when she is being admired, and she is admired for all the wrong reasons. Throughout *Agnes Grey* it is made very clear that defective moral and intellectual education is to blame for the bad marriages and sordid fates

awaiting the children of the “privileged” classes. Mrs. Murray’s “watchful, anxious care” (112) directs itself not towards her daughter’s wellbeing but her “prospects”: in other words, the cementing or upgrading of the family’s social status. In chiding Agnes she bemoans Rosalie’s habit of wandering along the lanes “like some poor neglected girl that has no park to walk in, and no friends to take care of her” (91). But Rosalie *is* neglected, and her friends are false. Vulnerably alone in the world, she dimly perceives that she has one friend who wishes her well: Agnes. Over and over, Rosalie acknowledges Agnes’s superior moral worth; over and over, she fails to make use of Agnes’s lessons and precepts. The reason is obvious. She does not feel she needs to, at least not until the gate of matrimony slams shut behind her. Agnes may be the moral wonder of the world, but her pupils can observe no benefits accruing to her virtue.

Rosalie, on the other hand, flaunts a train of glittering “successes.” There is nothing at all to prompt changes in her behaviour—other than a developed moral sense, which she does not possess—because her schemes and deceits represent the socially sanctioned avenue to marriage. Released from the schoolroom she bursts upon Society, coquettes furiously for a few brief months—then finds herself mewed up in the country. The flirt who pretends admiration and affection to enslave men discovers to her amazement that she has been hoist with her own petard: “I thought he adored me, and would let me have my own way: he did pretend to do so at first, but now he does not care a bit about me” (146). She has been as woefully befooled

as ever she duped the pretentious Hatfield, and now she confronts the reality of patriarchy. A woman's power, she discovers, is illusory and ephemeral, a sop to her vanity hiding a malicious trick. Now that Sir Thomas has gained secure possession of her person—and her money—he can control her utterly. Rosalie is outraged. “He might do as he pleased, if I might only be free to amuse myself and to stay in London, or have a few friends down here: but he *will do* as he pleases, and I must be a prisoner and a slave” (146).

One may smile at the notion of idle Lady Ashby becoming a “slave”—after all, desultory stabs at embroidery can hardly be classified as work, let alone slavery—until one realizes that she probably alludes to sexual slavery. The body she has used as her ultimate instrument of power becomes the means of her total subjection. She cannot legally refuse her husband, and he can colonize her body with pregnancies she does not want. Ashby's appearance is singularly unprepossessing: “tall, thin, and wasted, with a slight stoop in the shoulders, a pale face, but somewhat blotchy, and disagreeably red about the eyelids, plain features, and a general appearance of languor and flatness, relieved by a sinister expression in the mouth and the dull, soulless eyes” (146). Sexual congress with this Dracula prototype must disgust Rosalie—and worse. Through the device of the sickly infant, Anne Brontë may be hinting that Ashby—and therefore his wife—is syphilitic. There is no reason to suppose that such an infamous rake would not be infected. Whether physically or just morally rotten, the union of Rosalie and Ashby is a union

of master and slave where no love can exist. Sex in this context must inevitably repulse and degrade. Children of this union, if not physiologically sick at birth, will become morally so in time.

The full implications of the double standard apparently occur to Rosalie for the first time: "And then he must needs have me down in the country, to lead the life of a nun, lest I should dishonour him or bring him to ruin; as if he had not been ten times worse every way, with his betting book, and his gaming-table, and his opera-girls, and his Lady This and Mrs. That . . ." (147). If Rosalie is an Arthur Huntingdon, she also experiences the rage and mortification of a Helen Huntingdon. Rakes do *not* reform after marriage because they marry chiefly for money to pursue their debauchery. Rosalie will be "used up," just as she used up Hatfield.

Rosalie has acquired the real estate she coveted, but not a real home, and her deluded teenaged optimism has been replaced by nothing that can sustain her. Her self-imposed sentence can be commuted only through her husband's death, or made more bearable by the dangerous distraction of adultery. Indeed, Rosalie's whole life appears as a series of distractions. "Her intellect, at best, [is] somewhat shallow" (52-3), and the only talents she possesses are those geared to entrapping a husband. When she acquires one, she has simply nothing left to do and no resources to fall back on. Useless for Agnes to suggest that she devote herself to improving her vicious husband and succouring her delicate baby when society has encouraged her to think only of herself. This, it may be argued, is the only power remaining

to Rosalie—and a loftier power than any she has used heretofore—but it involves a degree of personal denial, forethought and perseverance inconceivable to her. It is far more likely that she will channel her not inconsiderable energies into revenging herself upon her husband and his mother—thus putting herself in further social and spiritual peril. The tactics used to win a husband, then, tactics of self-interest and deceit, are precisely those which will ensure an unhappy, dis-integrated family.

Agnes's tenure at Horton sees the steady diminution of her power and self-esteem and the ascendancy of Rosalie's. When Agnes obeys Rosalie's summons to Ashby Park, however, they are on a curiously equal footing. Precisely because Lady Ashby has got her man and Agnes has not, both are acutely miserable and almost equally powerless in their respective spheres. Both live effectively as prisoners, one by force of physical restraint and one bound by the demands of duty, Rosalie a bird in a gilded cage and Agnes regressed to the narrow bourne of parental control. Agnes's life as teacher in her kindly mother's new school may be a distinct improvement over the horrors of governessing, but she has lost the precious sense of independence which consoled her through those horrors. Her new home cannot fulfil her needs. Weston exists in the world, and Agnes can no longer settle for a spinster's life dominated in every aspect by Mrs. Grey. Neither is Rosalie mistress in her own house. The mother-in-law she invited to stay on to take charge has done her job only too well, and for the first time Rosalie is shorn of influence. The pair can hardly be termed sisters under the skin, but Agnes could justifiably cry with Rosalie, "It is

too bad to feel life, health, and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed . . . !" (147). Agnes has striven for years to better her lot by hard work and self-denial, and Rosalie has indulged herself all along the primrose path—but they are equally debilitated. Society evinces no interest in Agnes nor in any effort she may make for its betterment. Her poverty, her sex, and her spinster status all brand her a failure and render hers a powerless voice.

It is the moral anarchy of the Murrays' world, her own inability to effect change, and her desperate loneliness which enervate and almost defeat Agnes. In seeking the power which comes with independence she loses the empowerment of a sense of identity and integration; the bid for self-esteem results in the loss of self-esteem. Her spirit is very nearly crushed, or worse, warped:

And I, as I could not make my young companions better, feared exceedingly that they would make me worse Already I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting; and I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all my better faculties be sunk, at last, beneath the baneful influence of such a mode of life.

(80)

Just as she begins to sink, providence ushers in the antidote to moral chaos:

Edward Weston. Ironically, Agnes first hears of him from Rosalie. He is introduced as an afterthought, an irrelevance attached to a smug account of Hatfield's infatuation, and dismissed in four insulting words: "insensate, ugly, stupid blockhead" (64). There could be no stronger hint to the reader that Weston is none of these things and that he will prove anything but incidental to Agnes's life.

It is vital to our understanding of Anne Brontë's idea of love that the first detailed descriptions of Weston concern not his physical appearance but his spirituality and pragmatic Christianity, and that her attraction to him is, initially, purely intellectual and spiritual. He appears to her first at church, and Agnes rejoices at "the evangelical truth of his doctrine, as well as the earnest simplicity of his manner, and the clearness and force of his style" (66). Just as the personalities and careers of Agnes and Rosalie are contrasted throughout the novel, so too are those of Weston and Hatfield, a worldly and self-obsessed cleric straight from the pages of Fielding. Weston is come that Agnes and the dispossessed among Hatfield's flock might have life, and have it more abundantly. Though disclaimers are made as to Weston's perfection, he is unmistakably Christ-like. The Wordsworthian peasant Nancy Brown links him with St. John, the apostle of love, and regales an approving Agnes with tales of his energetic charity. He ministers not only to the spiritual needs of the cottagers but to their material wants as well. If Squire Murray cannot see fit to supply a dying consumptive with a sack of coal, Mr. Weston will make good the lack from his curate's pittance.

Simply knowing that a being such as Weston is abroad and at work in the world begins to restore Agnes to her old sense of-self:

I thanked God that I had now something to think about
 Never, from month to month, from year to year,
 except during my brief intervals of rest at home, did
 I see one creature ... with whom I could enjoy a single
 moment of real social intercourse, or whose conversation
 was calculated to render me better, wiser, or happier
 than before; or who, as far as I could see, could be
 greatly benefited by mine. (79)

Her buoyant girlish spirits start to return. For too long she has fought a losing battle with her wayward pupils, pecking away at them with pursed-lipped admonitions and watching herself degenerate into a humourless old maid. Immediately upon returning from Nancy's cottage she responds to the intelligence that she is late—and the young ladies waiting—with a mischievously sarcastic “Climax of horror! actually waiting for their governess!!!” (81). Weston has already begun to empower her, to restore her lost sense of fun and liveliness of intellect.

This sense of renewal finds expression in an ecstatic reflection:

The gross vapours of earth were gathering around me,
 and closing in upon my inward heaven; and thus it was
 that Mr. Weston rose at length upon me, appearing like

the morning-star in my horizon, to save me from the fear
of utter darkness; and I rejoiced that I had now a subject
for contemplation that was above me, not beneath. (80)

Distilling with perfect economy the many elements of Agnes's attraction to Weston, this extraordinary passage merits careful attention.

Agnes's language is strikingly Biblical, the imageries of Old and New Testaments merging in allusions to the Creation and the Redemption. "The gross vapours of earth" recall pre-Creation chaos. Agnes's world is without form, and void; clouds obscure her vision and darkness threatens to cover the face of the earth. Then Weston's "morning-star" arises to shed the first tiny rays of light and hope, enabling Agnes to see clearly as far as the horizon. Horizons, of course, have always stood as metaphor for the questing of the human spirit, the desire of the soul and intellect to explore and discover, the promise of futurity and eternity. The coming of Weston signifies a new morning, a new world, new possibilities. Weston's eastern star also hints at the harbinger of the Redeemer, the Star of Bethlehem. Christian dualism characterizes Hell as darkness and Satan as its Prince, Heaven as the Kingdom of Light and Christ as its Lord. If Agnes has "trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded" (80), she may well believe that her soul stands in peril of "utter darkness."

The reader is unconvinced. Agnes may be depressed and angst-ridden, but

she gives no indication of moral backsliding. It would be preposterous to imagine her adopting the principles of a Rosalie Murray. If Agnes apprehended that she were in real danger, surely she would embrace the lesser of the two evils and return to her family. Anxious as she is to prove her worth and independence, she would not risk compromising her chances of salvation, and, judging by her anguished reflections, there seems little likelihood of her sliding unaware into the pit. The fear of spiritual contamination apparently arises from Anne Brontë's own experience as a governess, and she makes use of it not only in *Agnes Grey* but in *Tenant*. This preoccupation results quite possibly from the extreme moral scrupulousness and cripplingly overacute fear of hellfire which plagued her from her earliest years. By modern and even contemporary standards, Agnes, Helen, and Anne appear to be models of Christian rectitude.

Agnes is stronger than she knows, then, but she believes that Weston has come to lead her back to the light. Good as she is, long years of humiliating drudgery have demoralized her so deeply that she feels she can no longer rely on her own efforts, or even her own perceptions, to guide her successfully through life. Indeed, it would take a very unusual woman to remain stalwart and cheerful through Agnes's trials and mortifications. Patriarchal values, which devalue the poor spinster and her work, provide at the same time the answer to her dispossession: a strong and caring husband. Weston is a figure of tremendous authority. He possesses a degree of freedom and influence denied to Agnes by law and custom, and she can do no

better than ally herself with him and partake of the benefits of his benevolent power.

In believing herself a candidate for damnation, weary Agnes has confused her social dispossession with a spiritual one. The good cleric Weston, then, she regards primarily as her spiritual saviour when in fact she needs the temporal and social empowerment he can bestow.

The language of the passage is not only Biblical, but also firmly rooted in the natural world. For Agnes the pantheist there is no tension between the two. She experiences a sense of wholeness and divine presence when wandering the open moorlands of her childhood home, and the imagery of the passage suggests just such freedom, expansiveness and revelation. The use of such imagery to describe the advent of Weston identifies him with this glorious transcendence and suggests that he will be the agent of its restoration to Agnes.

Weston, then, partakes of the qualities of Creator and Redeemer, and he re-awakens Agnes's sense of affinity with a nurturing and mystical earth. From the outset, Agnes establishes herself almost as his votary: like a deity he is a fit "subject for contemplation," and meditating upon his essence and works brings Agnes happiness and hope.

Then, too, startling manifestations of sexuality in the passage complement and vivify the sense of spiritual awakening to hint at a kind of erotic epiphany. The morning-star is, after all, the planet Venus. The modern reader, perhaps too sensitive to the possibilities of *double entendre*, will smile at such phrases as

“my inward heaven,” “Mr. Weston rose at length upon me,” and “a subject for contemplation that was above me, not beneath,” and wonder about Anne Brontë’s artistic intentions. It is probably safe to say that the eroticism is unconscious, but that it informs the passage with another layer of meaning entirely appropriate to the sense of potency and awakening. It also suggests futurity: the gently understated conclusion to *Agnes Grey* implies no conclusion at all, but a new beginning and an intimation of immortality through the generation and proper education of children.

Agnes’s orientation to love is itself based on an intensely spiritual familial communion. Brontë biographers suggest reasons for this. Anne’s most powerful experience of love was probably that which she cherished for her sister Emily. “Inseparable in childhood, ‘like twins’ in girlhood as Ellen Nussey said, they had lived their creative lives together in secret” (Lane *v*). Edward Chitham argues persuasively (93) that the following passage from the poem “Self-Communion” concerns not Willy Weightman nor any other supposed love interest, but the powerfully mystical Emily:

Oh, I have known a wondrous joy
 In early friendship’s pure delight—
 A genial bliss that could not cloy—
 My sun by day, my moon by night. . .

I saw that they were sundered now,
 The trees that at the root were one:
 They yet might mingle leaf and bough,
 But still the stems might stand alone.

(Chitham, *Poems* 156–57)

Likewise, the poem “I Dreamt Last Night” describes a deep but entirely platonic love

between two boys, and the devotion of Alexander and Zenobia, young lovers from her juvenilia, seems devoid of an erotic element. The acuteness with which Agnes delineates her fear of maternal rejection (26), still so immediate for all its author's maturity of years, underscores this child-like attitude to love. Finally, though much has been conjectured about Anne Brontë's feelings for the curate Willy Weightman, it is impossible to know their nature. Anne simply leaves no record in her life or works of a perception of love which could be characterized as distinctly erotic.

Of her poems, Derek Stanford observes: "shared experience, sympathy, affection, and loyalty, together with the thought of raising children: these seem to constitute the 'notes' of love as Anne conceived it . . ." (183). The assessment rings true for the love of Agnes and Weston. Signs of physical passion are scarce and ambiguous. Agnes feels overcome with self-consciousness when Weston so much as smiles at her, but this owes much to Agnes's waning self-esteem and, pre-eminently, to the Victorian convention of shy maidenhood. At one point she reflects in consternation that her heart is "more bent upon the creature than the Creator" (107), but she resolves this apparent clash of loyalties by concluding that "it is not the man, it is his goodness that I love" (107). Today's reader may scoff at this as a most transparent rationalization, but the sincerity of Agnes Grey and Anne Brontë behind her shines through the pages. "Whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are honest and of good report, think on these things.' We do well to worship God in His works . . ." (107). In loving Weston

Agnes experiences the reassurance of wholeness and integrity. Weston, like nature, she perceives as a splendid work of God; just as there can be no dissonance in loving nature and loving God, there can be no tension between love of God and love of Weston.

By her own admission Agnes does become obsessed: "I could think of him day and night I should have made God my friend, and to do His will the pleasure and the business of my life; but faith was weak, and passion was too strong" (118). She confesses strong passion, then, but the *nature* of that passion is clarified by the opposition, in that same passage, of the idea of Weston to "the dull, grey, desolate prospect around: the joyless, hopeless, solitary path that lay before me." Stanford's words bear repeating: Weston represents to the lonely and alienated Agnes the blessings of "shared experience, sympathy, affection, and loyalty, together with the thought of raising children."

Anne Brontë longed for children, as many of her poems attest. In "Dreams," the love she imagines feeling for a child flows unselfconsciously into love for the child's imagined father:

While on my lonely couch I lie
 I seldom feel myself alone,
 For fancy fills my dreaming eye
 With scenes and pleasures of its own.
 Then I may cherish at my breast
 An infant's form beloved and fair,
 May smile, and soothe it into rest
 With all a mother's fondest care.

How sweet to feel its helpless form
 Depending thus on me alone;
 And while I hold it safe and warm,
 What bliss to think it is my own!

And glances then may meet my eyes
 That daylight never showed to me,
 What raptures in my bosom rise
 Those earnest looks of love to see!

To feel my hand so kindly pressed,
 To know myself beloved at last,
 To think my heart has found a rest,
 My life of solitude is past . . .

(Chitham, *Poems* 113)

In Anne Brontë's mind the two loves are inseparable: the love of a man and woman results in the love of a child, and the love of a child strengthens the love between a man and a woman. Maternity is the necessary and sanctified issue of the erotic impulse—or it should be. In *Agnes Grey* the reader sees exhaustive evidence of perverted maternity and its effect upon society. The union of Agnes and Weston will produce children of light to counteract the deeds of the children of darkness. At the end of her life Agnes the mother will be able to reflect with satisfaction that she has, in the memorable words of Patrick White, “shot her . . . arrows at the face of darkness, and halted it, and wherever her arrows stuck, she saw other arrows breed. And out of those arrows, others still would split off, from the straight white shaft” (549).

Agnes and Weston are almost identical in social background, character and sensibilities. Long before their union, both their common conviction that duty to God takes precedence over duty to self and their concern for proper education, for

the poor, and for animals make them firm allies in the moral struggle surrounding Horton Lodge. Both are hampered in their work, Weston by the misrule of the rector, Reverend Hatfield, and Agnes much more severely by her total lack of meaningful authority.

With tidy economy Anne Brontë has Agnes sum up Weston's demeanour, character and preoccupations:

He greeted me in his usual, quiet, unaffected way, stopped to inquire about the condition of the sick man and his family, and with a sort of unconscious, brotherly disregard to ceremony, took from my hand the book out of which I had been reading . . . made a few brief but sensible remarks, and restored it; then told me about some poor sufferer he had just been visiting, talked a little about Nancy Brown, made a few observations upon my little rough friend the terrier . . . and finally upon the beauty of the weather, and departed. (96)

Both Agnes and Weston cherish philanthropy, the life of the mind, and God's goodness bodied forth in nature. This is a match made in heaven. But in order that there *be* a match there must be a degree of physical attraction. Agnes does find Weston attractive; however, this attraction is never divorced from moral approbation. Only after a long account of his spiritual beauty are we granted an assessment

of Weston's appearance—in which his rather plain features take on weighty moral significance:

. . . the outline of his face would be pronounced too square for beauty, but to me it announced decision of character; his dark brown hair was not carefully curled like Mr. Hatfield's, but simply brushed aside over a broad white forehead; the eyebrows, I suppose, were too projecting, but from under those dark brows there gleamed an eye of singular power . . . there was character, too, in the mouth, something that bespoke a man of firm purpose and a habitual thinker . . . (80–81)

If Weston's features are flawed, they do not err on the side of foppishness, as do those of the contemptible Hatfield. The description is carefully, almost gleefully, unromantic, but leaves the undeniable impression of manliness, of a pleasingly muscular Christianity. Agnes concludes her appreciation

. . . convinced that he was a man of strong sense, firm faith, and ardent piety, but thoughtful and stern: and when I found that to his other good qualities was added that of true benevolence and gentle, considerate kindness, the discovery, perhaps, delighted me the more . . .
(81)

This, then, is Agnes's—and Anne's—ideal of masculinity. Anne Brontë imbues Weston with two kinds of strength to gladden Agnes's heart: the type idealized in the Old Testament, that of the pious, strong-minded social leader, and that which the New Testament prescribes, the forbearing loving-kindness of Christ. It is a recipe for perfection, and one that suggests a great deal of personal power. Agnes senses that the woman who hitches her wagon to Weston's star will know the integrity of a happy home and place within society.

The attraction between Agnes and Weston may be the kind identified by John Alan Lee as “storgic eros,” which is characterized by

an initial attraction to the partner which [is] distinguish-
able from erotic “first love” by the notable absence of
physical symptoms of excitement [and] surprisingly lack-
ing in anxiety or concern for early reciprocation of their
feelings. [There is] sufficient enjoyment in the act of
loving another person to be initially indifferent to re-
quital of love. If a lasting relationship develop[s], the
love . . . becomes dependent on reciprocal feeling from
the beloved (151)

This ambiguous kind of eros, then, subsumed into energies more directly connected with God's work, serves as a catalyst to unite two people whose fields of endeavour are essentially complementary. (Agnes's concern is secular education and Weston's

spiritual, though each feels quite at home in the other's domain.) Eros, provided it is thoroughly subservient to reason and piety, functions as God's way of making the whole greater than the sum of the parts. Weston, though efficacious in his work, can prove more so with a helpmeet like Agnes, and Agnes can put her principles to practical use for the first time.

Other manifestations of eros in *Agnes Grey* shed further light on the need for muted passion between men and women. For Rosalie Murray, the erotic impulse must also be subservient—but to her need for ego gratification and material aggrandizement. She responds erotically to Harry Meltham, “a pleasant fellow to flirt with: but *being* a younger son, that is all he is good for” (63–4). Eros is routinely co-opted and exploited by her class through the chicaneries of the marriage market, as mammas manoeuvre and scheme and dangle their dazzling daughters before the most likely “catch”—who in turn may quite shrewdly view the bait as prey. In the meantime, eros can be perverted quite handily for purposes of distraction and amusement.

The two abuses coincide in the shoddy proceedings of Rosalie's flirtation with the Reverend Hatfield. A perfect foil for the Agnes-Weston relationship, it serves to contrast self-interest with altruism, deceit with sincerity, and the hyperbolic trappings of “romance” with the slow growth of esteem and affection. The flirtation constitutes an exercise in mutual vampirism. Though charmed by Rosalie's person, Hatfield chiefly hopes to help himself to the Murray status and fortune; for her part,

Rosalie seeks a gratifying conquest while her mamma casts around, on her behalf, for more imposing prospects. Rosalie positively exults in the power she wields over Hatfield, taking great pride in her self-containment: “To think that I could be such a fool as to fall in *love*! It is quite beneath the dignity of a woman to do such a thing” (93–4). The reader will observe that it is not beneath Rosalie’s dignity to spend most of her waking hours scheming and lying to pull off another petty coup of coquetry, nor is it beneath her dignity to sell herself on the marriage market to the highest bidder.

Yet her power over the rector is not as absolute as she would wish it, and the limitations of a woman’s power should be more obvious to Rosalie from the outcome of their sordid little power struggle. Once the façade has been ripped away, Hatfield can threaten her with public exposure as an arrant flirt. It is not at all certain whether Rosalie will refrain from bruiting the story abroad as she has promised him, but the possibility of infamy and subsequent damage to her “prospects” does make her uneasy (99).

Rosalie perceives that “falling in love” will strip her of her personal power and make her a man’s slave. She naïvely intends to remain “completely [her] own mistress” (100). In the world of *Agnes Grey*, which posits union and integration as the greatest good, this sentiment represents not an admirable assertion of independence but a perverse will to alienation. Ironically, Rosalie will get the worst of both worlds: isolated and alienated in her new mansion, she will be mistress neither of

her grand house nor of her own person. Unloved and unloving, she lacks the personal power to make positive changes. She has in fact unwittingly anticipated her own fate: in the rather heavy-handed exchange concerning the marriage of Agnes's sister Mary, an appalled Rosalie expostulates, "how can she think of spending her life there, cooped up with that nasty old man; and *no* hope of change?" (61). Mary's husband is a thoroughly decent and kind man, of course; Ashby really *is* nasty, and Rosalie will be cooped up with or without him, with no hope of change.

Ultimately, Rosalie dwindles into an object of pity. Like a bathetic Faustus she pursues her career of petty powermongering, like Faustus alternately jubilant and desperate. She needs the help of Agnes—who epitomizes the wisdom Rosalie's mother should have had—but she cannot so far humble herself as to be guided to repentance and good sense by a social inferior. After the marriage ceremony she comes "flying into the schoolroom, . . . laughing, half in mirth and half in reckless desperation . . . 'It's done, my fate is sealed: there's no drawing back now'" (119). Perhaps she already suspects that she has just lost her entire base of personal power, her ability to "fix" or enslave men (106). Sir Thomas Ashby will ruthlessly "use her up," and her vain, obsessive manoeuvres—her life's work and her *raison d'être*—will be dismissed by Weston as "some little things that puzzled me" (132).

Rosalie feels that loving renders a woman powerless, but it would be facile to claim that the reverse obtains, that loving automatically empowers a woman. Anne Brontë's message is ambiguous. On the one hand, she would like us to believe that

agape—defined by Lee as “‘gift love’, without ulterior motives and with no strings attached . . . completely altruistic and deeply compassionate” (139) — represents the highest form of love and, as such, an empowerment of the soul. Agnes purports to feel a strongly agapic love for Weston. On the other hand, agape seems not to be adequate, for Agnes falters and declines without the physical presence of Weston and the reassurance (or, at least, the strengthening hope) that he cares for her. When Weston does reappear, then, he seems to do so as her rescuer. But then again, it is suggested that Agnes transcends the pain of solitude and apparent lovelessness and *empowers herself*—and that *because of this* she is rewarded with Weston and greater power.

The issue merits deeper exploration. Initially, Weston’s morning-star so lights Agnes’s darkness that she can rhapsodize,

I could indeed be happy in a house full of enemies if
I had but one friend, who truly, deeply and faithfully
loved me; and if that friend were you—though we might
be far apart,—seldom to hear from each other . . . it
would be too much happiness for me to dream of! (132)

She expresses horror at Rosalie’s avowal to “fix” Weston and insists that this horror springs from a selfless desire to protect him: “if he could but know her hollowness, her worthless, heartless frivolity, he would then be safe, and I should be—*almost* happy, though I might never see him more” (117). Almost, indeed. When Rosalie

reveals to Agnes her machinations regarding Weston, agape does not fly out the window, to be replaced by manic eros—the absence of recognizable eroticism has already been noted—but one can perceive in Agnes's behaviour motivations other than rarefied altruism.

The truly selfless course of action would be to inform Weston—subtly, if at all possible—of Rosalie's game. She runs the risk, however, of making herself look bad—of seeming to be a teller of tales out of school, or worse, scheming for her own ends, and thereby losing Weston's regard. And so she does nothing, preferring to let Weston run his own risks. Yet, she confesses that “about this time, I paid more attention to dress than ever I had done before” (110). She has reduced herself to competing on Rosalie's level, and the depression she feels at having sunk so low is augmented by the bitter knowledge that she *cannot* compete with Rosalie.

These are the actions of profound powerlessness. They represent the dilemma of the poor but moral woman in patriarchal society. She loves, but she cannot prosecute her love, lest she be thought unwomanly. She needs a secure place in society, but that place must be granted her by a man, and she is not willing to marry without love. Agape she knows to be spiritually the purest form of love, but it will not put a roof over her head or dinner on the table. It may seem to her that security can be achieved only through degradation, and social power gained only at the expense of spiritual power. Her future, then, depends upon the existence of a worthy man whom she can love, and who will love her in turn.

Weston is such a man, and, in thinking him prey to Rosalie and in worrying about her appearance, Agnes underestimates his perspicacity. Perhaps because of her experience with other men (her father has been the best of a very bad bunch, and his wrong-headedness is the cause of her painful exile) she does not expect the same insight and sterling principles of men that she demands of herself.

Then, too, she underestimates her own worth and attractions. Agnes's sad career as governess has profoundly shaken her belief that she can make an impression on the world. All she has to show for years of hard work and humiliation is a little—a very little—money in the bank. Instead of improving her pupils, she has been degraded by them. She may even consider her work actively immoral because she must instruct her pupils in the shallow “accomplishments” which attract bad husbands. At one point she acts almost as Rosalie's procuress, waiting outside a shop to inform her charge of interesting males in the offing (103). Although Agnes's vision clears enough on occasion for her to assert such sentiments as “though he knew it not, I was more worthy of his love than Rosalie Murray” (117), eventually she despairs and mocks herself, “how could you ever dream that he would write to *you?*” (135). Agnes has become a bundle of unfulfilled needs, and the only solace she can give herself is to deny her worthiness to have them fulfilled. Clearly, then, her regard for Weston eventually derives as much from her own need as from her wish to see him happy. The argument could be made that, under these circumstances, professions of agape may begin to resemble a species of sour grape: it can be

comforting to imagine oneself the dispenser of disinterested and disembodied love when one does not perceive a chance of the conjugal variety. It is possible that Agnes makes a virtue of necessity.

It is possible, but unlikely. Agnes seems genuinely to experience both agape and storgic eros, but the former is increasingly displaced by the latter when she convinces herself of Weston's indifference. She simply loses the strength for agape. Agnes is a warm young woman, not the ascetic she has striven so hard to become; she discovers that even agape cannot thrive in a vacuum, that she cannot be "*almost* happy, though I might never see him more" (117). She begins to exhibit the classic symptoms of unrequited love:

I was grown listless and desponding;—and if, indeed,
 he could never care for me, and I could never see him
 more—if I was forbidden to minister to his happiness—
 forbidden, for ever, to taste the joys of love, to bless and
 to be blessed—then, life must be a burden. (136)

One can compare the final two stanzas of Anne Brontë's "Dreams":

But then to wake and find it flown,
 The dream of happiness destroyed,
 To find myself unloved, alone,
 What tongue can speak the dreary void?
 A heart whence warm affections flow,
 Creator, thou hast given to me,
 And am I only thus to know
 How sweet the joys of love would be?

(Chitham, *Poems* 113)

But the plot of *Agnes Grey* revolves around the workings of a poetic, or divine, justice. Agnes and, to a lesser extent, Weston, will be blessed with their hearts' desires when they have undertaken courses of action which seem to result in the loss of any chance of their fulfilment. Just when things seem to be coming to a boil with Weston, Agnes's hopes are "dismally quenched by a letter" (125) from her mother. Agnes's father is dying, and she must return home. Similarly, when Mrs. Grey requires her services at the new school, Agnes takes leave of her position and of Weston, her love undeclared, with little hope of seeing him again. She hits bottom, and the reader anticipates the inevitable return of Weston to rescue her from neurasthenic spinsterhood. And yet, this is not quite the case. There are intimations—no more—that Agnes rescues herself. Agnes rises very early one morning, strides through the town to the sea, and ecstatically recreates herself with the aid of a mystically loving nature.

Refreshed, delighted, invigorated, I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue, and experiencing a sense of exhilaration to which I had been an entire stranger since the days of early youth. (150)

She would seem to have restored herself to perfect peace and integrity—and immediately thereafter Mr. Weston is perceived coming toward her. Perhaps she has passed the gruelling test of alienation and been found worthy of love and integra-

tion. Having made it on her own, she proves herself strong enough to be of-service in a socially useful marriage.

Anne Brontë's intentions are unclear: is the reader meant to understand this moment of solitary ecstasy as a temporary or a permanent transcendence? If the former, the best Agnes can apparently hope for is a life punctuated with enough similar moments of bliss that it will be made bearable. If the latter obtains, her life will apparently be happy with or without Weston—but she will be still happier, and more socially useful, if he bestows upon her the status of vicar's wife.

Mrs. Grey cannot make her daughter's life complete; Weston can. Agnes's ability to be useful, to perform good work, has increased enormously since the founding of the school, but she still lives essentially as a child in the house of her good-natured but domineering mother. With Weston, Agnes can achieve power and integration in society as wife, mother, clerical helpmeet and teacher. For the first time she will live life as a respected *adult* in charge of her own home.

From the first, Weston's actions promise integration and fulfilment for Agnes. On four occasions Anne Brontë makes use of natural symbolism to suggest this promise. In the first scene, Agnes trails behind her charges and "a couple of military fops" (86) as they ramble down a country lane. Only when the noisy young socialites are almost out of earshot can Agnes "hear the sweet song of the happy lark" and seek the solace of nurturing nature. Oppressed with "sad thoughts of early childhood, and yearnings for departed joys, or for a brighter future lot," she "long[s] intensely

for some familiar flower that might recall the woody dales or green hillsides of home”—the happy home of her childhood, forfeit to Mr. Grey’s financial and familial irresponsibility. Her longing is fulfilled: she descries “three lovely primroses, high up between the twisted roots of an oak.”

There is an intriguing and delightful possibility that Anne Brontë is making use of florigraphy, or the language of flowers, a botanical code wherein flowers, trees, leaves and fruits are assigned special meanings. Anne must have been familiar with the floral dictionaries which reached the height of their popularity in the eighteen forties and it is not unthinkable that she has used florigraphy here. According to Kate Greenaway’s *The Illuminated Language of Flowers*, the primrose represents “early youth.” Nothing could be more apposite. In her poem “Memory” Anne Brontë conjures up childhood ecstasy through the discovery of a primrose: “As in the days of infancy, / An opening primrose seemed to me / A source of strange delight” (Chitham, *Poems* 101). The sweet little yellow blossoms which symbolize Agnes’s lost childhood lie, significantly, almost beyond reach: “they grew so high above me that I tried in vain to gather one or two, to dream over and carry with me: I could not reach them unless I climbed the bank.” It will cost Agnes a great effort, then—but Weston can accomplish the goal with ease and grace: “‘Allow me to gather them for you, Miss Grey’ . . . Immediately the flowers were gathered, and in my hand.” Weston’s springtime gift connotes rejuvenation and fertility plucked from barrenness, and as such is the gift of a lover. But the offering also symbolizes

Weston's puissance as a father-figure. His is the power to restore the happiness and integrity shattered by Agnes's father. As they walk along the lane together, Agnes has almost to trot to keep up with him (87). The image suggests not lovers but father and child.

The meaning of the primroses gains greater significance in the light of two other "floral presentations." Upon arriving at her first posting as governess to the Bloomfield brats, Agnes finds herself hauled off to the children's garden by the odious little tyrant-in-training Master Tom. An infant Caligula given to misogyny and sadistic persecution of helpless animals, the ironically named Tom Bloomfield takes a purely proprietary interest in the garden. It is *his*, as the estate will be, and in bestowing a polyanthus upon his new governess he appears to be "conferring a prodigious favour" (17). The presentation of the flower becomes a symbol of class and sexual superiority—a pungent contrast with the love and esteem signified by Weston's primroses. It seems too delicious a coincidence that the polyanthus is a *cultivated* primrose (the "cultivation" or artificiality of high society is everywhere in *Agnes Grey* contrasted with the sweet simplicity of the natural world, and found wanting) and that it represents, according to the language of flowers, "pride of riches."

The conferral of a sprig of myrtle plays a central symbolic rôle in the relationship of Rosalie and Hatfield. The pair traduce its meaning, "love," as they battle for possession of the posy. "You cannot be so cruel as to deny me a favour

so easily granted, and yet so highly prized!' pleaded he, as ardently as if his life depended on it" (93). Thus besieged, Rosalie coyly grants it, sending Hatfield into feigned raptures. The sentiments are false, the implied promises are false, and the symbol of love reduced to a useful toy in a tawdry game.

The reader is not told the fate of the myrtle sprig; as likely as not, Hatfield throws it away. As for the primrose blossoms, Agnes presses them "between the leaves of my Bible—I have them still, and mean to keep them always" (90). The image is perfect. Preserving a love-gift in a book of religion, Agnes unites secular with spiritual love, and God's Word with divine nature. The dried petals are, like her love, "everlasting."

Weston makes Agnes a second gift of flowers, and again florigraphy helps the reader to a keener understanding of his feelings and intentions. Rosalie has contrived to keep Agnes from seeing Weston, with the result that they have not spoken for two months. After Rosalie's marriage they are again able to enjoy each other's company, and Weston brings her "a cluster of beautiful bluebells" (124), according to Greenaway the symbol of constancy. Much is made of Weston's stability and changelessness, both in character and in love: "Happily, I could perceive no shadow of a difference: he wore the same aspect as he had worn two months ago—voice, look, manner, all alike unchanged" (120). Agnes has reason to value this quality in light of her father's temperament, which was "neither tranquil nor cheerful by nature, [and] often unduly vexed" (4). Weston will never be subject to this kind of

temper; the family he establishes will never know the anxiety of dependence on an erratic provider.

The homely little flowers anticipate the more mystical and profound symbolism of nature in the reunion by the sea at sunrise and the proposal by the sea at sunset. In the first, as Agnes walks alone along the sands, Anne Brontë gives a vision of the morning of the world, a fresh new beginning for Agnes, full of unlimited possibilities. The reader recalls Weston's morning-star. All is "unspeakable purity and freshness," the waves "foaming and sparkling, as if wild with glee" (146). She can start over, and make her mark in a world which seems—unfamiliar perception!—to have been created just for her: "no living creature was visible besides myself. My footsteps were the first to press the firm, unbroken sands" (149–50).

It is appropriate that within this natural setting it is the devoted little terrier Snap, the intermediary between the natural and the human worlds, who immediately reunites Agnes and Weston. (Anne Brontë is fond of this device of the innocent and artless creature who serves to break the ice in socially or emotionally difficult situations. It will be remembered that Agnes and Weston have met through the unwitting agency of Nancy Brown's cat. In *Tenant* little Arthur introduces Gilbert to his mother and brings about their ultimate reunion.) Strolling with the rescued Snap by the breaking waves, Weston reinforces both his identity as a liberator and the sense of his affiliation with all that is kindly and powerful in divine and human nature.

Much is accomplished through the medium of Snap. Initially, he stands proxy for Weston. Snap having made himself known, Agnes delightedly catches him in her arms and “kisse[s] him repeatedly” (151). No doubt she would like to lavish the same treatment on Weston; in any case, Snap’s delight effects in Agnes a more relaxed and receptive frame of mind than she might normally have possessed under the circumstances. The “real” Agnes shines through her customary diffidence.

But Snap in many ways stands proxy for Agnes, too. Weston has demonstrated himself to be a great champion of persecuted creatures: Nancy’s cat he saves from the guns of Squire Murray and his gamekeeper; Snap, the “canine slave,” he rescues from the tender mercies of the rat-catcher; Agnes he retrieves from loneliness and disempowerment. As Weston takes his leave of Agnes, the following very pregnant exchange occurs:

‘I won’t offer to restore him to you, Miss Grey,’ said

Mr. Weston, ‘because I like him.’

‘Oh, I don’t want him,’ replied I, ‘now that he has a good master; I’m quite satisfied.’

‘You take it for granted that I *am* a good one, then?’

(153)

Weston has become distinctly proprietary, and in his parting question he seeks confirmation of his desirability as a husband. He can take good care of Snap, and he implies that he can take good care of Agnes now, too. Weston’s attitude

to Agnes is soundly patriarchal—but it is responsibly and positively patriarchal, and both Agnes and Anne Brontë approve. Anne seems troubled by the patriarchal *status quo* only when the male half of society fails to live up to its responsibilities. If, like Weston, a husband demonstrates an ability to care for his wife—materially and spiritually—Agnes and Anne are content to accord man and woman their separate spheres. Weston dominates, but as a kind of proxy for a kindly male God.

In their conversation he hints very heavily that Agnes will know no material deprivation as his wife: “I have a respectable house in a rather pleasant neighbourhood, and three hundred pounds a year” (152). There is nothing intrinsically wrong with prosperity, then. Weston’s new gold watch and comfortable home are rewards in the Old Testament tradition for putting the service of God before the acquisition of wealth. Weston demonstrates no contempt for worldly comforts, but neither has his past penury embarrassed him. As with his love of Agnes, he is rewarded for his basic indifference to prosperity by the grant of prosperity. The reader may recall Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* and its likely source of inspiration, the Book of Job.

It is only his pride or uncertainty which forbids a more obvious proposal of marriage than “I have nothing but solitude to complain of, and nothing but a companion to wish for I am rather particular in my notions of a companion for life” (152). When Weston finally proposes, he does so in a grand swell of pathetic fallacy. In absolute control of the situation, he enters the Grey household

and suggests to Agnes a walk on the cliffs: “The rain has laid the dust and cooled and cleared the air, and the prospect will be magnificent” (156). Their troubles behind them, everything looks literally rosy: as they climb the hill past the little church by the sea—Anne Brontë again uniting energetic human endeavour, the divine power of nature and the church of God on earth—the sunset glows upon them. The image suggests not decline but, taken with the sunrise of their reunion, a cycle and a completion, alpha and omega. It is here that Weston reveals the extent of his proprietary interest in Agnes. He has spoken to Mrs. Grey in advance of his broaching the subject of marriage with Agnes, and everything has been taken care of: “And so now I have overruled your objections on her account. Have you any other?” “No—none.” (157). At last, Agnes need not seek to hide her emotions. “He laid his hand on mine that rested on his arm: he must have felt it tremble—but it was no great matter now” (157). She has achieved integrity; she has come home.

The excruciating delicacy of feeling imbuing the reunion on the sands derives from the very genuine insecurity of both protagonists. Agnes informs us exhaustively of her own feelings, but we can only guess at Weston’s during the period of what Tom Winnifrith terms his “inexplicable neglect” (71). A short digression is necessary to defend Edward Weston. Undoubtedly it is inadequate for him to volunteer, by way of explanation, “You must have known that it was not my way to flatter and talk soft nonsense, or even to speak the admiration that I felt; and that a single word or glance of mine meant more than the honied phrases and fer-

vent protestations of most other men'" (157), and the implicit comparison of his courtship techniques with those of Hatfield and Ashby cannot, somehow, compensate Agnes for her long months of suffering. The reader feels that Anne Brontë could have devised a more credible explanation. And yet, it must be admitted that Agnes has been very little help. She so overdoes her rôle of patience on a monument that Weston may be forgiven for being unsure of her feelings. Pre-eminently, Weston's hesitancy owes everything to his extreme prudence. In contrast with the crass horse-trading of the upper-class marriage market, he goes to great lengths to ensure that marriage to Agnes will be based on compatibility and a mutual desire to work together for the glory of God. Repeatedly and unsubtly he catechizes Agnes on her suitability for wifehood, "evidently less bent upon communicating his own thoughts and predilections than on discovering [hers]" (105). But when Agnes takes her leave of him at Horton, she does so with a most unencouraging diffidence. *

However, if there is one quality which long-suffering Agnes surely requires in a husband, it is prudence. By the time Weston has decided to propose, he has

*Their mutual ability to locate each other after both have independently removed to the same part of England—too great a coincidence—strains credibility, and perhaps Anne Brontë has sacrificed too much to the image of Weston as the Good Shepherd seeking his little lost lamb. If he were genuinely interested in Agnes, surely he could have formulated a better plan of action than merely betaking himself to the sands on random occasions on the off chance of bumping into her. Perhaps we are meant to understand that Weston has left it all to Providence, and that their meeting confirms Heaven's will. This does not square with his very determined character, however, and this passage must be accounted an artistic failure.

proven his stability and reliability, and he is all confidence. Unlike Richard Grey he will feel no need to keep proving himself to his wife and thereby jeopardize the future of their family. Snap need not be sold, their children will not be forced into exile, and Agnes will not be left a grieving and penurious widow. There are great advantages in the match to both parties—on several occasions Weston speaks wistfully of a real home—but Agnes can be identified as the chief beneficiary. The balance of power is traditionally patriarchal: by marrying Agnes, Weston can raise her in her own esteem and the world's. Though Agnes appreciates her own worth at last—largely because Weston's love has thus empowered her—and though she knows her own excellence as a mate for him, she must feel gratitude to him for the rest of her life.

He is an excellent man, but perhaps Anne felt later that Agnes should not have had to rely on a man's goodwill for her physical, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing. She has all Weston's talents and virtues, but her femininity excludes her from exercising them outside the home. Edward Weston achieves success because he works hard and perseveres, but also because he is a man and a cleric: he can live according to his principles and thrive; Agnes cannot, but must endure until this power is granted by an intermediary, her husband.

The novel ends with Agnes enshrined forever in happiness, restored to the integrity of a better home. However, Anne Brontë may have been uncomfortable with the implications of the patriarchal power structure, with the reasons behind

Agnes's happiness. What, she seems to have wondered, would happen if there *were* no truly moral men to rescue helpless women; and what would be the effect on a pair of lovers if the power were the woman's to bestow? *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* explores just such a radical realignment of values.

Part III

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Chapter 2

The Governess-Wife

A child of nine or ten as frantic and ungovernable as these at six and seven would be a maniac. (*Agnes Grey*, 28)

Arthur placed himself beside poor Milicent, confidentially pushing his head into her face, and drawing in closer as she shrunk away from him Arthur's sole intention seemed to have been to produce some such disagreeable effects: he laughed immoderately on finding he had driven her away Hattersley tried cursing and swearing, but it would not do; he then took a number of books from the table beside him and threw them, one by one, at the object of his wrath, but Arthur

only laughed the more; and, finally, Hattersley rushed upon him in a frenzy, and, seizing him by the shoulders, gave him a violent shaking, under which he laughed and shrieked alarmingly. (*Tenant* 286 and 290-1)

In *Agnes Grey*, the heroine becomes governess to wealthy, spoiled, and immoral children. In *Tenant*, the heroine becomes governess to a wealthy, spoiled, and immoral husband. Helen Huntingdon finds herself married to a “frantic and ungovernable” man whose capacity for malice far exceeds that of “a child of nine or ten.” Because Anne Brontë had had experience of governessing but not of marriage, the abused wife Helen takes on the qualities of the abused governess Agnes. However, the characterization is curiously apposite, for the status of the governess in an uncongenial situation is not dissimilar to that of a woman locked into marriage with a moral and intellectual inferior. In many respects the wife’s lot is worse than that of the governess.

Helen Huntingdon is an Agnes Grey transmuted by the easy self-confidence of wealth and beauty and subjected to more grievous travail *because* of that confidence. Agnes remains essentially sinless, a thoroughgoing victim of patriarchal class society. Helen is much more culpable. In entering into their respective “situations” Helen and Agnes reveal similar motivations. The initial fillip for Agnes’s enterprise comes from her father’s financial miscarriage, of course, but her search for a post owes much to her own determination to perform useful work in the world. By instructing

others she hopes to win self-esteem and recognition as a responsible adult; she needs

to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mamma and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed. And then, how charming to be entrusted with the care and education of children! Whatever others said, I felt I was fully competent to the task To train the tender plants, and watch their buds unfolding day by day! (10)

Helen also itches for the chance to prove herself through improving another, but her self-confidence amounts to hubris:

‘My sense and principle are at [Huntingdon’s] service!
 I think I might have influence to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction
 If he has done amiss, I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue—
 God grant me success!’ (165-66 and 167)

God does not grant Helen success because she herself needs to be educated, to comprehend the limits of her power in a patriarchal world, to understand that an inherently noble nature need not fear destruction, and to realize that she cannot

usurp the redemptive power of the deity. Ironically, she perceives that Arthur Huntingdon's flaws stem largely from idleness—an absence of the satisfying work necessary to order one's days—but does not apprehend that her own downfall begins with a similar inactivity. “I wish he had something to do [she frets], some useful trade, or profession, or employment—anything to occupy his head or his hands for a few hours a day and give him something beside his own pleasure to think about” (238). But to what employment has Helen devoted her time? She has a great fund of energy and enormous quantities of goodwill, but nothing at all to do. She needs to test her powers and prove her efficacy. Removed to Staningley, with time heavy on her hands, Helen has nothing to think of but the charming and wayward Huntingdon. The devil finds work. Just as Agnes takes herself off to the Bloomfield estate to “teach the young idea how to shoot” (10), Helen confidently drafts plans for the reformation of Huntingdon. Mrs. Grey and Aunt Maxwell attempt to dampen the heroines' enthusiasms, to no avail. The older women—and society as a whole—are culpable, because they have provided no worthwhile outlets for their charges' energies. “‘But, my love, you have not learned to take care of yourself yet,’” objects Mrs. Grey, with irritating justification. Aunt Maxwell's greater acerbity reflects the greater threat to her niece's happiness: “‘Do you imagine your merry, thoughtless profligate would allow himself to be guided by a young girl like you?’” (165). But the young women are impelled by the desire to bring their influence to bear upon the world. They get their way; both suffer badly as a result, but Helen's trials are

worse because her motives spring more from pride than from ingenuousness.

It is the girls' irresponsible male guardians who are accorded the greater share of the blame. Richard Grey's wrong-headedness and consequent impoverishment have been discussed above. Uncle Maxwell not only introduces Helen to Huntingdon, whom he knows to be an up-and-coming rake, but also acts to obtain her distant father's consent to the match and overrules his wife's objections. Mrs. Maxwell's is the superior moral sense, but the force of patriarchal authority lies with him. Helen will experience just such derangement in her marriage to Huntingdon.

Tom Winnifrith grumbles that "Anne Brontë seems all too eager to blame misfortunes on men, and praise women for their courage in facing up to them" (71). The objection is unfair, for two reasons. First, Winnifrith somehow overlooks the obvious social realities of patriarchy: major decisions affecting a woman's life are very likely to be made by a man. The male will make these decisions wisely or unwisely, for good or for ill, but it is he who decides. The implications of this power structure for women and for society as a whole will be discussed at length in the following chapter. Second, Anne Brontë presents a variety of morally flawed women, ranging from the narrow-minded and spiteful gossips of Linden-Car, through the shallow society matrons of Wellwood and Horton, to that epitome of turpitude, Annabella Wilmot Lowborough. If these ladies do not cause real havoc and irreparable harm, it is not because they lack the will or the personal

capability. Rather, patriarchal society simply does not grant them the opportunity. Lady Lowborough inflicts the greatest damage because wealth and her husband's blindness allow her the greatest freedom. She brings Lord Lowborough to the verge of suicide, and Winnifrith should note that Anne Brontë praises the injured male for his courage in facing up to his misfortunes.

The strength of Helen's reforming zeal derives largely from unused energies, then, but it also owes something to the bleak marital possibilities advocated by her aunt and uncle.* Her uncle's favourite "prospect" is wealthy Mr. Wilmot, true descendant of the infamous libertine John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. Helen knows him to be beyond the pale, "a worthless old reprobate" (154) unredeemed by youth or physical charms. Of her aunt's choice, the aptly named Mr. Boarham, Helen archly observes, "'As a man, I love him so much, that I wish him a better wife than I—one as good as himself, or better—if you think that possible'" (156). Helen could prove her virtue with this redoubtable bore only by withstanding his interminable, patronizing lectures. So, Wilmot does not deserve her and Boarham does not need her—and neither does she deserve or need either of them. In contrast, Huntingdon seems a very likely candidate indeed. Her enthusiasm for him may be founded at least as much on infatuation as on her reforming vocation, but she perceives no tension between her "love" and her wish to reform him. Agape she contrives to merge seamlessly with eros.

*Similarly, Agnes evinces enthusiasm for the governessing life partly because the other options appear so very uninviting.

Like Agnes, Helen finds herself not the cherished guardian of a grateful acolyte, but the absolute dependant of an unruly, unpredictable and singularly resentful charge. It is as though Agnes Grey had married Tom Bloomfield. Helen is attracted by Arthur Huntingdon's very boyishness—his high spirits, cheeky irreverence, and the chestnut curls she so loves to rumple. How easy it is to equate these endearing child-like qualities with innocence and malleability! She seems temporarily to abandon her very orthodox belief in original sin, believing "like a starry-eyed follower of Rousseau" (Chitham, "Diverging Twins" 108) that he needs only the opportunity—which she will provide—"of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness" (190). But the Anne Brontë reader has already been introduced to that uniquely frightening entity, the evil child. Tom Bloomfield's sadistic propensities are only encouraged by his elders; they exist within him from birth. Education can make a great difference only if the child is taken in hand at a very early age. Tom is hardened in corruption at the ripe old age of seven. As for Huntingdon, Aunt Maxwell reminds Helen that he is "full ten years older than you," and sarcastically enquires "how is it that you are so beforehand in moral acquirements?" (165). Huntingdon has long ceased to be re-educable. He proves no more tractable than he is innocent. Initially he is content to beguile Helen with promises of better behaviour because he too is blind, seeing in Helen more of a "pretty hen-dove" (175) than a strong-willed woman of passionate integrity. Like most men of his era

and breeding, he has never been taught to take women seriously. However, it is not long before her constant admonitions begin to chafe, and Helen discovers to her dismay that he will not permit her to reform him. They are at loggerheads, locked into the rôles of determined governess and resentful, disobedient pupil. Like Agnes, Helen lacks any authority over her "charge," but she too must devote a great deal of energy to caring for him, amusing him, and contriving new (and futile) schemes for his improvement. Huntingdon sulks and throws tantrums when he encounters obstacles to his pleasure. No more than the Bloomfields or Murrays does he interest himself in intellectual attainments, and no more than Agnes can Helen make him do his "lessons." Books he declares to be "cursed trash" (225), and he resents Helen's enjoyment of reading because every moment she spends with a book is one in which she neglects him. Huntingdon can find only one use for a work of heavy literature: he hurls it at his dog, thus allying himself with Master Tom and John Reed and all the other anti-intellectual persecutors of helpless creatures who throng the pages of the Brontë *corpus*. As final proof of his intense childishness, he exhibits a perverse species of "sibling rivalry" when his own son is born. He cannot bear Helen to pay more attention to it than she accords him; occasionally he cannot tolerate *any* attention being paid to it:

'Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it As long as you have that ugly little crea-

ture to dote upon, you care not a farthing what becomes
of me.' (253, 254)

His egotism recalls the tyranny of Tom Bloomfield standing in "his" garden and proclaiming his pre-eminence over his younger siblings.

The same system which has produced Tom and Mary Ann Bloomfield and the Murray girls has cast up an Arthur Huntingdon. Helen cannot teach him anything because he sees no need to learn. His is the power, if not the glory. He can order his life as he pleases and disorder it as much as he likes. Only the governess-wife intrudes upon his enjoyment and she can be ignored or kept out of sight, and with her errant pupil in London, Helen can only fret at her inability to deliver him from evil.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that Helen's husband is not only her "charge" but also her "employer." The final word is his on any matter of household management. Helen experiences no greater success in appealing to Huntingdon as authority-figure than does Agnes in her subtler hints to her employers. Huntingdon will not listen, does not care, will not invest her with any authority or credibility—and blames her for everything that goes wrong.

Soon after Helen is married, she regrets it, but like Agnes she resolves to make a go of it. The self-esteem of both women is bound up in their new rôles, and, in any case, there appears to be little alternative. Her determination owes at least as much to her own resolution as to the law of the land, which in the 1820s forbade

a woman to leave her husband without his permission. Before meeting Huntingdon she has had nothing to do; after her marriage, she perceives that she has a great deal to do, but gradually realizes that she has no way of accomplishing it. However, she gains more impetus for tackling the hopeless task from the conviction that her husband's disgraceful behaviour reflects poorly upon her. He is, after all, her professed life's-work, and he is a disaster. Agnes endures endless reproof from the Bloomfield and Murray parents when their children show themselves ill-mannered and backward. Helen upbraids *herself* for her failure, and must identify more closely with her husband than Agnes with her pupils: "since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own I am debased, contaminated by the union, both in my own eyes, and in the actual truth" (273). Her humiliation is blazoned abroad in the person of her husband, and she must endure with patience the galling pity of Milicent, who feels herself comparatively lucky to be matched with the oafish Hattersley.

It appears, then, that Helen wishes to save Huntingdon not only because she fears desperately for his soul, but because her own sense of self-worth demands it. Never can Helen relinquish her sense of superiority. Just as Agnes can truthfully represent herself as "the only person in the house who steadily professed good principles, habitually spoke the truth, and generally endeavoured to make inclination bow to duty" (52), Helen resolves to make her unsatisfactory (not yet adulterous) spouse acknowledge her righteousness and come to heel. After their first quarrel

she is “determined he should make the first advances, or at least show some signs of an humble and contrite spirit, first; for, if I begin, it would only minister to his self-conceit, increase his arrogance, and quite destroy the lesson I wanted to give him” (224). Without doubt, her capitulation would indeed have this effect, and she demonstrates singular bravery in holding out for an apology. Anne Brontë suggests through the hapless Milicent Hattersley and others that it is too often the woman who apologizes when the man is at fault, not just for the sake of domestic peace but because she is by education less able to tolerate the withdrawal of affection. In the words of anonymous observers of married life, “the partner who cares less runs the show.” Helen cares desperately, and indeed it is Huntingdon who runs the show, but she has correctly identified their problem as a power struggle and sees no other way to proceed. She *is* right, she insists, and Huntingdon *must* listen to her.

It seems plain, long before Helen herself realizes it, that her cause is hopeless, that Huntingdon can only degenerate further. Anne Brontë and the reader pity her and understand the reasons behind her governessy approach, yet the self-consciously liturgical demand for “an humble and contrite spirit” and the implications of the words “the lesson I wanted to give” can only seem a trifle indigestible. Helen is forever calling her husband onto the carpet just as a headmistress would summon a recalcitrant schoolboy to the dreaded inner sanctum. And Huntingdon plays to perfection his part in the drama:

‘Well, I’m sorry for it,’ replied he, with more of sulk-

iness than contrition: 'what more would you have?'

'You are sorry that I saw you, no doubt,' I answered coldly.

'If you had not seen me,' he muttered, fixing his eyes on the carpet, 'it would have done no harm.' (247)

Both partners, then, acknowledge the wife's moral leadership and her superior claim to truly adult status, but one need not be an expert in Victorian social history nor a genius in gender sociopsychology to know that Huntingdon will not submit himself cheerfully to the moral tutoring of his teenaged wife. The more she reminds him of his failings, the more he desires to escape her company. It is a natural, if not laudable, human reaction. Today the feuding partners would reach an accommodation, or divorce. In the 1820s it was all too easy for the man, guilty or innocent, to duck the issue entirely, and Huntingdon quite characteristically does just that. His sense of violated masculine privilege, his unwillingness to come to terms with his grievous failings, and his wealth and consequent mobility combine to send him scuttling away from the source of his discomfort. His dissipations in London are at once balm to his injured ego, antidote to the restless boredom he experiences in the country, and a malicious punishment of Helen, root cause (he insists) of all his dissatisfactions. Anne and the reader disapprove strongly, yet understand too that there can be no other outcome of the power struggle.

Like Agnes, Helen experiences ambivalence in her dealings with her "charge."

His persecutions anger her, yet she feels real distress on his behalf. If he carries on like this, what will become of him, body and soul? His actions are not merely domestically disruptive and socially debilitating: they are literally damnable. Despicably, Huntingdon exploits her distress to punish her. What better revenge on this meddling woman who has tried to usurp his rightful male authority than to rub her nose in her impotence? Initially, he merely absents himself from her influence and lets her stew in anxiety. Later, when his fear and loathing of Helen have pushed him into blatant malice, he makes her powerlessness known to all by throwing open his home to the riotous boon companions of London infamy. The lunatics take over the asylum, and the would-be keeper can only look on helplessly. No more than Agnes does Helen have a real home. "Home" becomes an opulent house in which she broods, lonely and neglected, subject at any time to invasions by drunken revellers. She cannot protect herself, and she cannot shelter from corruption her genuinely innocent charge, little Arthur. Her husband, whose duty it is to protect her, deliberately leaves her vulnerable to insult and injury.

Huntingdon, then, confirms and advertises her failure by making himself as ostentatiously vicious and irresponsible as possible. Yet here the reader must confront a question which Anne Brontë lets simmer in the background: to what extent is Helen Huntingdon, the relentless governess, responsible for her husband's deterioration and death?

At first pass the question appears unfair; it suggests the sexist "blame the

victim” mentality. Helen, after all, seems devoted to Huntingdon, proves herself indefatigable in her quest for his amelioration, and suffers terribly for her very pains. Among detractors of the novel, however, it has not been uncommon to take a harsh view of Helen’s campaign. Françoise Basch tells the reader that “in 1903 one critic, exasperated by the exhibitionistic saintliness of Mrs. Huntingdon, indicts her for her severe and reproachful attitude and makes her responsible for her husband’s bad ways” (82).

Clearly, though, Arthur Huntingdon need not comport himself as he does. Although he behaves as irresponsibly as a child, he is demonstrably an adult. He knows better. Aunt Maxwell, as ever, comes to the point:

‘Mr. Huntingdon . . . is not without the common faculties of man: he is not so light-headed as to be irresponsible: his Maker has endowed him with reason and conscience as well as the rest of us; the Scriptures are open to him as well as to others;—and “If he hear not them, neither will he hear though one rose from the dead.”’ (191)

This is the nub of Helen’s—and Basch’s critic’s—mistake. She will not truly acknowledge in Huntingdon the common spiritual inheritance of free will. Because of her youth and inexperience, and because of her boredom and egotism, Helen believes that she can remake Huntingdon in her own image. This is massive hubris,

as culpable in the eyes of God as any sin of Huntingdon's. And *this* is why Helen's punishment is so severe. Only at the bitter end, when Huntingdon lies rotting physically and morally, can she admit to him, "No man can deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him'" (451).

Until her flight from Grassdale, Helen tries to play Pygmalion. The harder he resists her efforts at improvement, the more doggedly she persists—so the harder he resists. Anne Brontë suggests that Helen concocts a recipe for disaster. By insisting on her moral supremacy, Helen claims the right to govern her husband. But Huntingdon will not be governed, and he childishly asserts his independence of her by becoming as flamboyantly wicked as possible. Anne Brontë makes it very plain that this is his choice. The alternatives are obvious. But it is equally obvious to Helen that he reacts to her handwringing and pious lectures with fresh bouts of dissipation and abuse.

Huntingdon, like Mary Ann rolling on the schoolroom floor, is perverse. To confound his governess he will become ever more childish and irresponsible and finally destroy himself. His every malicious act recalls Mary Ann shrieking "with an air of vindictive satisfaction . . . 'Now then! *that's* for you!'"(25). Like this horrid little girl he needs to escape from his governess to prove his power over her. To that end he manifests "an incorrigible propensity to keep running into the nursery" (*Agnes Grey* 26)—the lunatic nursery of his London debauchery.

After a quarrel Helen frets, "I must not let him go to London, whatever

comes of it . . . he will run into all kinds of mischief, and I shall be the cause of it'” (227). Anne Brontë's use of the word “mischief” speaks volumes, both about Helen's naïveté and her attitude to her husband's behaviour. It connotes childish naughtiness, and Huntingdon's city activities—drinking, gambling, whoring, and possibly opium-taking—are not those of a child. Knowing that Helen regards him as a child, he sets out to prove otherwise by the most overtly “adult” course of action he can devise. But his use of it *is* childish, for he cannot control himself, surfeits, and dies. Huntingdon becomes a genuine psychiatric case, seeking love and approval where he most alienates it, wrecking his health and future in order to deny his wife's power over him. No more than the Bloomfields or Murrays does Huntingdon evince the genuine love of self which is self-esteem. He knows this, and his realization provides an unexpectedly touching glimpse into a sad and confused soul: to Helen's heartfelt wish that he could love himself, Huntingdon replies, “That would be hard indeed!”—and Helen reflects, “I don't know whether he fully understood my meaning, but he smiled—thoughtfully, and even sadly—a most unusual thing with him;—and then he closed his eyes and fell asleep” (238). Here as nowhere else does the reader understand the appeal of Huntingdon for Helen.

A short digression is necessary. It is important to realize that more than one character in the novel wishes to marry with the expressed desire of improving his or her partner. This scrupulous fairness emerges as a characteristic of Anne Brontë's didactic writing. In the pedantic Boarham the author gives us a subtle and perfect

foil for the earnest young Helen. He is an even more ridiculous figure than George Eliot's Casaubon, "walking up and down the drawing-room, humming snatches of tunes, and nibbling the end of his cane" (157). By way of a proposal, he patronizes her thus:

'Let me assure you, I shall not be severe to mark the faults and foibles of a young and ardent nature such as yours, and while I acknowledge them to myself, and even rebuke them with all a father's care, believe me, no youthful lover could be more tenderly indulgent towards the object of his affections, than I to you; and, on the other hand, let me hope that my more experienced years and graver habits of reflection will be no disparagement in your eyes' (157)

No deluded Dorothea, Helen turns him down flat—but her stated reason for refusal is significant. His "But you don't know me—you wish for a further acquaintance—a longer time to—" she interrupts with "No, I don't. I know you as well as I ever shall, and better than you know me, or you would never dream of uniting yourself to one so incongruous—so utterly unsuitable to you in every way" (158). She is right, of course—but she cannot see that her desire for a match with Huntingdon bears close resemblance to Boarham's desire for a union with her. Both she and Boarham assume superiority, the ability to ameliorate a spouse's

faults. Although we are left in little doubt of Helen's *genuine* moral supremacy, as contrasted with Boarham's complacent pedagogy, she has set herself up in startling opposition to the patriarchal construct of husband as the head of the wife. Boarham's attitude is socially sanctioned; hers is not.

Neither does she perceive the irony in her dismissing Boarham because their marriage would be "incongruous" and "utterly unsuitable." Her match with Huntingdon will prove just that. Huntingdon should be the one to speak of incongruity, but it is useless to expect insight from that quarter. It is left to Aunt Maxwell to represent to Helen his real character, but, as the champion of Boarham, she has forfeited credibility and influence.

It must be noted, however, that Huntingdon does not come to Helen a monster compounded of equal parts of vice and deceit. Neither can he be said to be merely feckless, of course. No doubt there is some truth behind "that story about his intrigue with a married lady" (166), and his part in the corruption of Lowborough seems quite sinister. But, before their marriage at least, he seems imperfectly to understand the implications of his actions. He lives in the present. His health and wealth are holding up reasonably well under the pressure, and so he rashly concludes that they always will. He simply and drastically lacks the moral insight which Helen demands of him. Even in his worst moments of spite in the dregs of their marriage he emerges as a kind of inept and unfocussed Heathcliff, his persecution of Helen vitiated by his need for escape.

Neither is Huntingdon merely a fortune-hunter. Helen's money will come in very handy, of course, but his affection for her is undoubted. That is all it is, affection, and a considerable degree of lust. Huntingdon, unable to love himself, cannot love anyone else, and the sentiment of mere affection will begin to die when the first signs of discord appear. Anne Brontë insists that the basis of marriage is love, and that the basis of love is mutual esteem, genuine friendship, common interests, and the shared desire to raise children. The Huntingdon marriage fails abysmally on all counts.

In spite of every proof to the contrary, Helen believes that she can mould Huntingdon into a tractable husband. This rigid insistence transmutes easily into the kind of relentless carping which so maddens and alienates the man. Helen becomes her aunt. Yet the reader has to sympathize with her; not only does she know no other way to proceed, but there probably *is* no other way. Scott sums it up: "If she endorses his licentiousness, of bottle and tongue, in the smallest degree, she perverts her own principles and poisons the future of her child" (79).

Ultimately, the worlds of Helen and Huntingdon seem even further apart than those of Agnes and Rosalie. Whereas Agnes very soon knows the worst about her charges, life with Huntingdon provides Helen with an endless series of moral shocks, each worst than the last. Huntingdon betrays her as the thoughtless Murrays can never do. Indeed, Helen might justifiably long to change places with the wretched Agnes. At least Agnes can resign her post. She cannot legally be imprisoned,

nor may sexual services be required of her. Whereas Agnes earns money from her labours, Helen's employment cannot be described as gainful in any respect. She effectively pays Huntingdon for the privilege of being his wife. He legally takes all her money and exploits it for evil ends that will make her life miserable. "All I have will be his and all he has will be mine," she exults (193). This is all very well, but while Helen stands possessed of a lovely person and a considerable fortune, Huntingdon can offer only debts and vice.

It is not good enough to say with Scott that marriage is a lottery in which women come off the worse (138). Anne Brontë indicts the institutionalized patriarchal oppression which can make the lives of women intolerably burdensome, but she also condemns the failure of an individual to act with self-knowledge. Arthur Huntingdon should know better than to behave as he does, but so too should Helen. She has been extraordinarily foolish in taking on Huntingdon against the advice of an experienced woman and in the face of overwhelming evidence of his incorrigibility. Once wed, however, the couple find themselves locked into a futile power struggle. Helen cannot win because she lacks social and legal authority, Huntingdon because he has no moral credibility. On Huntingdon's side is ranged all the artillery that his status as legal superior can muster; Helen can only let fly with an endless barrage of annoying moral darts. Because she has transgressed patriarchal law and will not accept his authority, neither line can advance. She will not abandon her efforts at moral suasion, and he will not shift his ground as her lord and master. All he can

do is make a martyr of her and a monster of himself.

The supreme irony of this war of attrition lies in the fact that patriarchal authority demands, with seamless doublethink, that a woman provide a moral example to her family and yet be totally subjected to her husband. Ultimately Helen can forge no sense from this contradiction, and so she is forced to attack the very heart of the Victorian ideal. She must break up her family.

Chapter 3

The Experienced Angel

Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Oh, 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.

(Anne Brontë, Preface, to the second edition of *Tenant*)

You ask me if I do not think men are strange beings. I do indeed—and I think too that the mode of bringing them up is strange—they are not half sufficiently guarded from temptations. Girls are protected as if

they were something very frail and silly indeed, while boys are turned loose on the world as if they, of all beings in existence, were the wisest and least liable to be led astray. (Charlotte Brontë, letter to Miss Wooler, quoted in Gérin 253)

I see that the world is not a bit better for centuries of self-sacrifice on the woman's part . . . and therefore I think it is time we had a more effectual plan. (Sarah Grant, quoted in Showalter 181)

Anne Brontë contends through her representation of the Huntingdon marriage that a woman has no business acting as governess to her husband, but not because she subscribes to any notions of male superiority. If the man's behaviour is so childish and immoral that they cannot dwell happily together, they ought never to have married. In such a situation the woman assumes at once a superiority and an inferiority which leave no room for the moral equality Anne insists be present in a marriage, but neither can this equality exist when the wife assumes the softer, socially sanctioned rôle of "the angel in the house." More importantly, families and society as a whole can only suffer when "virtue" is isolated in the person of a sheltered and ghettoized "angel." Huntingdon would have Helen assume such a rôle. Instead, she is forced by her own integrity to re-create the rôle of the angel and make it a genuine force for good.

Coventry Patmore's now infamous poem began to appear in 1854, six years after the publication of *Tenant*. References to this work in respect to Helen's moral rôle represent no anachronism, however, because Patmore merely gave a name to the popular sentimental concept of womanhood long prevalent in Christendom and apotheosized in the Victorian era. The mandate of the angel in the house is "to preserve and quicken the moral idealism so badly needed in an age of selfish greed and fierce competition," explains Walter Houghton, and he goes on to quote the "commonplace writer" Edwin Hood: "The hope of society is in woman! The hope of the age is in woman! On her depends mainly the righting of wrongs, the correcting of sins, and the success of all missions" (352).

Stirring stuff—but what are the qualifications of this angel to work such miracles? She must be meek, gentle, pious, and unworldly, "contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home" (Showalter 14). Too often, of course, she was merely an ill-educated, vain and trivial idler, as well she might be, having been raised with no other thought in her head than that of the necessity of bagging a husband. Yet it is the male who is to be influenced by her moral example, the male who moves in the cut and thrust of the commercial world, exposed daily to every tawdry temptation society can offer. Obviously, the angel has quite a job on her hands. Not only must she endeavour to keep her mate upright and pure without understanding the nature of the negative forces at work upon him, but she must also fulfil her

duties through *passivity*. Women's virtues have always been defined negatively: the "good" woman has memorized and obeyed a seemingly endless list of "thou shall nots" which serve to reinforce her subservience to men and her incompetence outside the home. Speaking of the Victorian virtue of self-denial, Carol Dyhouse comments, "it was almost invariably prescribed for women in conjunction with the *passive* virtues of patience, resignation, and silent suffering. In a man's education, self-denial was more generally associated with the *activist* ethic of self-help, hard work and self-reliance" (175).

Self-help, hard work and self-reliance: these "masculine virtues" are in fact the traits manifested by the very womanly Helen Huntingdon in salvaging the wreck of her life and saving her little boy from his father's evil influence. These are not the qualities demanded of the angel in the house, but Anne Brontë suggests that she would do well to cultivate them—for her own good and for the benefit of others.

Obviously, another kind of angel is required if families and societies are to thrive, one who must be permitted to understand the world outside the home in order to be effective *in* the home. In her work *Woman and the Demon : The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Nina Auerbach compares the patriarchal trivialization of the woman to the trivialization of the concept of the angel. The two movements coalesce in the notion of "the angel in the house."

Exploring "the radical iconographic shift inherent in Patmore's original phrase" (69–70), Auerbach reminds the reader that the traditional Christian angel is a mas-

culine, often martial, figure of supernal power and limitless mobility.

As heir of this tradition, the Victorian angel in the house seems a bizarre object of worship, both in her virtuous femininity with its inherent limitations—she can exist only within families, while masculine angels exist everywhere—and in the immobilization the phrase suggests. In contrast to her swooping ancestors, the angel in the house is a violent paradox with overtones of benediction and captivity. Angelic motion had once known no boundaries; the Victorian angel is *defined* by her boundaries. (71-2)

Anne Brontë would be the last commentator to suggest that domesticity necessarily debilitates women—her very honest and personal poems read like athrenody for the absence of husband and children—but she avows that terrible harm can arise from the suppression of a woman's God-given insights and abilities, and that such suppression may well occur in marriage to a man of ill will. Huntingdon attempts to reduce Helen to a status actually beneath that of the angel in the house. Although his early pet-names for Helen play on variations of "angel," he seeks no moral haven from the rude bustle of the world; rather, he introduces riot and dissipation into the moral haven she tries to create. Huntingdon desires his wife to be merely a pretty toy, not unlike the vapid decoration perched atop a

Christmas tree. Helen complains that she “must sparkle in costly jewels and deck [herself] out like a painted butterfly” (230). One may recall Rochester’s proprietary prettification of Jane Eyre. Huntingdon intends to reduce his angel from her status as servant of God to that of slave of man.

The triumph of Helen Huntingdon lies in breaking the boundaries—physical and social, and even religious—set up by patriarchal society in general and her husband in particular. Helen is at her angelic best in “flight.” She becomes a true heroine. In acting to save herself and her child Helen must find her way through the obstacle course prepared by patriarchal hostility. The chief of these concerns the paradox of a woman’s spiritual status in Christian society. Patricia Meyer Spacks comments, “The nature of female moral experience has always caused perplexity, for both sexes Are women ‘responsible beings’ in precisely the same sense as men? Presumably so, in relation to God; certainly not—so it has at various times been thought—in relation to society’” (3). In many traditions—the cult of the Virgin, for instance, or the worship of motherhood or the apotheosis of the angel in the house—she is actually elevated to a superior moral status. And yet, these repositories of virtue are denied a meaningful rôle in ordering the world—to their own detriment, as exemplified by Helen’s case, and to the detriment of others: because Helen lacks power and authority, her child risks permanent corruption; by extension, the children of men lose a powerful advocate in heaven and on earth.

Ironically, patriarchal society thrives because it ignores the tenets of its own

religion. Social expectations for men are completely at odds with the injunctions of the New Testament, for how can a man “get on in the world”—make a name for himself in the hurly-burly of commerce, or maintain his status as a landowner—if he heeds Christ’s exhortation to spurn earthly power and material possessions? The good woman, on the other hand, perceives no such tension between her social and spiritual responsibilities. Her husband and society at large demand meekness, forbearance and obedience to male will. Christ requires that she manifest patient loving-kindness, and promises that her earthly suffering will win her a crown in heaven. But these are precisely the qualities that may result in her exploitation and degradation by the men who wink at the demands of their own religion. It is certainly not the case that Anne Brontë thought less of New Testament injunctions because of this; her life-long determination to live a truly Christian life of love and service can only touch and inspire students of Brontë biography. Rather, she understood that, unless men live up to their Christian responsibilities, the virtue of the woman might just as well not exist, because it can never make its influence felt. Societal celebration of the superiority of female morals begins to seem like a mere sop. Like the concept of chivalry, it placates the woman with visions of her ethereal purity while effectively dismissing her as irrelevant to the real business of the world. The angel in the house is a tame, co-opted creature, as much a servant of man as any governess or prostitute.

Female virtue is necessary, argues Anne, but in her Preface and in the

novel itself she insists—quite radically, for her time—that genuine virtue comes not from ignorance of the world but from experience. In her confrontation with the Markhams, an impassioned Helen attacks Gilbert’s double standard: “‘You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others’” (57). A woman, she claims, can take effective action only if she knows the enemy. Her true purity of mind and habit can be sullied by contact with vice and degradation, but only if she lacks all power to effect change or, at least, to escape the influence of vice. Thus Helen Huntingdon, perceiving her husband’s baneful influence on herself, and, more critically, on her little boy, acts to retain their purity by shaking off the contamination of his presence. The law of God supersedes that of man, and not to use one’s moral energy is itself immoral. Understanding that she has erred in contracting the marriage, and that her son will pay the price of her obstinate pride, she understands too that no improvement can result from her dwindling into a mere pet angel. She needs to become a genuine angel, a powerful angel, spreading her wings for flight and for the shelter of her child. “The obstinacy and overconfidence, which causes the downfall of Helen at eighteen, transmute themselves into the determination and assurance that ultimately rescue her and her son” (Craik 244). Ironically, Helen must opt out of social and Biblical tradition *in order* to be a true Christian. She transcends patriarchal law because the patriarchs do not heed the law.

That the rôle of the traditional angel in the house is inadequate to combat

degeneracy and disorder is evident from the plight of Milicent Hattersley. She fulfils the prescribed “angelic” function to perfection, dispensing nothing but longsuffering kindness to her rampaging boor of a husband and enduring endless instances of schoolyard bullying: “In proof of his affection, he clutched a handful of her light brown ringlets, and appeared to twist them unmercifully” (298). Anne Brontë makes it plain that, in displaying infinite forbearance, poor Milicent fails in her moral duty. It is *not* virtuous to forgive “until seventy times seven.” Anne even has Hattersley serve her didactic purpose by admitting that Milicent’s sweet softness causes harm: “‘We shouldn’t always have what we want: it spoils the best of us, doesn’t it? How can I help playing the deuce when I see it’s all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or like a scoundrel . . .?’” (300). And not only is her meek submission counterproductive; it is *boring*: “‘when a boy has been cramming raisins and sugarplums all day, he longs for a squeeze of sour orange by way of a change’” (298). Responding to Helen’s reasoned arguments, he finally confesses his complete confusion: “‘I can’t stand contradiction—in a general way—and I’m as fond of my own will as another: only I think too much of it doesn’t answer for any man’” (301). Helen and Milicent might be excused for flinging their hands in the air and crying, “What do men *want*?” Anne Brontë would answer that men need—even if they think they do not want—to know that the domestic oppression of women results in loss of companionship, mutual unhappiness and misunderstanding, and, in extreme cases such as Huntingdon’s and Hattersley’s, rampant moral idiocy; and

that, all too often, a woman's self-sacrifice not only does no good—it can wreak positive havoc.

Poor, quailing, angelic Milicent cannot bring her husband to this understanding. It is the very un-angelic Helen who must champion her friend and help Hattersley make sense of his own conflicting feelings. She gains support for her views from an unlikely source: Arthur Huntingdon, whose "scoundrelly" behaviour has begun to appal even his friend Hattersley. Milicent's husband reflects, "'now I think upon it, Huntingdon often regrets that you are not more like [Milicent]'" (301). Huntingdon's pronouncements regarding Helen are suspect precisely because he utters them. By the end of their discussion Hattersley is eager to dissociate himself from Huntingdon's turpitude and, amusingly, to score points by comparison of their characters: "'You can't reform *him*: he's *ten* times worse than I'" (301).

Milicent and Annabella serve as Helen's chief foils, representing two extreme principles in their dealings with men. Milicent's angel finds its evil counterpart in Annabella, the devil in the house. A somewhat stereotypical, rapacious home-wrecker, Annabella obviously acts as a more potent force for evil than does Milicent, but Anne Brontë uses her to establish the necessity for a golden mean in conjugal relations. The need for an intelligent middle path, for compromise without co-option, emerges as one of the most important themes of the novel.

If no golden mean can be forged, the woman is better off remaining single, however disgraceful society considers that condition. To Esther Hargrave's

expressed wish for companionship in marriage, a sadder and wiser—indeed, almost cynical—Helen replies, “‘If such are your expectations of matrimony, Esther, you must indeed be careful whom you marry—or rather, you must avoid it altogether’” (381). It is appropriate for Helen to act as governess to young Esther, who has solicited her advice on matrimony. Ironically, she must educate by her own sad example because she has failed in her determined campaign of reformation.

Helen has erred in marrying, then, but she will not, cannot, resign herself to a life of misery and her son to a future of damnable dissipation. Initially, she acts to reclaim her own person: “henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments, when you have given the substance to another!” (315–316). But this action, brave as it is, cannot preserve her little boy. Ultimately there seems to be no way out except through the door. If the law forbids it, the law be damned before Helen will risk her own salvation. As W.A. Craik comments, Helen’s desertion of her husband cannot be compared to Jane Eyre’s abandonment of Rochester (238). Rochester intimates that he can only degenerate if she leaves, and Jane agonizes until she concludes that her primary duty is not to her man but to herself. Helen reaches the same conclusion, but does not distress herself over the possibility of Huntingdon’s further deterioration. He cannot possibly get any worse, but she and her son can. Acknowledging the obscenity of pouring good souls after bad, she flees.

Helen is empowered to act, and act splendidly, because her life is focussed

on her God and on her child, and there is no conflict of loyalties there. The conflict comes with her duty to her husband, which she does in fact fulfil at the end. The accounting sheet reads thus: she owes her duty first to God, then to her husband and child, then to herself. When duty to husband is perceived as dereliction of duty to God, child, and self, she simply has no choice. Besides, fulfilling her duty to Huntingdon, by remaining with him, will not bring about his reform. In leaving her husband her actions are intellectually, psychologically, and spiritually correct, and the knowledge carries her through subsequent social isolation. For Helen and for Anne, the choice is between society and salvation.

In leaving Huntingdon and withdrawing the light of her spirit, she must swallow the bitter pill of his probable damnation. But Huntingdon has already made a hell of their home. When the new bride Helen arrives at Grassdale, the almost Wordsworthian connotations of its name suggest an Edenic innocence. But, as in Eden, the pastoral perfection is spoiled by manifestations of temptation and evil. Huntingdon reveals himself to be a kind of downmarket Miltonic Satan, a figure of pity in many ways but cast into outer darkness by his own jealousy, megalomania, and inability to repent. He sets himself up as a god and is enraged when Helen, claiming a higher allegiance, will not worship him. Helen becomes his relentless reminder of the spiritual purity he has rejected, and a *memento mori* (or rather, *memento post-mori*) which must be morally destroyed if he is to hold sway in this kingdom. Like Satan or Faust he lies and resorts to the pettiest of persecutions in

his attempts to corrupt or degrade innocence. (Unlike her sisters, Anne routinely portrays vicious acts as petty and even ludicrous.) In this Eden, Hargrave appears as the snake in the grass, a false friend offering the apple of illicit eroticism.

On a less epic scale, Huntingdon's mismanagement of his estate reveals another antithesis of the eighteenth-century country-house ideal. Anne Brontë characterizes bad husbands as bad husbandmen, who live in a pastoral environment without understanding it or caring for it (238). For Huntingdon, the country estate exists to provide revenue and the entertainment to be derived from slaughtering its wildlife. As its squire, Huntingdon drains the wealth of nature to sustain his city vices. He takes all and gives nothing back, and extends this depredatory attitude to his wife and child. He should cultivate them as one would a garden, but he interests himself only in sowing wild oats. Significantly, it is an agent of the natural world, a horse, which brings about Huntingdon's demise. Drunk, unable to maintain his balance, he falls. Anne Brontë could as easily have had him hurt in a brawl, or something equally ignominious befitting his utter degradation. But she permits subjugated nature to take revenge on "Hunting"don. His fate is specifically contrasted with that of his foil Hattersley, who *redeems* himself through his interest in breeding horses: he becomes a sober and competent farmer and husband/man.

When Eden has been sullied with sin, Helen acts as her own angel of admonition, driving herself from the garden into the wilderness of "Wildfell" to earn her own bread and to win redemption for generations to come. It is important to realize

that, although she is fleeing an intolerable situation, her place of refuge will also be a place of exile, and her sufferings a kind of purgatory wherein she can expiate the very real sin of hubris. Socially and even domestically, her tenancy at Wildfell Hall represents a bleak dispossession. The very word "tenant" suggests dependence on another, impermanence, anonymity, and disenfranchisement. Because her flight and custody of her child are actually illegal, she slips into an understandable state of paranoia, imagining kidnappers where none exist and terrified that her neighbours will discover her real identity and situation. Her own brother cannot be publicly acknowledged as such and neighbours must be discouraged from paying calls. It is a terrible time of trial for a woman devoted to candour, orthodox domesticity and the congenialities of social intercourse. Worst of all, she has no way of knowing that her exile will not be prolonged for years.

Helen's flight from Grassdale suggests not only courage but also a great sense of personal power. At Wildfell, however, she is rendered nearly powerless. Without a husband she must look to her brother for protection, but his powers are compromised by the clandestine nature of their relationship. Presumably he can take care of all her material wants; however, Helen insists on working for her bread. The pleasant pastime of painting must be conscripted for the support of her little family; there is no time for the indulgence of hobbies. In manufacturing art hour after hour and in disguising the origins of her paintings with false legends and signatures, Helen loses a part of her integrity.

Yet Helen both gains and loses integrity and power during her exile. She is guardian of her child and mistress of Wildfell Hall as she never was of Grassdale, and here is a refuge which exactly suits her state of mind. The moors around the Hall are bleak and uncompromising, remote and uninviting. The Hall itself has seen better days; it has been abandoned just as Helen has been emotionally deserted by her abandoned—in both senses—wretch of a husband. Significantly, though, the Hall has been partially restored. Helen can at last bring her own influence to bear on her environment. As long as she remains canny and careful, she can retain some power and integrity in her new home.

Anne Brontë relentlessly eschews the kind of romanticism with which her sister Emily or even Charlotte would have imbued Wildfell Hall. Nothing is made of its “goblinish appearance” or of the “ghostly legends and dark traditions” (46) predictably adhering to a ruined Elizabethan manor; it is simply an old-fashioned and very uncomfortable dwelling. To Gilbert, its mistress seems an old-fashioned and very uncomfortable woman.

Ultimately, the experienced angel, Helen, is a very human being, stripped of the romantic claptrap associated with Christian iconography or Victorian sentiment. Her human flaws have resulted in her exile; her human goodness will help restore her to the loving domesticity she needs. When she has expiated her sin of hubris she can claim this new and nurturing love. By his very flaws, Gilbert Markham helps her to win that expiation.

Chapter 4

The Problem of Gilbert

First study; then approve; then love. (*Tenant* 150)

The reader's assessment of Gilbert Markham's character determines absolutely his or her opinion of Helen's second marriage and, consequently, the understanding of Anne Brontë's thematic intentions. Of late it has become fashionable to view Gilbert as an unfortunate, if not a disastrous, choice of husband, and Helen therefore as a weakling, a fool, or a hapless victim of relentless patriarchal forces.

The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, who can forgive Gilbert neither his bourgeois origins nor his rise to wealth and power, gleefully sums up the case for the prosecution:

Gilbert himself is foolishly sentimental . . . He is touchy and overbred, full of rhetorical gestures and gallant clichés, alternating between tender idealisations and bursts of

histrionic wrath. He is, in fact, emotionally infantile, ready to "stamp with vexation" when his candle won't light, falling easily into self-pitying misanthropy as a rejected lover, quick to inflict grotesque violence on Helen's brother Mr. Lawrence. (130)

One can certainly view Gilbert as a completely negative character if one ignores the plentiful evidence of positive, commendable traits, but, to quote Anne Brontë out of context, "is it the most honest [course to pursue]?" (Preface to *Tenant*). The modern tendency in criticism of *Tenant* is to be over-ingenious and to overlook the obvious. There cannot be the slightest doubt that Anne intended the reader to see Helen and Gilbert as rewards for each other, and their marriage as a happy and productive one. It is true that Gilbert's character is marred by flaws of varying severity, but Anne Brontë has four very good reasons for portraying him as she does. First, Gilbert *must* be imperfect in order for Helen to learn to accept shortcomings in a man without resorting to the kind of reformation campaign which proved so disastrous with Huntingdon. Second, Anne knew very well that most women could not hope for the kind of paragon she gives us in the person of Edward Weston of *Agnes Grey*. Compromise is necessary. Third, Gilbert must be flawed in order for the reader to observe him maturing and improving—as Helen matures and improves—to fit himself for marriage. He will always be imperfect, but through his love for Helen he gains a far superior wife to any he could have obtained

in his little village. Finally, Anne may well have created his histrionic character in order to satirize the passionate Byronic male long popular in fiction.

Anne leaves such an unmistakable trail of clues throughout the novel that the reader can be in no doubt as to her ultimate approbation of Gilbert. Careful reading reveals parallels between Gilbert and the excellent Edward Weston. In their very different ways both are exceptionally honest. Both men put responsibilities ahead of immediate desires, and both manifest an interest in literature and the life of the mind. Gilbert views the natural world with as much respect and affection as does Weston, and, as a sound farmer, he is in a better position to ensure its integrity. We have only Agnes's subdued postscript to inform us of Weston's superior capabilities as a father, but Anne has Gilbert display his kindness and concern for children from the beginning. If he were devoid of any other redeeming feature, this last might be enough to recommend him in the eyes of Anne Brontë.

Before Gilbert's notable merits are explored further, it would be useful to examine the evidence against him. The most immediate problem concerns his function as narrator. Dark feminist suspicions are bound to arise when the reader reflects that the male Gilbert writes to the male Halford, enclosing his wife's old diary (has he even asked her permission?) and interpreting events in his rather cocky way without qualification by Helen. Helen has ripped out the diary pages pertaining to him, and it is he who concludes their story, claiming their marriage to be felicitous. Helen has fallen silent. This would be rather worrying were it not for the fact of

Anne Brontë's characteristic fairness and balance: Gilbert may take it upon himself to speak for Helen, but most of the novel consists of her verbatim account of her first courtship and marriage—and it is she who interprets Huntingdon's character. If Gilbert is to be suspected of misrepresenting his marriage, then in fairness Helen must also be suspected of having calumniated Huntingdon. She has, after all, revealed herself as something of an extremist—and at least Gilbert cannot be accused of that—and it must be taken on faith that her journal represents an accurate account of her sufferings and that Huntingdon was not merely a rather boisterous fellow with a penchant for tipple. Such an interpretation would be nonsense, of course, completely at odds with the earnest intentions expressed in the Preface. By the same token, there is no reason to suspect Gilbert's integrity as narrator. Instances of self-satisfaction or outright conceit are balanced by amused or rueful self-deprecation. Here, Anne's lighter and more satirical pen finds fine expression. Winifred Gérin writes of the "flash of self-betrayal" which so often delights Anne's readers: "Anne Brontë did not hesitate to laugh at herself . . . and to make others laugh with her in a manner as disarming and lovable as Goldsmith's . . ." (72). So too can Gilbert record his juvenile tendency to self-dramatization and the amused response of the more experienced Helen:

'You have blighted the freshness and promise of youth,
and made my life a wilderness! I might live a hundred
years, but I could never recover from the effects of this

withering blow—and never forget it! Hereafter— You smile, Mrs. Graham,’ said I, suddenly stopping short, checked in my passionate declamation by unutterable feelings to behold her actually *smiling* at the picture of ruin she had wrought. (145-6)

Any doubts which may beset the reader concerning Gilbert’s intentions of self-satire should be dispelled by his choice of the word ‘declamation.’ Gilbert knows that he had been acting, and rather badly at that. Then, too, his levity, quirks and foibles provide a necessary contrast to Helen’s relentless severity. The lightness and jocularity of the framing narrative reassure the reader that everything will come right in the end.

On the more serious side, Arlene Jackson observes, “the fact that Gilbert does reveal so much of himself to Halford . . . reveals his essential honesty and generous nature” (202). In recording his contemptible assault on Frederick Lawrence, and the tawdry justifications and inadequate apologies which follow, Gilbert is commendably frank. However, the passage can only be viewed as an artistic disaster. Chitham excuses it as Anne’s way of counteracting the “balladic” representation of violence in Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, suggesting that although “she has to find a place in her book to introduce such a scene of violence . . . she either makes a wrong choice or else fails sufficiently to prepare the reader for the episode” (“Diverging Twins” 102). Precisely. An incident like this would not have gone amiss

in the context of Grassdale, but for Gilbert to acquit himself thus is inappropriate and almost incredible. Perhaps Anne Brontë is attempting to link his rashness with Helen's own precipitancy in plunging into her disastrous marriage. Also, the scene points up the contrast between Gilbert and Huntingdon: whereas Huntingdon has despicably offered Helen to anyone who will take her, Gilbert, in his own equally impulsive way, is fighting for her. Helen may not feel the disgust at his action which the reader would expect, for she too knows what it is to feel "sick with passion" (327) or jealous anger. Ultimately, however, there seems to be no adequate reason for the inclusion of this scene.

Gilbert appears at his most unworthy as eavesdropper and bully. He listens to Helen's private conversation with her—unknown to Gilbert—brother Mr. Lawrence, and torments her cruelly with his knowledge of the "evidence" of her perfidy: "But while I secretly exulted in my power, I felt disposed to dally with my victim like a cat" (143). Again, however, he is honourable enough to record his dishonourable behaviour, and, writing years after the event, he is acutely conscious of his mistake and of Helen's innocence. Anne wants the reader to understand that he is no longer ruled by the exaggerated self-seriousness of youth—the kind which can inflame a man to acts of brutality—and that a man unchanged by the years and by experience would not so freely confess such contemptible sentiments and actions. Gilbert has become a different and much better person. No doubt he expects Halford—who knows him well—to join with him in a little middle-aged head-shaking and tutting

over youthful follies.

One can, of course, make a case for young Gilbert's conduct. Eavesdropping may be the classic resort of the craven, but in such fraught circumstances the opportunity would prove irresistible. As for his bullying, Gilbert has been desperately hurt by Helen's apparent dissembling and he has no real reason to think that she has played fair with him. His vitriol owes much to that hurt and to his sense of outraged impotence. Anne Brontë updates the old adage to read, "Hell hath no fury like a lover scorned." She exquisitely delineates the insecurities seething beneath the surface of their confrontation. Each loves the other, but each believes the other to be unjust and to possess superior control of the situation. For all his cheap exultation in his feline "power," Gilbert considers himself a powerless dupe, and aches for the transcendental empowerment of reciprocated love. With the diary in his possession he rushes home "panting with eagerness, and struggling to suppress [his] hopes" (147).

Gilbert earns a great deal of wrath from the critics for what Eagleton terms his "callously inadequate reaction to Helen's harrowing tale . . . His blatantly self-interested response to Helen's history is as unpleasant as the wallowings in egoistic joy into which he is thrown a moment later" (135). Scott concurs, sniffing, "his first extended reaction to the whole is self-regard and concern about how *he* now figures in the imagination of the woman by whom he is obsessed" (95). What are Gilbert's sentiments that he should draw such contumely upon his head? Eagleton

and Scott cite two passages. In the first, Gilbert bemoans the loss of the part of the diary pertaining to himself: "How cruel—just when she was going to mention me!" (400). Second, he recollects

that the former half of the narrative was, to me, more painful than the latter; not that I was at all insensible to Mrs. Huntingdon's wrongs or unmoved by her sufferings, but I must confess, I felt a kind of selfish gratification in watching her husband's decline in her good graces, and seeing how completely he extinguished all her affection at last. (402)

Two points can be made. First, Eagleton and Scott are highly selective in extracting quotations. Following his chagrin over the lost pages, Gilbert reflects:

if, at first, her opinion of me had been lower than I deserved, I was convinced that now my deserts were lower than her opinion, and if the former part of this continuation had been torn away to avoid wounding my feelings, perhaps the latter portion had been removed for fear of ministering too much to my self-conceit. (401)

The tone is still cocky, and a really implacable critic would conclude that, whereas Gilbert first believes himself much better than Helen supposes, he ends by flattering himself that she loves him to distraction. But Gilbert *does* know himself to be

beloved, and he is chastened now by the knowledge of her worth and of his poor behaviour. (Also, he must be very grateful and gratified to have his high opinion of Helen vindicated, an opinion which runs counter to the wisdom of his elders and betters.) Though highly anxious to know the depth of Helen's feelings for him (and who would not lament the loss of such potentially delightful intelligence?), he concludes quite sincerely, "I had no right to see it She had done well to keep it from me" (401). He acknowledges, then, both her right to privacy and her superior judgment. It bodes well for an egalitarian basis for marriage.

Immediately before the second quotation cited by Eagleton and Scott, Gilbert remarks, "I will only make this acknowledgement, little honourable as it may be to human nature, and especially to myself:—" (402). He apprehends clearly, then, that such an admission reflects poorly on his integrity, so his honesty is the more commendable. This is the second point vital to the defence of Gilbert. Both Gilbert and Anne Brontë are being *daringly* honest. Their analysis of human motivation is prescient, almost Skinnerian; people do feel a great deal of anxiety where their future happiness is involved, but this does not preclude active sympathy for others. There is such a thing as enlightened self-interest. Huntingdon is revealed at the beginning of Helen's narrative as Gilbert's undeniable and disconcertingly entrenched rival, so *of course* Gilbert rejoices to see Helen's affection die. Otherwise, Huntingdon would hold all the cards, legally and psychologically. It must be not be forgotten that her husband is still alive and that Gilbert needs all the straws he can

clutch at. The portrait of Gilbert's psyche is very finely drawn. Then, too, Anne Brontë exhibits no little bravery and integrity in having Gilbert continue to love Helen after he knows she is married. The reader may recall Jane Eyre's constancy of feeling for Rochester even after his bigamous schemes have been discovered.

The novel is spattered with the sins and peccadilloes of Gilbert, the greatest of which—in Helen's eyes—is his attempt to wheedle her into an illicit union (405). The force with which Helen responds to his "that man is *not* your husband: in the sight of Heaven he has forfeited all claim to—" (405) can be ascribed to her expression of a similar sentiment during her third year with Huntingdon: "How much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried . . . !" (256). She fights not only temptation from Gilbert, but from herself; and the temptation is founded not only on physical attraction but on intellectual and spiritual doubts. Her obvious agony shakes Gilbert; he instantly begs her forgiveness and represents the action to Halford as completely immoral. The whole point is that, like Huntingdon, he errs and strays—but that, unlike Huntingdon, he possesses the will and the energy to improve himself. Jackson concludes,

Gilbert's self-centeredness and petulance are never completely eradicated, but when he recognizes his faults, he readily admits them and feels ashamed or asks Helen's forgiveness. Gilbert is considerably matured over the course of his love for Helen Huntingdon and ends the

novel by becoming not an ideal but a believable marriage partner. (202)

Part of the difficulty the reader is liable to experience with the characterization of Gilbert may originate in Anne's amused scorn for the Byronic type of flamboyantly independent male, he who is given to grand gestures and theatrical passions. Such men are very fascinating, but altogether useless as husbands. Gilbert seems to nurse rather Byronic notions of himself: he is the cynosure of the village and he may have read too many romances. In short, he fancies himself. Initially he spends a good deal of time "vengeably biting [his] lips, and sternly repressing the passionate heavings of [his] chest" (131) and dashing himself on the ground "in a paroxysm of despair" (125). When he begins to know Helen and the circumstances of her life, he learns that life and suffering are not romantic and that love should not be enacted upon a public stage—that he should not, like Byron, trail his bleeding heart everywhere.

Gilbert is a creature of imperfections, then. However, he cannot help but shine in comparison with the other men in the novel. In his sincerity, yeoman's industry and intrinsic goodness he stands for everything that Huntingdon is not and, consequently, everything that Helen needs. His has been an indulgent upbringing, but the responsibilities of work and family make all the difference. Work and a sense of belonging to an integrated community—which expects him to behave himself—render his self-indulgence relatively harmless. Country-bred (and proud of it) he

yet comports himself in a much more mannerly and civilized fashion than does Huntingdon or the upper-class clod Hattersley.

Frederick Lawrence may do very well for a brother, but his affliction with “a certain morbid feeling of delicacy, and a peculiar diffidence, that he was sensible of, but wanted energy to overcome” (61) links him unexpectedly to Huntingdon’s famous inability to rally his energies to overcome obstacles; Helen needs a more virile man than this. Eagleton dismisses Gilbert as a “milksop,” berating him for his effeminacy in actually sitting at the tea-table. But Anne Brontë quite explicitly condemns the kind of “masculinity” bodied forth in the person of the Reverend Millward,

a man of fixed principles, strong prejudices, and regular habits,—intolerant of dissent in any shape, acting under a firm conviction that *his* opinions were always right, and whoever differed from them, must be, either most deplorably ignorant, or wilfully blind. (42)

This man is no friend to

tea and such slops, [but] a patron of malt liquors, bacon and eggs, ham, hung beef, and other strong meats, which agreed well enough with his digestive organs, and therefore were maintained by him to be good and wholesome for everybody, and confidently recommended to

the most delicate convalescents or dyspeptics, who, if they failed to derive the promised benefit from his prescriptions, were told it was because they had not persevered, and if they complained of inconvenient results therefrom, were assured it was all fancy. (43)

The reader may experience the perverse desire to introduce this fellow to the equally gustatorially obtuse valetudinarian father of Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse. In equating the loathing of tea with insensitive behaviour, Anne Brontë may be hinting that Gilbert Markham is both a proper gentleman and a real man, one equally at home in the fields and in the parlour.

Pauline Nestor too objects to Gilbert's "detailed acquaintance with feminine minutiae" (39). If Gilbert seems feminine in any way it surely derives from his being portrayed largely among women, and from his affliction with traits usually assigned to women—sulking, impetuosity, fits of temper—but which Anne Brontë knew to be the province of both sexes. Anne Brontë is being both honest and canny here, of course, because like Jane Austen she had no knowledge of men's behaviour in exclusively masculine company. Accordingly, she sets Gilbert in a fatherless family of females and one underage boy. Elsewhere, with his workers in the field, for example, or during his mad dash to Staningley, he reveals himself at once as an energetic and acceptably virile young man and a foil to the kind of two-dimensional manliness advocated by Mrs. Markham and Reverend Millward.

Neither does Gilbert resemble in any way Lord Lowborough, given by disposition to excess and escapism, and who can even after his reformation expect at best a monotonous life filled with regrets. The reader cannot imagine Gilbert seeking oblivion in alcohol—far better that he fling himself about in fits of temper and despair. But Gilbert finds his most subtle foil in Hargrave, who attempts to seduce Helen by both sophistry and harassment. In the chess game he plays with Helen he uses a series of sexual and religious *double entendres* to signify that they are playing for the stakes of her honour. He treats as a game the issue which Helen holds most sacred. In comparison with Hargrave's Machiavellian deceit, Gilbert's more understandable (because his feelings are reciprocated) error in proposing an unsanctified union appears as ingenuous and ultimately forgivable.

It is the desire for honesty and a relationship based on genuine friendship which prompts Helen to give Gilbert the diary. Gérin is quite wrong to support George Moore's patronizing assertion that the diary ploy was an artistic mistake. "By the device of the diary the drama that wrecked Helen's life is seen at one remove, not in the heat of the action . . ." (Introduction, *Tenant* 14). Anne Brontë knew exactly what she was doing. Moore and Gérin suggest that Helen should have told Gilbert her story rather than letting him read it, but it is the diary which makes immediate Helen's sufferings and mitigates the distancing effect of Gilbert's long-after-the-events narrative. Also, Helen's verbatim reportage of very long arguments with Huntingdon and similar exchanges already strains credibility; Gilbert's third-

hand account would be ludicrous. Most importantly, Helen's testament must stand alone, unaffected, uncompromised and unbowdlerized by Gilbert, and unaltered by her own hindsight.

Her gift of the diary, a more intimate record than any verbal confession could be, serves several purposes. First, she acknowledges his right to know the truth; their relationship has deepened to the point where she must acknowledge his genuine claims on her affections. Then, the presentation is a defensive act, her demand that he acknowledge her virtue and the justice of her cause. It is also a warning: Helen lets her would-be suitor know what she expects of a man and of marriage, and she wants him to absorb a first-hand account of the wages of vanity and pride—faults to which he is no stranger. Finally, the gift of the diary is a symbolic gift of herself, the anticipation of their future legal and sexual union.

Helen has studied, and approved, and loved: for all his flaws, Gilbert has proven himself a desirable mate, one with whom she could dwell in amity and equality. She is introduced to him by means of her little boy. Young Arthur is a symbol of regeneration and hope: it was chiefly for his sake that she fled her husband, and now he helps her to a new and better husband. Significantly, Gilbert rescues the little boy from a fall, and displays irreproachably paternal kindness:

I wiped his eyes with his frock, told him he was all right,
and called Sancho to pacify him. He was just putting
his little hand on the dog's neck and beginning to smile

through his tears, when . . . Mrs. Graham darted upon
me (47)

For a moment they stand together on the moor, mother, father, child and dog, an adumbration of the happy family life to come. Arthur, a likable little fellow, is fond of Gilbert and repays the favour of the kindly rescue by reuniting Gilbert and his mother at Staningley when both adults are diffident with prickly pride.

Gilbert passes the first test: he is good with children and animals. Helen then begins to know him as a vigorous and efficient farmer. Gilbert himself tells Halford in Chapter 1 that he had had higher ambitions than farming, but, from a sense of duty to his father and family, had decided to work hard in order to “transmit the paternal acres to my children in, at least, as flourishing a condition as he left them to me” (35). He chafes a bit under this self-imposition, but, having made up his mind, commendably throws all his energies into the betterment of the farm. Again Anne presents an instance of the conscientious worker whose self-denial is ultimately rewarded by the fulfilment of his deferred hopes. Not only will Gilbert be able to indulge his literary predilections—and the reader must admit that he writes rather well—but he will enormously increase the number of those paternal acres and help his rootless younger brother to a patrimony. At twenty-four, Gilbert appears self-reliant, hardworking and virile: “‘I’ve been breaking in the grey colt . . . directing the ploughing of the last wheat stubble . . . and carrying out a plan for the extensive and efficient draining of the low meadowlands’” (36–7). Anne

Brontë approves of him; so will Helen, who cannot help comparing Gilbert's industry and competence with Huntingdon's abysmal sloth. In Grassdale she wished that her husband would "attend to the farm, but that he knows nothing about, and won't give his mind to consider" (238). The man who cultivates his farm will cultivate his marriage: good husbandmen make good husbands.

The circumstances of Helen's life are too fraught with anxiety to permit much relaxation in the company of Gilbert, but Anne Brontë gamely suggests their intellectual compatibility. Gilbert's literary aspirations have already been noted, and he especially orders for Helen, as his first present to her, a copy of Walter Scott's *Marmion*. Gilbert may or may not be hinting at a parallel between Helen and the character of the nun Constance, who is walled up alive in a convent; but it is known that Anne Brontë, like her sisters, knew intimately and esteemed the works of Scott. She approves of his taste, then, too.

Finally, as has been delineated, Gilbert is always honest. Even his faults of impetuosity and bad temper reflect this integrity. He is simply incapable of dissembling, a trait with which Helen has had all too much to do in her dealings with Huntingdon, Annabella, Hargrave, and others of the Grassdale circle.

It is well that the reader can ascertain from this evidence the depth of Helen's feelings for Gilbert, because there is very little indication of erotic attraction. Scott comments, "There is this general failure in Anne Brontë's prose to convey . . . the erotic charge which colours one's individual awareness of another when amorous

love is in the case" (86). Its influence can be felt more strongly in *Tenant* than in *Agnes Grey*, but this is due largely to Gilbert's rash declarations. In only one highly charged and rather beautiful scene does Helen demonstrate great physical passion, but even then, the reader cannot be sure that her intense emotion does not derive also from grief for the loss of her one true companion: "'God bless you!' and 'Go—go!' was all she said; but while she spoke, she held me so fast that, without violence, I could not have obeyed her" (411). She might well be saying farewell to her son, who enjoys first claim on her devotion, and indeed there is something undeniably maternal about Helen's erotic impulses. Huntingdon's boyishness attracted her, and she often seems more like Gilbert's mother than his future wife. A maternal eros seems the safest kind for both Helen and Anne Brontë, based as it is on very warm feelings of protection and devotion. Maternal eros also suggests the reason for which God ordained sexual union, the production of children. If erotic attraction to Huntingdon was the cause of her fall, the issue of their union, young Arthur, redeems her. He gives Helen reason to live and to escape, and from the outset acts as emotional go-between for Helen and Gilbert.

Eros in its Grassdale manifestations is an evil thing, making slaves of its degraded votaries. Anne Brontë would have the reader believe that Helen has been so undermined by the moral chaos of Grassdale that she considers revenging herself on Huntingdon "by a seeming encouragement of Hargrave's advances" (323). Infidelity on her part is probably her only means of hurting the man who has so

injured her—not that she can wound his tender passions, because he has none, but his ego would never withstand a cuckolding. However, she knows it will not answer. To Hargrave's sly, “do you never think of revenge?” she responds, “Revenge! No—what good would that do?—it would make him no better, and me no happier” (338). She is not in this exchange aware of Hargrave's meaning—but she might make the same answer to the temptation when it comes. Such a revenge on Huntingdon could ultimately only aid him in his campaign to destroy her. Even if her “seeming encouragement” is indeed to be restricted to mere “seeming”, she will undergo the mortification of being judged a hypocritical coquette by the deceitful Hargrave. There can be nothing more offensive to Helen's sense of integrity. The demon whispering in her ear she rebuffs “with horror and self-abasement,” but ultimately throws the blame on Huntingdon, where it belongs: “I hate him tenfold more than ever, for having brought me to this!” (323).

Annabella's is the most unmistakable brand of feminine eros, and Anne Brontë represents it as a kind of Lilithian pathology. Good women do not experience lust divorced from intense love, if indeed they experience it at all in the way it is perceived today. (Helen applies a rigid double standard here, assigning more blame to Annabella than to Huntingdon for their adulterous affair, but Anne Brontë's intention is unclear. If she condones Helen's attitude, she makes a mockery of the egalitarian sentiments expressed in the Preface and elsewhere in the novel. It is more likely that she was attempting to convey the desperation of a wronged wife

still determined to excuse the actions of her fallen partner.) Significantly, Annabella (like Rosalie Murray) shows no interest in the byproducts of her lust, her children. Nothing could be more damning in the eyes of Helen and Anne.

Helen and other women of her time had somehow to resolve this paradox: although "good" women could show no wild enthusiasm for sex, it was their fault "if the men turned elsewhere for their pleasures" (Calder 57). "Domestic contentment is a woman's responsibility, and any disruption of it is necessarily her fault. If she cannot keep her husband at home, she has failed" (Calder 22). The profound moral conflicts embroiling Helen and Huntingdon from the outset would naturally have intruded into their bedroom, with the result that Huntingdon seeks consolation with Annabella, and the further result that Helen shuts her door against him forever.

However, it is a moral thing to declare one's passion when the passion leads to a "good" marriage, that is, one centered on mutual esteem and the nurturing of children. Helen seems to make little distinction between eros and passionate friendship; as in *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë presents the reader with a relationship based on "storgic eros." And again, eros serves to bring together a man and woman for the good of their own lives and of society.

Gilbert initially views Helen as a mysterious widow, all the more intriguing for the scorn she heaps upon his evident interest. By the time he has perused her diary—superficially a highly sensational story, but in reality a wearying record of human depravity—he has matured enough to let his romantic fantasies disintegrate.

His love for her has apparently owed more to lust than has hers for him, but he reveals a genuine friendship for her now. There is a sense of solidarity in suffering. Helen wants the love of friendship—as well she might, given her outcast state—and she maintains that true friendship can only be based on loyalty and equality. Gilbert has already proven his loyalty, standing up for her in the village and lapsing only due to an understandable misapprehension. Significantly for the broadening of Helen's outlook, it is women and the forces of religion who persecute her at Linden-Car, and her two champions are secular males, her brother Lawrence and Gilbert.

Gilbert has early committed himself to equality in marriage. Anne Brontë yet again proves her fairness and fine sense of balance by having a woman, Mrs. Markham, insist to her son:

'it's your business to please yourself, and [your wife's] to please you. I'm sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, and after the first six months or so were over, I should as soon have expected him to fly, as to put himself out of his way to pleasure me. He always said I was a good wife, and did my duty; and he always did his—bless him!—he was steady and punctual, seldom found fault without a reason, always did justice to my good dinners, and hardly ever spoiled

my cookery by delay—and that’s as much as any woman
can expect of any man.’ (79)

Years later, Gilbert comments on this set speech, asking his correspondent, “Is it so, Halford? Is that the extent of *your* domestic virtues; and does your happy wife exact no more?” (79). As Craik remarks, Mrs. Markham’s “idea of marriage is sadly low” (240), and both Helen and Anne insist on something better—but so too does Gilbert, claiming, “I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive’” (79). This assertion seems almost, but not quite, out of character at the time, a heavy-handed didactic intrusion by the author. But it gives an excellent idea of how the reader is *meant* to see Gilbert’s attitude to marriage, and none of his later actions compromises his early statement of intent. Both he and Helen desire a marriage based on integrity and friendship. After their confrontation and his absorption of the diary he indicates complete recognition of her personhood, and obeys her injunction to keep away.

Not surprisingly, Helen’s experiences and precarious independence combine to harden her heart to the claims of love, but she soon appreciates that her misogamy is as great a moral evil as the hubris which landed her with Huntingdon in the first place.

Experience deceives and injures her, and at one stage
of the story she seems to have escaped from the follies

of the heart only, as it were, "to wither into truth."
But if experience is injury, it is also, for the thoughtful spirit, instruction; and by its lesson she eventually achieves a new and informed light-heartedness of being, a kind of happiness which comes, like the runner's second-wind, after pleasure and despair . . . Little by little, she learns to soften, finding in her second love an image of the good. (Stanford 232)

Because her heart has softened again, she needs to return to Huntingdon. She sees it as her duty to the man who is yet her husband, but, more importantly, she sees it as her duty to herself. She wishes not to hate him anymore. Helen knows that she is a better and more moral person if she loves—and if she is loved.

She risks a great deal in returning to Huntingdon; after all, his demise is by no means assured, and he need not sign the custody agreement. She also risks much in declaring her love to Gilbert. She has told her love once, and paid for it dearly. Now she is much more cautious, but when Gilbert, overawed by her wealth and status and agonizingly unsure of himself, fails to act, she grasps the nettle—or the rose—and declares herself. The rose is both soft and prickly, and it perfectly symbolizes the final dance of insecurities in which Helen and Gilbert engage before their acknowledgement of mutual love. In offering the rose, Helen is softness and loveliness; when Gilbert fails to intuit her meaning she turns prickly and defensive,

believing her love to be scorned. It is then up to him to soften her again with his final abandonment of pride and admission of love.

Helen's is an act of tremendous courage and trust, and the risk is not merely emotional. As The Married Woman's Property Act was not passed until (1882), Gilbert would automatically gain control of her huge new estates. But she is sure of herself and of Gilbert. A victim of patriarchal oppression, she combats its power by denying its spiritual validity—and she accomplishes this by tossing away the power grudgingly accorded her by the death of her husband. Divisions of gender are as false and meaningless as divisions of class, she insists, and urges Gilbert to overcome his false pride. Her marriage to Gilbert is not an acknowledgement of her need for a master but of her need for a real family, integrity and home.

Gilbert and Helen fit themselves for each other in a much more active and painful way than do Agnes and Weston. Anthea Zeman comments on the trend in literature for male and female to compromise their rigid roles:

the heroines . . . toughen up intellectually to fit themselves for love, becoming more clear-headed and independent; . . . the heroes . . . soften in their manners and emotions, becoming more perceptive and gentle until the meeting point is found. It is the counterpart of the dance, that loaded social occasion, when the woman puts down her needle, gets up from her chair, and reveals

herself unexpectedly spirited, physically energetic—becoming more like her idea of a man in order to come closer to him; while the man sets his warlike, business, political affairs aside as he bows over her hand—making himself more like his idea of a woman in order to come closer to her. (173)

Helen has proven her courage and independence; Gilbert has become more sensitive and less self-indulgent.

Gilbert will live matrifocally, empowered by his wife with the very Old Testament rewards of pastoral patriarchy. It is ironic—but Anne Brontë maintains that it works out to a very acceptable equality. Together Helen and the good gardener Markham can re-create the Eden spoiled by sin. Huntingdon was indeed “the old Adam”; Gilbert is the new.

Part IV

Conclusion

In her two novels the author maintains that kind and loving women and men should be rewarded with kind and loving partners, and that society should so order itself that more such people can grow and thrive. It seems little enough to ask, but it was more than fate was inclined to grant Anne Brontë. In response to this deprivation she forged throughout her "exiled and harassed" life an ideal of marriage which grew at once more realistic and more sublime. Deploring the falsely romantic notions which serve to entrap, disappoint, and ultimately alienate husbands and wives, she insists that real "romance" lies in the quiet daily routine of a couple whose marriage is founded on self-esteem and mutual respect and affection. Here is true power, because here is integrity. Nothing can shake its foundations.

Anne's vision matures and expands in the short time that separates the composition of the two works. In *Agnes Grey* she is content to let her heroine get her man, to have everything made right by that man in the revelation of one glorious master-plan. Agnes goes forth into a hostile world, she endures, and she triumphs. In no very satisfying way, however, does she effect this triumph herself. All the vitality is Weston's. Both study, then approve, then love—but Weston *acts*. The reader willingly believes in the felicity of their eventual marriage, but may be bothered by the nature of Agnes's experience with independence. Almost all of it seems to have been negative, and there is no obvious cause-and-effect relationship between her suffering and her reward. One can only cite poetic justice and be happy for her.

Agnes gains the understanding of human nature denied her by her sheltered upbringing; the reader is probably meant to understand that her new depth of experience will serve her well in her rôles of mother and clergy wife, but the point is not unmistakably clear. Neither is it evident that Agnes would not have been happier remaining at home like her sister Mary and eventually marrying a local cleric. Mr. Grey's fears for the marital prospects of his "poor penniless things" (42) have not been realized: Mary appears more than happy, and her good husband Mr. Richardson, though merely sketched as a character, does not seem markedly inferior to Weston. Thus, the notion that Agnes "earns" her excellent husband through initiative and perseverance is never adequately developed. The reader is left wondering about the point of all her suffering.

Then, too, there seems little possibility of personal growth within the marriage. The conclusion describes changes wrought and problems tackled, but these are enacted in the social arena and through the production of children. They have combined their energies for the improvement of humanity and theirs is a winning team because there is never the least conflict between them. They are essentially the same person divided along very Victorian lines into active male and passive female virtues. The notion of growth seems in this context unnecessary and indeed irrelevant. Weston functions as the type of a moral man; Agnes escapes two-dimensionality only because Anne Brontë gives us intimate access to her heroine's psyche and paints with a fine brush the details of her servitude.

The definition of morality presents no problems for the heroine, then. Good is good and bad is bad; only in the presentation of Agnes's mother and, especially, father, does the author give us anything like a morally "grey" area. In the character of Richard Grey the reader may perceive the classical concept of *hamartia*, the fatal flaw which destroys an otherwise virtuous man. It is this admixture of negative and positive traits which renders his one of the two really interesting personalities in the story. The other is Rosalie Murray's, likewise a morally mixed character, and how much more thought-provoking she could have been had the author allowed her to develop her capacity for reflection! No doubt Anne would have considered this an instance of "represent[ing] a bad thing in its least offensive light" (Preface), but Rosalie's cautionary tale might have had more impact had she been represented as less of a thoroughgoing moral imbecile.

Agnes herself "lives out no personal crisis of contradictory values" (Eagleton 134) because all her enemies are external; once Weston restores her to her rightful home they can be left behind with a shudder and a sorrowful shake of the head. She acknowledges that she has been ingenuous in her hopes for a career, and nothing happens to prompt second thoughts. She must simply rely on Anne Brontë and Weston to grant her the opportunity for a different and vastly more satisfying life.

Agnes, then, fails to grow as a character in any meaningful way because her perceptions of morality never vary and because Anne cannot resist coming to her rescue. Her story is delightful and the reader can only cheer her victory, but

perhaps a still, small voice kept asking Anne, "is it honest?" How truthful is it even to represent such a paragon as Weston, and what lessons can be drawn from her novel by imperfect women who must choose their husbands from a population of imperfect men? Does Anne not, as artist, parallel Agnes's enforced function of teaching mere superficialities?

Anne's discomfort with *Agnes Grey* may be inferred from the radically different tone of her second novel. Between the composition of *Agnes Grey* and the writing of *Tenant*, Anne's concept of hero and heroine undergoes a salutary change. The protagonists become less two-dimensionally virtuous and, consequently, more engaging and meaningful to the reader. The modern critic might wish that Anne had apportioned their shortcomings more evenly, or at least have allowed Gilbert a fairer share of the more lofty failings: although the besetting sins of each are pride and vanity, their manifestations in Helen seem to partake of the classically tragic, whereas their presence in Gilbert finds expression in foot-stamping and sulking. Unlike Gilbert, Helen is never merely *silly*. Nevertheless, both find favour with the reader as recognizable human beings. The same perception holds true in considering the antagonists. The major characters are quite believable in their vicious malice and degradation, and Anne Brontë prepares the reader well for the revelation of their worst depravities. Anne is more competent at delineating the nature and motivations of evil than of goodness, perhaps because she has so shrewdly analyzed its origins in defective moral education.

Helen need not be mated with a brother-under-the-skin, as is Agnes, because the exigencies of her character force her to compromise, to apprehend that goodness may exist in a nature surprisingly different from her own. After she and Gilbert have battled to a peaceful understanding they need fear no homogenization of their personalities. Helen and Gilbert will remain equally matched but complementary in their qualities—and therefore more truly engaged with each other and a more vital and interesting couple to the reader than are Agnes and Weston. They do much more to earn each other. Agnes merely waits for Weston to come for her, and there is no sense that he ever agonizes on her behalf or fears for the possible loss of her love. Helen and Gilbert, like the young friends and lovers of Anne's poetry and juvenilia, more truly share their sufferings and therefore seem more genuinely to earn their peace and prosperity.

Helen emerges as an active moral being because she must make choices: options are revealed to her as they never are to Agnes, and the stakes are higher. Her initial statement of selfhood, her marriage to Huntingdon, is far more important—and ultimately more ironic—than Agnes's self-confident decision to become a governess. Once married and a mother, her responsibilities are greater and the choices she must make are therefore more fateful. On the one hand, she can continue as governess-wife, morally unimpeachable if completely ineffectual; on the other hand, she can gain a degree of approbation from her husband—for what it is worth—and a great deal of social approval by transmuting herself into an angel in the house.

Both roles enjoy the sanction of tradition, the latter more than the former. But Anne Brontë avers, as does her sister Charlotte in the Preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, that “conventionality is not morality” (5). Therefore, she allows her character to create an entirely new type of moral woman, one who insists on her right to the integrity of her own body, psyche, and soul. Helen makes her most splendidly moral statement by opting out of traditional morality. Convention is inadequate to her needs.

Agnes perceives that her actions have made her unhappy, but she makes no effort to ameliorate her situation. Passively, she waits to be loved, and then withdraws into a man’s custody. A radically different situation obtains in the case of Helen Huntingdon. Both her “career moves” are matrimonial, but she is permitted to compensate for the failure of the first by experiencing success in the second. If her original impulses and plan of action were faulty, they are not always so: she can try again, this time informed by a wealth of experience. In other words, unlike Agnes, Helen learns positive lessons from her negative experiences, the most important of which is the knowledge of her ultimate competence as a moral agent. Agnes is a total failure in her endeavours; she ameliorates nobody and makes herself worse. She never knows whether she could have succeeded in another position. Helen seems set fair to copy Agnes’s career, but Anne will have no more defeated women. A better example is needed.

Helen relies partly on her brother for succour, but the reader suspects that

Helen, like Elizabeth I, could “thrive if she were cast out into her kingdom in her petticoat.” Empowerment comes from knowledge of her righteousness—not from the deluded sense of self-righteous missionary zeal which brought about her disastrous marriage, but from the justice of her cause: her destructive hubris becomes the astonishing courage to look Christian patriarchy squarely in the eye and say, “the system you have created is wrong and unjust”—and then to look Gilbert, a representative of that patriarchy whether he will or no, squarely in the eye and say, “I love you. I am willing to try again.”

Unlike Agnes, Helen knows she has as much to bring to her husband as he has to give her. And, unlike Agnes, she need not be eternally grateful to a male rescuer—but it is vital to the reader’s understanding of *Tenant* and of Anne’s concept of marriage to appreciate that Helen wants no gratitude from Gilbert, either. She has in the past been enraged at Huntingdon’s ingratitude for her sacrifices on his behalf; now she knows that conscious sacrifice and gratitude have nothing to do with real love, power, or integrity. She can help Gilbert to understand what true marriage should be because she knows even better than he what it should not be.

Anne Brontë’s new type of moral woman anticipates the “New Woman” of the later nineteenth century in her demand for moral equality. There is no indication that she believed in universal suffrage—her High Toryism would suggest not—and neither, as a committed Christian, would she have had any truck with the advocates of free love. Nevertheless, in demanding through Helen Huntingdon the right for

women to act as autonomous beings and to bring influence to bear upon society without the offices of a male intermediary, Anne Brontë gives us one of the first truly feminist novels.

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VITA

Surname: KNIGHT **Given Names:** Hilary Ruth

Place of Birth: Finedon, Northants., England

Date of Birth: March 5th, 1953

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. 1971-72 and 1973-75

University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C. 1982 to 1987

Degrees Awarded:

B.A. 1986 University of Victoria, B.C.

Honours and Awards:

University of Victoria President's Scholarship for Part-Time
Undergraduate Students, 1984-85 and 1985-86

The Mairi Riddel Memorial Book Prize for best essay written in an
English graduate seminar, 1987

University of Victoria Fellowship, 1986-87 and 1987

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Author



Hilary Knight

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