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Ideology and Femininity in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Between 1847 and 1848, the literary market of Victorian England convulsed under the influence of two novels from previously unknown authors: Currer Bell's *Jane Eyre* and Ellis Bell's *Wuthering Heights*. Known to a slightly smaller number was a novel by a third Bell: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, by Acton Bell. Despite the authors' relative obscurity, these novels quickly drew popular attention—and incited controversy. For as many reviewers praised the novels, others agreed with the *Athenaeum's* 1847 description of *Wuthering Heights* as “painful and exceptional subjects...the eccentricities of ‘woman’s fantasy’...the contemplation of which true taste rejects” (Chorley 272). The same writer for the *Athenaeum* published a second review, this time of all three novels, in 1850 and castigated them as “a repudiation of conventionalisms” and “unfeminine” (Chorley 346).¹ For all the technical merit that almost every review recognized in the authors, the Brontës' blunt handling of religion, morality, and gender shocked Victorian audiences and their novels rapidly became texts which “decent mothers forbade their daughters to read” (Reef 116).² Despite the Victorians' strong reactions for or against the Bells—who were, of course, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë—even the texts' first readers clearly recognized their instinctive questioning of women's roles and gendered foundations of Victorian society.

¹ While I have chosen to include two reviews by the same author, largely because of their particularly aggressive wording, the reader should note that quoted reviews are indicative of a wider sampling of contemporary reviews of the Brontës' work.

² One of the most scathing reviews of *Jane Eyre* came from a frequently published art historian, Elizabeth Rigby, who published her angry review in the *The Quarterly Review*. In it, she famously called the novel “an anti-Christian composition” and Jane herself “a mere heathen.” She vigorously asserted that Currer Bell had to be a man, for no woman could write with such vulgarity. The review made Charlotte so angry that it was one of the few she retained.

Since the nineteenth century, the Brontës' writings have consistently garnered critical attention, in part because of their ongoing relevancy to contemporary debates about gender. While the popularity of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) have ensured ongoing scholarly attention, a dearth of research remains in applying Marxist and feminist theory to each novel. While scholarship exists praising the unconventional heroines in the Brontës' novels or examining how Jane, Catherine, or Helen embody the growing consciousness of the proletariat, academia has yet to produce a Marxist-feminist reading of any of the Brontës' works.³

However, a feminist reading of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, within the framework of ideas produced by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, generates readings of the Brontës' novels that reveal gender as a social construction. Beyond identifying the social institutions that craft and maintain femininity, the Brontës' novels rewrite Victorian standards of womanhood and directly threaten patriarchal definitions of gender. By isolating their heroines both physically and socially, the Brontës create space for each woman to evaluate and define herself without the smothering expectations of nineteenth-century England. The resulting portrayals of femininity the Brontës' heroines display are active, evolving, and varied, suggesting subversive and pluralistic iterations of womanhood. This recrafted femininity becomes so strong, in fact, that Jane, Catherine, and Helen are each able to maintain their rebranded womanhood within the traditionally patriarchal institution of marriage.

Karl Marx used the term "ideology" in his writings on what economists would later dub Communism and literary theorists would transmute into Marxist theory. Marx and his adherents

³ For examples of Marxist, class-based readings of the Brontës, *Styles of Marxism; Styles of Criticism*. *Wuthering Heights: A Case Study* by Ronald Frankenberg offers a panorama of Marxist scholarship on Emily Brontë's novel from its initial publication through the twentieth century.

concentrate on the economics and power dynamics of class struggles and Marx goes so far as to note in *The Communist Manifesto* that “all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (661). Essentially, Marx asserted that class struggles express themselves through the economic allocation of power, which creates a hegemony, or group with a dominant ideology that attempts to maintain a status quo.

Later theorists expanded on Marx’s work on the creation or maintenance of a hegemony—including Louis Althusser. A Marxist and literary theorist, Althusser explored Marx’s articulation of ideology, or the beliefs that preserve the power of the economically dominant social class, in his work *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Here, Althusser classifies the conveyors of ideology as either Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) or Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). Althusser defines ISAs as “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (1291). He then provides a list of these institutions, including religion, schools, social units such as the family, and the media. ISAs stand in contrast to Althusser’s definition of RSAs, which are wielded bluntly by the government and include forces like the military or the law. Althusser describes the process by which ISAs convince their subjects to accept their place in the current system as “interpellation,” or when “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals...by that very precise operation...*interpellation*” (1306). Understanding the movements of societies through the lens of ISAs enables the observer to recognize how ISAs function in a myriad of ways to “interpellate” or enforce status quos. Marx’s ideas of power structures and Althusser’s insights into how these structures maintain themselves provide a theoretical foundation on which to map feminist theory.

Utilizing Althusser's and Marx's approaches to power dynamics and constructions of identity in a feminist reading reveals femininity as a social construction created and maintained by a patriarchal hegemony. Since ISAs convince their subjects to accept their social and economic place, they play an instrumental role in shaping the expectation and lived reality of womanhood. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* articulates how individuals "perform" gender: "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body...Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (2384). Under Butler's logic, gender becomes a series of behaviors, with which ISAs are responsible for teaching, or interpellating, subjects. This interpellation occurs both overtly through formal institutions such as schools, and subliminally by encouraging women to model their behavior on other, interpellated women. Teresa de Lauretis articulates a similar perspective to Butler's in her book *Technologies of Gender*, in which she observes that "The sex-gender system, in short, is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, prestige, value, location in kinship, status within the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society" (Lauretis 5). Analyzing how gendered standards appear and assign value in each text reveals how social norms position femininity as not only domestic, pious, or chaste, but as inherently subservient and at the disposal of patriarchal figures.

Any discussion of hegemony and gender roles in British Victorian society must immediately confront the ubiquitous doctrine of "separate spheres." Scholars Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall pioneered historical analyses of Victorian gender dynamics in 1987 in their groundbreaking text *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*. By combining

analysis of personal documents with public records, Davidoff and Hall offer an innovative, detailed portrayal of gender roles in Victorian England. They premise their opinions on the assumption that women lived in sequestered, “private” spheres and possessed little influence beyond their familial circles while men inhabited the “public” sphere of business and politics. So prevalent were Davidoff and Hall’s arguments that scholar Judith Flanders would be one of many scholars to build on them twenty years later and note in the same vein that “The Victorian house became defined as a refuge, a place apart from the sordid aspects of common life, with different morals, different rules, different guidelines to protect the soul from being consumed by commerce” (5). Women, Flanders asserts, played a vital role in creating this domestic sanctuary by using their inherent goodness and morality (6). Historian Catherine Gleadle likewise writes that “Such images of the domesticated female were widely used in discussion of the ‘separate spheres’ in which women’s mission was to preside over a loving home, whilst men were to brave the vicissitudes and demands of public and business life” (84). The idealized Victorian woman, who created a virtuous and smoothly running domestic space for her husband, became associated with a phrase coined by Coventry Patmore in his poem “Angel in the House.”⁴ Feminist literary scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar address the Victorian convention of the angel in the house as well in their book *Madwoman in the Attic*, and define her by way of her “modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness—all of which are modes of mannerliness that contributed to...angelic innocence” (23). Women in the Brontës’ world, then, would have been steeped in discourse emphasizing their inborn virtue and

⁴ Coventry Patmore was a published Victorian poet who wrote one his best-known poems, “Angel in the House” about his wife Emily Andrews in 1854. Although this poem appeared after the publication of the novels examined here, the rhetoric Patmore would later collect under one term had already begun to circulate by the early nineteenth century. Thus, although slightly asynchronous, I will continue to refer to the collection of expectations surrounding Victorian women as those of the “Angel in the House.”

the necessity of embracing their submissiveness and domesticity as angels in their houses. The “Angel in the House,” in short, was the epitome of ISA-constructed femininity.

Despite how many scholars have noted the prevalence of the “Angel in the House,” other studies have argued that many middle-and-working-class women ignored this “ideal woman,” out of either rebelliousness or necessity. Lauretis highlights the difference between rhetoric and reality as “Woman with the capital letter, the *representation* of an essence inherent in all women...distinct from real women, the real, historical beings and social subjects” (9). In terms of Victorian England, Lauretis’s ideas indicate that the number of actual angels in their respective houses might be substantially fewer than Victorian rhetoric and contemporary scholarship have implied. Directly after providing observations on the ubiquity of the “angel in the house” ideal in Victorian England, Flanders writes, “Evangelical ideas had linked the idea of womanliness to women carrying out their biological destiny—to being wives and mothers...despite the fact that, by the second half of the century, 25 percent of women had paying work—of necessity...Most of the remaining 75 percent worked at home” (13). Likewise, Amanda Vickery directly challenges Davidoff and Hall’s arguments and asserts that, for most women, the idealized passive housewife was an unheard-of luxury: “The metaphor of separate spheres fails to capture the texture of female subordination and the complex interplay of emotion and power in family life...our preoccupation with separate spheres may have blinded us to other languages at play in the Victorian period” (401). Vickery does note, however, that the ideology of separate spheres and the angel in the house remained a constraining force for women, regardless of how poorly it reflected reality: “Much recent scholarship has refused to see the domestic ideal as a force, which, in and of itself, severely limited a woman’s freedom of manoeuver” (391).

Thus, it is important to distinguish between idealized discourses surrounding women in nineteenth-century England and the actual experiences of middle-and-working class women, as they often left the domestic sphere to support themselves or their families. The Brontë sisters themselves embody this reality, as all three of them worked as a teacher or governess for varying lengths of time to support themselves and their father—in addition to their writing and publishing, a “masculine” activity that categorically subverted sanctioned femininity. In fact, Jane, Helen, and Catherine also violate the sanctity of the “Angel in the House” in their quest for self-sufficiency. Thus, it is necessary to position the Brontës within the tension between ideology and reality and understand their portrayals of women as combatting ideology through a potent mixture of reality and imagination.

As the earliest and arguably most formative ISA each protagonist encounters, their families immediately dictate their actions by demanding that they become self-effacing and self-sacrificing. In *Jane Eyre*, the title heroine grows up an orphan in the house of her wealthy relatives, the Reeds. Jane Eyre’s relatives condition her acceptance into the family circle on her behavior, as her Aunt Reed “regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance...but...[I acquired] a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner...she really must exclude me” (C. Brontë 5). Jane’s aunt—and the rest of the Reed household—compare Jane’s appearance and behavior to that of her cousin Georgiana, “who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spirit, a captious and insolent carriage, [and] was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and purchased indemnity for every fault” (C. Brontë 12). Annette Frederico, in her essay “‘A Cool Observer of her Own Sex Like Me’: Girl Watching in *Jane Eyre*,” notes how these physical and behavioral comparisons manifest in the opening lines of the novel: “I

never liked long walks...humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed” (C. Brontë 5). Jane’s awareness of the difference in attractiveness between herself and her cousins highlights her sensation of being “an uncongenial alien” among them and emphasizes to her childhood self the necessity of performance and appearance to earn companionship or affection.

Like *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* centers around a clinically dysfunctional family. Unlike Jane, however, who must learn to resist the messages of one familial ISA, both Catherine Earnshaw and her daughter, Catherine II, must avoid both the stifling atmosphere of the socially sanctioned Grange and the cruel abuse of the Heights.⁵ This realization, in fact, leads to an important note regarding *Wuthering Heights* as it appears in conversation with *Jane Eyre* and *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Unlike the other two novels, which find pockets of isolation within a larger social framework, such as the seclusion of Thornfield Hall or Moor House in *Jane Eyre* or the limited social interactions in *Tenant*, *Wuthering Heights* acknowledges very little influence from people or institutions beyond the two central households of The Heights and Thrushcross Grange. These two households perpetuate graphically different portraits of families and of women, and Gilbert and Gubar rightly note that the Heights and the Grange “at every point...are opposed to each other, as if each in its self-assertion must absolutely deny the other’s being” (273). The isolated dichotomy of the Heights and Grange creates a microcosm, with which much of the scholarly criticism of *Wuthering Heights* occupies itself by demarcating which of the two homes represents “hell” and which “heaven.” While most academics are quick to agree with Martha Nussbaum’s assertion that The Grange contains a shallow imitation of emotion and The

⁵ “The Heights” refers to Catherine Earnshaw’s childhood home, while Thrushcross Grange, the neighboring manor, is the house she marries into and in which Catherine II grows up.

Heights, as represented through the character of Heathcliff, possesses an “entirely unguarded love” that “is linked...with a deeper sort of generosity and the roots of truer altruism,” Emily Brontë’s treatment of gender in both houses presents challenges that Catherine, in both of her iterations, must successfully recognize and overcome (379).

The Heights, the home that first greets readers, is a place of unmitigated violence and raw desire. Gilbert and Gubar note that the building itself is unfinished and distinctly masculine, with raw meat on display in the living room and no parlor to receive guests (261). Even Lockwood, the primary narrator, first enters the house only to be attacked by a “hive” of “four-footed fiends” (E. Brontë 6). For Catherine Earnshaw, The Heights presents a violent backdrop to her childhood that leaves her empowered to have her own way in everything, but devoid of affection or care. Nelly Dean describes the young Catherine as “a wild, wicked slip” that nonetheless charms her family with her “bonniest eye, and sweetest smile” (E. Brontë 34). Catherine absorbs the chaos of her early family, particularly the influence of her adopted brother Heathcliff, with whom she “would run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day” (E. Brontë 37). Like the animalistic Heathcliff, Catherine is tempestuous until the influence of Isabella and Edgar separates her from her wild nature. In her final years of life, she remarks plaintively to Ellen that “The thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I’m tired, tired of being enclosed here. I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart; but really with it, and in it” (E. Brontë 124-125). Ultimately, in attempting to reject the harshness that Heathcliff and the Heights represent, Catherine sacrifices herself to a polished but short life with superficial relationships.

In contrast Cathy Linton, or Catherine II, grows up in the refined, patently interpellated world of Thrushcross Grange and reflects a version of her mother altered by the Grange's stultifying influence. Where Catherine I rejected the anarchy and neglect of the Heights and found herself swallowed and suppressed into death by the Grange, Catherine II must navigate between both extremes to create a sense of self free from the extremes of her environment. As the indulged, only child in the household, Nelly's early description of Catherine captures the pieces of her mother's temper mellowed with a passive selfishness:

Her spirit was high, though not rough, and qualified by a heart sensitive and lively to excess in its affections. That capacity for intense attachments reminded me of her mother; still, she did not resemble her, for she could be soft and mild as a dove...she had faults to foil her gifts. A propensity to be saucy was one; and a perverse will that indulged children invariably acquire...if a servant chanced to vex her, it was always: 'I shall tell papa!' (E. Brontë 145)

Edgar Linton adores his daughter, but the selfish and protective nature of his love demands that she remain within the property of which he is lord and master, relegating her to the feminine and submissive role of daughter. As a part of this control, Cathy grows up in deep isolation, as her father's love and health depend on her following his rules: "Till she reached the age of thirteen, she had not once been beyond the range of the park by herself...the chapel the only building she had ever approached or entered, except her own home...she was a perfect recluse, and, apparently, perfectly contented" (E. Brontë 146). Perhaps it is her early confinement that enables Gilbert and Gubar to write that "Because she is a dutiful daughter, moreover, Catherine II is a cook, nurse, teacher, and housekeeper. In other words, where her mother was a heedless child, Catherine II promises to become an ideal Victorian woman" (299). Just as the violence of the Heights steers the first Catherine so far away from Victorian gender norms that she loses the

capacity for empathetic relationship, so does the family at the Grange attempt to subdue Catherine II into passive, feminine dormancy.

In *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, young Helen's aunt and uncle interpellate her with a conviction that it is properly feminine for a wife to shield her husband's reputation, regardless of personal cost. When Helen reaches marriageable age, her Aunt Maxwell cautions her to choose her mate carefully in the novel's beginning, and notes that "Believe me, matrimony is a serious thing.' And she spoke it so seriously, that one might have fancied she had known it to her cost" (A. Brontë 98). Scholar Meghan Bullock argues that it is Helen's aunt who, through her marriage to a selfish and indolent man, teaches Helen to cope with an abusive marriage through silence. Bullock writes that Helen's "Uncle keeps friends similar to Arthur's, and shows the signs of having lived like him at one time in his life. Helen's aunt serves as Helen's model for how to deal with marital troubles: silence" (136). Just as Jane learns the necessity of fitting a social mold to earn acceptance and both of Emily Brontë's Catherines navigate separating their identities from their environment, Helen absorbs that it is correctly feminine behavior to absorb male cruelties in silence.

Initially, female education centered around preparing girls to be good wives and mothers. This philosophy persisted until the 1850s, shortly after the Brontës penned their respective novels. During the Brontës' childhood, women were educated at home by their mothers, or by a governess (Gleadle). Gleadle writes that this governess-offered education would include "staple fare of basic literacy, history, geography and, abilities permitting, music, languages, and painting: 'accomplishments' which...it was hoped would render privileged girls attractive to potential suitors" (53). Gradually, the latter half of the nineteenth century began to produce more formalized institutions for the benefit of girls' educations.

The increasing emphasis on female education derived from a joint consciousness of nationalist and religious values. On the one hand, Britain's increasing contact with foreign cultures created a social desire to shore up a distinct English identity, in which educated women could play a critical part as the "natural guardians of the nation's culture" (Gleadle 140). To the British mind, a crucial piece of educating responsible, feminine British women was to instill female pupils with discipline and religious order. Gleadle observes that most educational institutions maintained "a 'double conformity': they felt obliged to achieve the educational standards reached in boys' schools, as well as conforming to the prevailing notions of femininity" (Gleadle 140). The prevailing notions of femininity remained intricately connected with religion which, in fact, remained the backbone of female education, as even skeptics of educating females reasoned that educated women would prove better moral guides to their children.

To this point, *The Children's Friend*, a weekly magazine produced by Reverend William Wilson, who oversaw the "Clergy Daughter's School" where the young Brontë sisters attended, highlights the ingrained connection between female education and religiosity. Wilson writes in the introductory preface to the magazine that "I hope to give you many pretty stories, but you must bear in mind, that they are meant to teach you to know and love the Lord, as well as to amuse you" (392). After this intro, Wilson provides a story, "sent in a letter from a young lady" about a small girl who asked to remain in "the school until it was night, because she heard of Christ Jesus, and she wanted to be good" (393). Wilson urges his readers to emulate this girl's self-denying piety and connects female education with true virtue.

The educations of the women in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflect a sampling of different educational methods, but all emphasize the connection between

education and submissive feminine behavior. Religion and education combine in social institutions that prescribe and dictate the private and public lives of men and women—but particularly women. As a child, Jane attends Lowood Institute, a charity school run by the hypocritical Mr. Brocklehurst. Theorist Adrienne Rich describes Mr. Brocklehurst as “the embodiment of class and sexual double-standards...using religion, charity, and morality...to repress and humiliate the young women over whom he is set in charge” (472). Brocklehurst himself supports this assessment of his character, stating that his intentions are “not to accustom [his pupils] to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying” (C. Brontë 53). To achieve this goal, Brocklehurst systematically deprives his pupils, limiting their food, warm clothing, and even individuality by forcing them to wear unflattering uniforms and keep their hair short. Lowood Institute functions as both an educational and religious ISA by placing the girls in a starving, unhealthy environment that physically weakens them into feminine submission.

The crotchety manservant in *Wuthering Heights*, Joseph, functions similarly to Brocklehurst as a painful embodiment of religious ISAs. A patent hypocrite, “Joseph...was, and is yet, most likely, the wearisomest, self-righteous Pharisee that ever ransacked a Bible to rake the promises to himself and fling the curses on his neighbors” (E. Brontë 33). Joseph and the faceless local curate act as the only instructors in *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine, Hindley, and Heathcliff learn the rudiments of their education either at church with the curate or under Joseph’s eye at the Heights. Despite the relative absence of formal education, Catherine’s early familial experiences with religion offer her an informal understanding of the religious expectations surrounding her. Catherine Earnshaw’s father uses religion as a form of punishment to her; but once again, she soon becomes desensitized to it as a threat and defines herself in opposition to it: “I cannot love

thee...Go, say thy prayers, child, and ask God's pardon'...That made her cry, at first; and then, being repulsed continually hardened her, and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for her faults, and beg to be forgiven" (E. Brontë 34). Even as Catherine I actively resists religious interpellation, her daughter Catherine experiences religion as part of stifling interpellation, as the church is the only building she has ever entered apart from the Grange.

By the time *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* begins, Helen has already passed through any formal education she may have received and her "accomplishments" indicate her educational consecration to the role of housewife. She plays piano and sings mediocly, but her true talent and parlor trick lies in her painting. Helen's education has also imprinted her with a deep religious devotion, which manifests in her strict adherence to church attendance before and after her marriage to the patently irreverent Mr. Huntingdon. Her religious conviction, in fact, motivates her choice to remain with her abusive husband for as long as she does. The doctrines of religion are also what incur the community's judgement on her after she leaves Mr. Huntingdon. Once in hiding in Wildfell Hall, Helen encounters the formal disapproval of the local Vicar, who "maintained that she had done wrong to leave her husband; it was a violation of her sacred duties as a wife, and a tempting of Providence by laying herself open to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step" (A. Brontë 328). In short, Helen's encounters with religion persuade her to endure her husband's behavior with passive virtue rather than take initiative for her own safety.

Media constitutes the final prevalent ISA in each novel, as images create a visual of ISA-produced femininity with which the Brontës' heroines must compare themselves. Antonia Losano, in her text *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature*, discusses how both Jane's and Helen's artwork "comment[s] on gender and class politics" by positioning both the female artist

and the work they produce within the framework of Victorian expectations for women (99). Jane creates images reflective of gendered politics when she draws herself and Blanche Ingram, her rival for Rochester's attention. When Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall as a governess, she finds herself attracted to her Byronic employer, Mr. Rochester. Aware of their class disparity, Jane attempts to repress her feelings for the charismatic Rochester by drawing herself and Blanche. Jane participates in what Annette Frederico terms "the politics of beauty" and connects appearance to class when she labels her own portrait "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor and plain" and Blanche's "Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank" (Frederico; C. Brontë 137). Losano notes that Jane's drawing of Blanche is based on a woman Jane has not yet met, so that "both images are valued not for their final appearance but for their emotive effect...on the artist" (117). In other words, media in *Jane Eyre* is significant less for the quality of the work itself than for how it concretizes Jane's understanding of herself in relation to ISA-sanctioned femininity.

In *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen's art becomes a battleground of control with her husband, Mr. Huntingdon, as his early attempts to temper and interpret her art gradually yield to her control over its production and interpretation. Before their marriage, Huntingdon looks at one of Helen's early paintings and tells her what it means: "Sweet innocent! She's thinking there will come a time when she will be wooed and won like that pretty hen-dove by as fond and fervent a lover; and she's thinking how pleasant it will be, and how tender and faithful he will find her" (A. Brontë 118) Huntingdon uses this description to prescribe Helen's own romantic and expectant state. Losano shrewdly comments of this scene that "Huntingdon's appraisal of Helen's artwork is misguided, motivated solely by aesthetic ignorance on one hand and sexual interest and egotism on the other. Huntingdon sees in Helen's artwork precisely what he wants to see—a young girl just coming into sexual awareness and waiting for his advances" (69). When

Helen ventures to suggest that perhaps the figure in the painting will also find loyalty from her lover, Huntingdon scoffs at her naivete in a marked foreshadowing of their disastrous marriage (A. Brontë 118). This interaction, and the way that sketches of his face mark the backs of her other drawings like sentinels, mark Huntingdon's use of art as a control mechanism and form of interpellation. By telling Helen what her art means, Huntingdon is attempting to interpellate her with the passive submissiveness he wants from her as his wife.

Wuthering Heights, similarly to *Tenant*, features male characters appropriating images of painted women as a form of interpellation. Lockwood, the primary narrator, evinces an interest in Catherine II's beauty during his first painfully awkward interaction with her and sees her as a potential bride. Later, Nelly Dean accuses him of being in love with her and asks him "why have you asked me to hang her picture over your fireplace?" (E. Brontë 194). Readers never hear a description, either from Lockwood or from Nelly, of how this picture presents Catherine—or even if it is a faithful representation of her—but once again possession of an image represents Lockwood's desire to possess the original and media becomes an avenue for male attempts to dominate women.

Like media, the Brontës' novels each contain an interpellated "angel in the house" that embody femininity for the heroines to critique or react against. These interpellated women represent another hurdle for each heroine to face and conquer on her way to separation from standard femininity, embodying Gilbert and Gubar's statement: "Women...acting as agents for men, may be the keepers of other women. But both keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains" (351). Jane, Helen, and Catherine each come to view their would-be rivals with a combination of contempt and pity, as they recognize the chains that bind these women who have accepted interpellation into normative femininity. In *Jane Eyre*, Blanche Ingram represents the

first great threat to Jane's happiness as the ostensible object of Rochester's affections. By her beauty and rank, she appears to upstage Jane with her "Tall, fine bust, sloping shoulders, long, graceful neck; olive complexion, dark and clear; noble features...She was greatly admired...for her accomplishments" (C. Brontë 135). Soon, however, Jane develops contempt for her would-be rival:

Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling...She was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments, but her mind was poor, her heart barren...nothing bloomed spontaneously in its soil...She was not good; she was not original...she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her. (C. Brontë 158)

A similar narrative appears in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* through Helen's fraught relationship with the flighty Annabella Wilmot. Like Blanche, Annabella is statuesque, accomplished, and flirtatious, and like Blanche she threatens the heroine's relationship with her potential husband. Helen's retiring and quiet disposition sits poorly with Huntingdon, who prefers the "fine dashing" Annabella, who describes herself as "too great a flirt to be married" (A. Brontë 105). Annabella possesses performative accomplishments and enraptures Huntingdon with her piano playing and singing. While Helen cannot help but call Annabella "a magnificent creature," she nonetheless disdains to emulate Annabella's behavior to retain her husband and rather relinquishes him willingly once she learns of his infidelity.

To Catherine Earnshaw, Isabella embodies the female version of the interpellated Thrushcross Grange—in other words, she becomes a feminine product of her environment. Unlike the passive angels in the house, Isabella is active, but her lack of self-knowledge or self-

sufficiency condemns her to exile from her family and an ignominious death. Isabella patently subscribes to the Victorian rhetoric that female virtue can purify men and, in her naivete, she convinces herself that she can rescue Heathcliff from his dark exterior. She is “Catherine’s opposite, a model of the stereotypical young lady patriarchal education is designed to produce” (Gilbert and Gubar 287). Initially, Isabella reflects the insipid blandness of the Grange, kindling Catherine’s immediate disdain: “I am not envious: I never feel hurt at the brightness of Isabella’s yellow hair, and the whiteness of her skin, at her dainty elegance, and the fondness all the family exude for her...[Edgar and Isabella] are spoiled children, and fancy the world was made for their accommodation” (E. Brontë 77). However, once Isabella has been exposed to the roughness of Heathcliff, her personality gradually remodels itself in his image, instead. She becomes violent and craves weapons and opportunities to inflict pain on others:

I surveyed the weapon inquisitively; a hideous notion struck me. How powerful I should be possessing such an instrument! I took it from his hand, and touched the blade. He looked astonished at the expression my face assumed during a brief second. It was not horror, it was covetousness. (E. Brontë 109)

Ultimately, Isabella’s inability to define her own identity and her willingness to imbibe the climate of those around her ruin her and lead to a rash elopement and slow moral and physical decline, as Nelly Dean observes, “She already partook of the prevailing spirit of neglect which encompassed her. Her pretty face was wan and listless” (E. Brontë 114). Isabella absorbs the characteristics of the environments and models for Catherine the product of passively receiving ISAs.

However, not every interpellated woman appears pitiful or shallow—and the “feminine” women who strike each heroine as virtuous or enviable present a far greater threat to the

heroine's individuality. Maternal, gentle women provide the most persuasive presentation of the types of femininity produced by ISAs because of the corresponding affection they inspire in each heroine. This tendency has a social and cultural precedent since Victorian mothers were primary agents of interpellation for their daughters. Gleadle notes that "In addition to their academic educative role, mothers were usually responsible for their children's spiritual and moral guidance and...played a key role in socializing children into particular ideological or religious institutions" (82). Jane, Catherine, and Helen all lose their mothers at early ages, but find substitutes in female figures that model religious femininity.

For Jane, these two maternal figures first enter her life to tempt her at Lowood Institute through the persons of Miss Temple and Helen Burns. At Lowood, Jane befriends her angelic fellow student Helen, who first counsels Jane that "You think too much of the love of human beings, you are too impulsive, too vehement" (C. Brontë 59). Gilbert and Gubar argue that Helen hides "a 'sewer' of concealed resentment" which she masks beneath passive religious devotion (346). This reading of Helen makes her death all the more telling, as it suggests that Helen's decaying, consumptive illness and early death are a result of her continual repression of self. Miss Temple, as an older woman, functions in a more maternal role, but nevertheless serves to repress Jane's desires and encourages her to accept interpellation with religious duty and submission. Rich writes of Miss Temple that she "has no power in the world at large...but she has great personal attractiveness, mental and spiritual charm and strength" (473). To Rich, Miss Temple provides a necessary example of the marginalized but potent woman and a key mother-figure for Jane. Under her influence, Jane suppresses her adventurous instincts and sequesters herself away at Lowood until Miss Temple marries and leaves: "She had stood me in the stead of mother...From the day she left I was no longer the same: with her was gone every settled

feeling...I had imbibed something of her nature and habits...I was quiet; I believed I was content” (C. Brontë 71). Helen and Miss Temple’s combined influence settles Jane into submissive, feminine order, until their absence reawakens her desire to discover and assert herself.

Catherine faces a similar situation in *Wuthering Heights* while under the sway of Mrs. Frances Hindley, her brother’s girl-bride who dies shortly after bearing her first child. Rather than intelligent or independent, Frances strikes the narrator Nelly Dean as “half silly...she ran into her chamber, and made me come with her, though I should have been dressing the children; and there she sat shivering” (E. Brontë 36). Frances appears delicate and easily startled and confides during her first conversation with Nelly that she is “so afraid of dying” (E. Brontë 36). Young Catherine prefers her roguish friend Heathcliff to the prancing behavior of her sister-in-law, but when she is attacked by a dog at Thrushcross Grange and obliged to recover there, “[Frances] undertook to keep her sister-in-law in due restraint, when she returned home” (E. Brontë 41). Accordingly, Frances “visited her often, in the interval, and commenced her plan of reform by trying to raise her self-respect with fine clothes and flattery, which she took readily” (E. Brontë 42). Frances assumes a mother role for Catherine by encouraging her to fixate on her appearance and class status. Like Helen Burns and Miss Temple, Frances’s influence weakens with her early death. By dying in childbirth of consumption, Frances constitutes Catherine’s first exposure to conventional Victorian womanhood. Gilbert and Gubar write that she “incarnates” the “social disease of ladyhood, with its attendant silliness or madness” (269). Not only does Frances vanish quickly from Catherine’s life, but she paints a vivid—and chillingly prophetic—portrait of the consequences of acceding to the femininity preached by ISAs.

In addition to Helen's aunt in *Tenant*, her friend Millicent Hargrave's passive nurturing of an abusive husband reifies Helen's decisions to keep her experiences a secret. Millicent finds herself in a similar situation to Helen's when her family persuades her to marry the roughish Hattersley, who takes her because she is recommended to him as "somebody" that will "let me have my own way in everything...I must have a good, quiet soul that will let me do just what I like...without a word of reproach or complaint" (A. Brontë 160). Like other gentle but interpellated women, Millicent is patently passive, and merely receives the actions of others rather than initiating herself. Hattersley routinely manhandles her, pulls her hair, and verbally abuses her for crying. Yet even when he does, she demonstrates a pleading affection. In one deliberately unsettling scene, Hattersley tells Millicent that he loves her and "In proof of his affection, he clutched a handful of her light brown ringlets, and appeared to twist them unmercifully. 'Do you really, Ralph?' murmured she, with a faint smile beaming through her tears, just putting up her hand to his, in token that he pulled rather too hard" (A. Brontë 204). Millicent, like Helen Burns, is angelic in her suffering, which justifies Helen's approach to enduring her own husband's abuse much as Helen Burns guides Jane towards passive torment.

To complete this edict of femininity, each text also presents warnings of what may happen to women who resist conformity in an attempt to shock each heroine back onto her designated social path. When ISAs fail, society reverts to Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) as a way of containing a threat to social order, a process that *Jane Eyre* demonstrates through the character of Bertha, Rochester's mad wife whom he keeps sequestered in an attic. Because of both her sexual desire and Creole background, traits which makes her nature "wholly alien" to Rochester, he and his society have unsexed Bertha, leaving her with only animal traits so that when Jane encounters her, she observes coolly that "What it was, whether beast or human being,

one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours” (C. Brontë 250). Adrienne Rich writes of Bertha that “The nineteenth-century loose woman might have sexual feelings, but the nineteenth-century *wife* did not and must not; Rochester’s loathing of Bertha is described repeatedly in terms of her physical strength and her violent will—both unacceptable qualities in the nineteenth-century female” (477). Bertha, in other words, represents the antithesis of the interpellated angels in the preceding paragraph and demonstrates the consequences of capitulating to female desires.

However, despite the grotesque warnings and subtle seductions of conventional femininity, these heroines develop the capacity to identify and resist the messages of ISAs, rather than internalizing them. In her survey of literature by British women, Elaine Showalter articulates the stages by which women begin to create and define themselves through their artwork. She defines them thus:

First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values...Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. (Showalter 13)

While Showalter is referring to trends in literary style across decades of women writers, her observations apply readily to a reading of evolving femininity in the Brontës’ literature. If the above discussion of ISAs marks the heroine’s half-hearted attempts to imitate and internalize (or interpellate) into femininity, then the remainder of this argument will explore the stages of protest and self-discovery. Jane, Catherine, and Helen can resist these interpellators and begin to practice self-discovery because they are relatively insulated from ISAs—their physical,

emotional, and social isolation spares them from total conformity into femininity. Without the stifling dominance of ISA-constructed femininity, each woman commands the space to construct her own identity and define her own relationships.

A key piece of this isolation is physical, as these women's stories tend to merely brush with bustling crowds or sprawling metropolises briefly, before retreating away from society for the bulk of the plot. In other words, these novels' events occur away from what Victorian scholars call "the public sphere," which Davidoff and Hall define as "the realm of life in which public opinion can be formed" (419). Victorian society associated this sphere with men and with the temptations the private, female sphere of the home was to counteract. The public sphere, which in its physicality consisted of places of business, such as shops, coffee houses, or political offices, makes no direct appearance in the microcosms of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* or *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Rather, the events of each novel occur in the private sphere of the family and close friends, an artistic choice which automatically forces the plot into the confines of feminine space and buffers the female protagonists from the masculine social strictures of the public sphere.

Jane Eyre and *Wuthering Heights* both occur in remote locations surrounded by moors rather than cities. Jane's first look of Thornfield Hall, the central location of the novel, is of a building surrounded by "quiet and lonely hills enough, and seeming to embrace Thornfield with a seclusion I had not expected to find" (C. Brontë 84). Ferndean, the setting for Jane and Rochester's reunion, and Moor House, where Jane lives with her cousins, are equally remote. *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange, similarly, exist in a physical no less than a social vacuum. The primary narrator, Lockwood, aptly notes that "In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society" (E. Brontë 3). So

isolated is the microcosm of the Heights and the Grange that only the faintest whisper of other towns or cities trespass into the text. When characters leave the two households, such as Heathcliff's vanished years or Isabella's life after she flees from Heathcliff, they vanish off the face of the narrative until they physically reappear in proximity to the Heights and Grange.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall occurs in two primary settings: Huntingdon's country estate, Grassdale Manor, and Helen's gloomy safehouse, Wildfell Hall. Grassdale Manor is similarly isolated to Thornfield Hall or Wuthering Heights, leaving Helen with only a few neighbors to see at long intervals. The physical removal from others heightens Helen's sense of loss when her husband leaves her and she writes plaintively in her diary that "He knows I have no one but Rachel to speak to, for we have no neighbors here...how can you expect me to gather bloom and vigour here, pining in solitude and restless anxiety from day to day?" (A. Brontë 159-160). In contrast to her husband's world at Grassdale, Helen has total control over her visitors at her hideaway of Wildfell Hall. Like *Wuthering Heights*, an external narrator introduces the setting as physically removed and "desolate." The Brontës' tactic of placing their heroines in isolated locations naturally limits the number of other characters they interact with and forces them to introspection.

Physical isolation compounds with separations of class and relationship, as many of these women exist in a hybrid space between classes that inhibits their connections with others. Jane's status as a poor orphan instantly separates her from her cousins the Reeds, and allows John Reed to exclaim, "You are a dependent...you have no money...you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen's children like us" (C. Brontë 8). Even once she has arrived at Thornfield, her occupation as a governess places her above the kindly housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax, but too low to interact with Mr. Rochester's guests as their equal. Instead, she lingers in a corner and listens to

them discuss and evaluate her as if she were an object. Mary Poovey notes that the position of the governess itself was subversive and threatened Victorian class distinctions by creating a woman who belonged in both social spheres and neither: “The governess was the like the middle class mother in the work she performed, but like both a working-class woman and a man in the wages she received, the very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of separate spheres threatened to collapse the differences between them” (Poovey 170). As a governess, Jane threatens gender divisions by receiving payment for her work—a fact which explains the unease Rochester’s guests display towards her and their consciousness that “one of the anathematised race was present” (C. Brontë 151). Jane’s partial place in multiple classes and gender roles, then, isolates her from both.

This isolation from family and equals, in fact, constitutes part of Rochester’s reason for choosing Jane as his new bride; it allows him to take advantage of her. When she tells him that she is kinless, he remarks decisively, “No—that is the best of it...It will atone. Have I not found her friendless, and cold, and comfortless?” (C. Brontë 218). Jane’s lack of relatives allows Rochester to possess her more fully, and Jane attempts to isolate herself even from him by resisting his attempts to, as Rich notes, “make her his object, his creature, to want to dress her up, lavish jewels on her, remake her in another image” (478). Jane rejects Rochester’s advances to commodify her and chooses to maintain her individuality by fleeing Thornfield into the wild moors.

Though Helen possesses the advantage of class over Jane, her lack of companionship isolates her from support systems and forces her to make complicated choices on her own. Bullock notes Helen’s isolation as a deeply telling piece of the novel: “When Helen is first introduced...the reader is struck by her solitude...There is no friendship in the text with the

ladies she is shown to be on good terms with at Wildfell Hall, and the relations with most ladies in the neighborhood seem barely cordial” (136). Once married, Helen’s concealment of Huntingdon’s behavior further separates her from her aunt: “I would beg my uncle and aunt...to come and see me, but I do not like to complain of my loneliness to them, and indeed loneliness is the least of my sufferings” (A. Brontë 160). Even when away from Huntingdon and in hiding as Mrs. Graham, Helen does her best to live as a hermit and avoid her neighbors since she fears their judgement—and does not feel the need for their company: “My kind neighbors will not let me alone...bent on discovering who and what I am, whence I came, and why I have chosen such a home as this. Their society is unnecessary to me, to say the least, and their curiosity annoys and alarms me” (A. Brontë 280-281). Helen’s example marks how women may choose isolation as a place of protection rather than exclusively as a prison.

The characters in *Wuthering Heights* also seem to seek solitude, and even Lockwood’s opening statements praise the isolation of the novel’s small community: “I perceive that people in these regions acquire over people in towns the value...They *do* live more in earnest, more in themselves, and less in surface change, and frivolous external things” (E. Brontë 49). Martha Nussbaum, in contrast, defines *Wuthering Heights*’s negative qualities by its lack of proximity to people and of deep relationships, writing of Lockwood that “The work opens with its refusal of community. The city man has come to the country to avoid, it seems, the ‘stir’ and bustle of superficial social forms....[Thrushcross Grange has] desolation, its emptiness of love” (373). Both Catherines experience extreme isolation from other people, and neither of them ever visits any structures other than the Grange, Heights, and church. By separating each heroine from an abundance of social interaction, each Brontë sister grants her protagonist space to form her own opinions—a process which leads to the disestablishment of ISA-produced femininity.

Because each text has forced its heroines to wander and watch from the fringes, it provides the respective protagonists with the ability to externalize femininity from themselves and begin to comment on it as an observer. In doing so, Jane, Catherine, and Helen all achieve what Teresa de Lauretis describes as “doubled vision:”

Unlike Althusser’s subject, who, being completely ‘in’ ideology, believes himself to be outside and free of it, that subject I see emerging...is that one is at the same time inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and is conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, that division, that doubled vision. (Lauretis 10)

One of the clearest examples of this doubled vision emerges in Jane during her time at Thornfield Hall. Where the Reeds branded Jane as physically inferior, she later comes to see herself as separate from Mr. Rochester’s guests and is thus less intimidated by them, as shown by her dismissal of Blanche Ingram. Frederico’s “politics of beauty” now possess only a diminished effect on her, where before her looks formed a principal part of her self-image, as it appears in her self-portrait of a “plain” governess.

More broadly, each Brontë protagonist recognizes how the ISAs surrounding her are attempting to shape her behavior and begin to resist the pressures of feminine ideology. Initially, isolation facilitates this resistance. Jane challenges conformity to male authority and desire by running away from Rochester into the moors, both Catherines refuse to be contained in either the Heights or the Grange, and Helen chooses to prioritize the role of individual—a desire she cloaks under her maternal duty—over that of wife by escaping Huntingdon. The isolated space enables each woman to redefine herself and what it means to be feminine.

Jane, Helen, and Catherine use their isolation as a tool to separate themselves from ISAs and deconstruct socially produced femininity. After fleeing a nearly horrendous marriage, Jane uses her time as a schoolteacher and independent woman to expand her mind, family, and bank account, making her a self-sustaining and self-fulfilled woman even as she mourns the loss of her relationship. Jane works as a teacher in a rural girls' school to provide for herself until, thanks to her now-deceased uncle, she accrues a sizable fortune, allowing her to remark to Mr. Rochester later that "I told you I was independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (C. Brontë 370). Most importantly, she finds herself surrounded by family. The discovery of St. John, Diana, and Mary supplants Jane's former loneliness and grants her a stable sense of place: "There was a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time—the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles" (C. Brontë 298). Jane's isolation frees her from commodification as Rochester's doll-bride and grants her instead fortune, purpose, and family.

Like Jane, Helen creates time and space for herself after losing her husband. Part of this journey comes through her self-exploration and growth as an artist, as Helen's talent grows from a parlor trick to a means of income. Losano identifies the distinction between Helen's early paintings as a wife and her later, independent artwork as the money she earns, "further marking her as a professional artist" (77). Losano's pointed use of the word "professional" emphasizes Helen's transition in the wake of her married life: she now possesses a recognized occupation and has crossed into the public, masculine sphere under a pseudonym. Gilbert and Gubar assert that Helen's disguised name disempowers her art, since it displays the nineteenth-century female artist's need to "both to express and camouflage herself" (81). However, this reading of Helen's art ignores the reality that Helen employs the "genteel social accomplishment" of painting to

purchase her freedom from an abusive husband. Also, in contrast to the earlier examples of Huntingdon interpreting Helen's art for her, she now can produce paintings to which she alone creates and ascribes meaning. In both of these senses, Helen's art becomes a platform for her to reimagine her self-image and femininity. Even the necessity of practicing art for self-sustainment becomes unnecessary for Helen, however, after her husband and uncle die and leave her "the full control and management of the estate...besides the absolute, unconditional possession of her own fortune" (A. Brontë 336). Helen takes this fortune and removes with it to live with her aunt and son at her childhood home, thereby exercising independence and in possession of both good company and the ability to parent her son as she chooses.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the resolution of both Catherine's quest for simultaneous independence and relationship begins to find fruition after the death of Linton Heathcliff. Within the sequestered microcosm of the Heights and the Grange, Catherine II achieves true isolation after her father and waspish husband die. In the wake of their deaths, Heathcliff reunites her with Nelly Dean but requires that Catherine not stir beyond the garden and kitchen. Catherine is inherently relational, and her efforts to court Hareton mark her negotiation between the brash, selfish parts of her Earnshaw nature and the craving for affection that reveals her Linton heritage. Initially, she cannot help verbally abusing Hareton: "He's just like a dog, is he not, Helen...or a cart-horse? He does his work, eats his food, and sleeps, eternally!" (E. Brontë 235). Eventually, however, "her conscience reproved her for frightening him off for improving himself" and "her ingenuity was at work to remedy the injury" (E. Brontë 235-236). Catherine's physical isolation from the patriarchal forces of each house who would dictate her actions—Heathcliff and her father—enable her to reconcile both pieces of her nature as she sets out to construct her own

ideal companion. In her budding relationship with Hareton, her construction of her own brand of Earnshaw-Linton femininity emerges.

Under the Brontës' protagonists, femininity becomes a platform for learning, independence, and fulfilling relationships. All three heroines still crave connection, even in their empowered, isolated state. As Jane plaintively remarks, "if others don't love me, I would rather die than live—I cannot bear to be solitary and hated" (C. Brontë 58). In the brief windows between the onset of isolation and an idyllic marriage, Jane, Catherine, and Helen reimagine femininity as healthy and constructive, rather than stifling. The Brontës then negotiate their heroines' return to relationships in such a way that each heroine finds affection without compromising their new power. Their rebranded womanhood becomes so sturdy, in fact, that it withstands the re-entry into the traditionally patriarchal institution of marriage.

The brief moment between each protagonist's developing femininity and her rapid marriage points to a trope recurrent in both Victorian literature and lifestyle: the overwhelming assumption that women would marry. The vast majority of middle-and-upper class young women in Victorian England married, and most of those women married for economic or social reasons rather than personal attraction. Gleadle describes the tension between Victorian ideas of marriage thus: "Although forced marriages were seen as increasingly unacceptable, the idea of a 'good match' continued to resonate powerfully throughout the upper-class world" (80). Victorian marriages signaled a complete renunciation of legal and social individuality for the woman since "A husband could legally enforce his wife to live with him, even if this should necessitate her virtual imprisonment...separated women might still have their earnings and property taken by their husbands" (Gleadle 89). Legally, socially, and religiously, the Victorian institution of marriage encouraged women to embrace dependence on their husbands and minimize their own

needs in favor of meeting his. Thus, marriage functioned alongside ISAs that promoted gender norms and embodied the ultimate fulfillment of femininity and the angel in the house.

The ubiquity of real-life marriage, then, translated smoothly into literature, resulting in a spate of happy, textual marriages that critics refer to under the umbrella term: “the marriage plot.” Most of the critical attention that the marriage plot receives either dismisses it as a negation of feminist themes or highlights it as subversive. Scholar Elaine Hoffman Baruch asserts that marriage provided a woman’s only way to acquire experiences outside of her home, making the journey to marriage the equivalent of a male *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story. For women, she asserts, turning to marriage allowed them “to achieve the goals of romantic individualism, those of increased knowledge, enhanced of feeling and experience, and precisely those dangers and adventures that men seek through marriage to escape” (Baruch 157). Finding a suitable partner, then, created a socially acceptable space for women to experience self-discovery. Susan K. Harris’s ideas offer a potential expansion for Baruch, as she positions the marriage plot as a smokescreen for subversion. Harris posits that the marriage plot allowed female authors to find a publishing market and sell their books while challenging “the idea of female subordination, either through their plots, their narrators' addresses to the reader, or their patterns of rhetoric. In other words, their themes and structures tend to work at cross purposes” (265). The use of the marriage plot, then, becomes a potential impediment for an otherwise empowered heroine *or* a disguise for her ongoing journey of self-discovery and self-definition. By reimagining a woman’s role within her marriage, the heroine manages to preserve her new brand of femininity and integrate back into society. Jane, Helen, and Catherine demonstrate this possibility by marrying men who are their physical, economic, and social inferiors.

On their way to a fit marriage, each heroine also encounters marriages that would compromise her reconstructed femininity, largely because these would-be suitors are unable to see Jane, Catherine, or Helen outside of their own desires. Jane's temptation derives from her cousin St. John, directly before her reunion with a newly widowed Mr. Rochester. St. John asks her to marry him and travel with him as a missionary's wife, a proposal which strikes a chord in Jane's religious training and instinct for self-sacrifice learned from Helen and Miss Temple. However, St. John's offer seeks to use Jane's industry as a tool for his self-glorification, so consequently his presence threatens to rob Jane of her autonomy. Jane notes that "He acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind...I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by...I fell under a freezing spell" (C. Brontë 339). Because of how St. John's presence represses Jane's reconstructed femininity she must actively resist him by rejecting his marriage proposal, for which he castigates her as "violent, unfeminine, and untrue" (C. Brontë 351). St. John's reaction measures those of patriarchal Victorian society and its expectation for women to give themselves entirely to service, but St. John's coldness repulses Jane away from an imprudent marriage. More sympathetically, scholar Jerome Beaty notes that "St. John's way is [not] wrong or anti-life, as many modern readers would have it, but only that his way is not Jane's way" (499). He goes on to explain that the text, or "Providence," has set Jane for relational domesticity rather than martyrdom. While he asserts that both ways are valid, he concurs that for Jane to deny her desires to marry St. John would violate her desires and her newly discovered selfhood and femininity.

Helen encounters two prospective suitors—aside from her abusive husband—who also view her as an acquisition and whom she also must overcome to reconstruct femininity. The first of these, Mr. Boreham, sees her as immature and unformed and treats her as Victorian men often

treated their wives—like children. When he proposes, he reassures her patronizingly that “I shall not be severe to mark the faults and foibles of a young and ardent nature such as yours...while I acknowledge them to myself, and even rebuke them with all a father’s care” (A. Brontë 104). Despite the urgings of Helen’s aunt, Helen recognizes that she could never attain equality with Mr. Boreham and rightly rejects him. Several years later, Helen’s neighbor, Mr. Hargrave, attempts to lure her into an affair with him. Despite her many rejections and assumptions of the moral and ethical high ground, Hargrave tries to manipulate and subject her to his will. The two of them play a game of chess that rapidly becomes a symbol of his attempts to dominate her and prompts his vicious aside: “Trust me, and you shall be happy also, for if you are a woman I can make you so—and I will do it in spite of yourself!’ he muttered between his teeth” (A. Brontë 236). Despite his emotional protestations of love, Hargrave, too, views Helen as an object to possess rather than a partner to grow alongside.

Edgar Linton, Catherine Earnshaw’s husband, bends himself to Catherine’s preferences to lure her into the interpellated world of Thrushcross Grange as his wife. Nelly observes his deliberate passivity: “They were both very attentive to her comfort...It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckle, but the honeysuckle embracing the thorn” (E. Brontë 72). Edgar adores Catherine, but he remains her emotional and physical inferior and so cannot earn her respect. She and Heathcliff both mock him as a “milk-blooded coward” and Catherine remarks derisively, “Your cold blood cannot be worked into a fever; your veins are full of ice-water, but mine are boiling, and the sight of such chillness makes them dance” (E. Brontë 92). Catherine’s marriage to Edgar—and the smothering world of the Grange that he represents—cripples her physical and mental health by separating her from Heathcliff until she withers away.

Similarly, Linton Heathcliff, Isabella and Heathcliff's child and Catherine II's temporary husband, proves himself a suppressor of Catherine's personhood by reducing her to the role of female nurse; in other words, he cannot imagine a purpose for Catherine beyond meeting his comfort. At his most affectionate, the best Linton can say to Catherine is that "I think I should not be peevish with you; you'd not provoke me. And you'd always be ready to help me, wouldn't you?" (E. Brontë 181). He willingly sacrifices her safety for his own and even after helping Heathcliff to trap Catherine in his home peevishly demands that she make him tea and complains, "Now, Catherine you are letting your tears fall into my cup! I won't drink that. Give me another" (E. Brontë 206). Despite the superiority of Edgar's love to Linton's selfishness, both marriages ask Catherine and Catherine II to relinquish their desires and thus challenge their self-made femininity.

After navigating these relational threats to their new, independent femininity, each Brontë heroine manages to preserve her redefined womanhood in marriage. Jane's time at Moor House allows her to acquire life experiences apart from a relationship, along with the benefits of finding a family circle and acquiring financial independence. Thus, she is prepared to reunite with and marry Rochester as his equal. When she finds him at his reclusive manor, Ferndean, he is physically maimed by the loss of his hand and sight, so where before he could overwhelm her with his massive presence, he is now dependent on Jane to provide for him and guide him around his own house. Unlike Blanche or Bertha, Jane is Rochester's mental and financial equal as well as physical superior, so she reflects contentedly of her marriage that "All my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord in the result" (C. Brontë 384). Adrienne Rich echoes Jane's assessment, since Jane's relationship "is not patriarchal marriage in the sense of a marriage that stunts and

diminishes the woman; but a continuation of this woman's creation of herself" (483). Thus, *Jane Eyre* submits to the Victorian convention of the marriage plot; however, Charlotte Brontë, by deliberately weakening her hero even as she enriches her heroine, manages to establish Jane's marriage on equal footing and preserve Jane's new brand of femininity.

Initially, Anne Brontë's hero, a rustic farmer named Markham, casts himself as the investigator who will uncover Helen's deceptions and so master her. The events of the novel soon invert the dynamics of power between himself and Helen, so that he comes to view himself as socially and personally unworthy of her. In the final scenes of the novel, as he stands outside of Helen's mansion, he reflects on the class disparity between himself and Helen and concludes that "there was another barrier: doubtless there was a wide distinction between the rank and circumstances of Mrs. Huntingdon, the lady of Grassdale Manor, and those of Mrs. Graham, the artist, the tenant of Wildfell Hall" (A. Brontë 322). Helen's fortune and moral fiber have elevated her beyond Markham's sphere, so when they marry, the power balance of their marriage tilts toward Helen even more sharply than does Jane and Rochester's relationship. Rather than asking a patriarchal figure for Helen's hand, Markham must slowly earn permission to marry Helen from her aunt and agree to relinquish his farm and move into his new bride's home. In a total inversion of a conventional marriage, he becomes his wife's dependent. Markham's abashed humility and acquiescence to Helen and her aunt's directives allow Helen to maintain her redefined femininity. She remains artistic, pious, and self-sustaining so that her marriage becomes an auxiliary to her life rather its defining factor.

Lastly, the journey Catherine takes over the course of both of her lifetimes finally ends with Hareton, a man with a childish mindset whom his wife can mold to her choosing. As revenge on Hindley, Heathcliff deliberately warps his son, Hareton, into an illiterate and brutish

boy, making him the intellectual inferior to the heiress of Thrushcross Grange. Nelly presents Hareton as a sympathetic character to Lockwood and hence, to us, pleading for him that “He was never taught to read or write; never rebuked for any bad habit which did not annoy his keeper; never led a single step towards virtue, or guarded by a single precept against vice” (E. Brontë 151). Despite his lack of education, he nonetheless grows up handsome and strong—and he is Catherine Linton’s physical match in a way the men of Thrushcross Grange could never be. Lockwood describes Hareton as “as handsome a rustic as need be seen” and, like Catherine, he spends the majority of his time roaming the moors (E. Brontë 225). After Heathcliff dies, Hareton emerges as Catherine Linton’s only viable choice for marriage. Under her guidance, Hareton begins to learn to read and adopt more civilized manners, and the text suggests, will grow into Catherine’s ideal match:

They were thick...in their several occupations, of pupil and teacher...His honest, warm, and intelligent nature shook off rapidly the clouds of ignorance and degradation in which it had been bred; and Catherine’s sincere commendations acted as a spur to his industry. His brightening mind brightened his features, and added spirit and mobility to their aspect. I could hardly fancy it the same individual. (E. Brontë 243)

By marrying him, Catherine becomes the dominating presence of the marriage and may shape her husband into a partner that assists her growth without inhibiting it.

Perhaps it is small wonder, then, that the Brontes elicited such dramatic reactions from their contemporary audiences. Their varying portrayals of women, from governesses to heiresses to artists, demand the reader’s attention and reveal gender as patently constructed and limiting. Capitulating to interpellation through the influence of religious, familial, and media ISAs allowed women to adopt the mindset of the passive accessory and preserved the hegemony of

empowered husbands and submissive, feminine wives. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë use their respective novels to uncover and challenge this ISA-produced paradigm and, in doing so, reimagine femininity. The Brontë sisters each create a protagonist who, through a combination of circumstantial and deliberate isolation, separates herself from gendered ISAs and instead begins to reimagine femininity as self-sustaining and evolving. If marriage embodied the ultimate social achievement for a woman, then Jane's, Catherine's, and Helen's assertion of themselves *prior to* their marriages indicates the ability of women to reconstruct womanhood and still participate in social relationships. In some sense, then, perhaps the Brontës are as “unfeminine,” in the Victorian sense of the word, as their critics claimed—but only because their heroines transcend passive, limiting definitions of femininity in favor of a healthy, evolving model that remains compelling for modern discussions of gender.

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