

## **THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL: THE REVOLT OF THE “GENTLEST” BRONTË**

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### *ABSTRACT*

According to Charlotte Brontë, her sister Anne's novel had an unfavourable reception: "At this I cannot wonder. The choice of subject was an entire mistake", she affirms in her *Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell*. But, why did the eldest Brontë dislike the subject of Anne's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*? The aim of my article is to show that in the pages of this novel Anne Brontë not only gives a powerful indictment of the society of her time but defies with realistic zeal the most romantic aspects of both Charlotte's and Emily's novels. Anne Brontë's difference with regard to her sisters will be explained and highlighted in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and the radical character of the theme she chose.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The literary figure of Anne Brontë has been traditionally relegated to a rather unobtrusive position. When the novels of the three sisters were published, the tendency of the critics was to review them more like a single phenomenon than as the products of different writers and personalities. This resulted in a generalised overlooking of the personal quality of Anne's work. *Agnes Grey*, Anne's first novel, was prior to *Jane Eyre* in composition, but appeared after Charlotte's novel, published in one volume with Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. *Agnes Grey*, which actually influenced *Jane Eyre*, was considered an imitation of her elder sister's novel, an imitation, moreover, devoid of the strength of the latter, since *Agnes Grey*'s soberness blinded the critics to the appalling reality it contained. Furthermore, the turbulent power of *Wuthering Heights* exerted such magnetism on the critics that these often passed over

Anne's novel as the moth crosses the air towards the light. In this respect I want to echo Elizabeth Langland's (1989:150) words:

The virtues of *Agnes Grey*, with its emphasis on *realism*<sup>1</sup> and its quiet understatement, would be utterly eclipsed when put in the context of *Wuthering Heights*. In addition, the taste of the age for tales of high romance would also predispose readers and critics against Anne's subtle story.

*Agnes Grey*, the understated story of a self-effacing, gentle governess, became thus the emblem of its authoress's personal and literary figure: kind and unobtrusive, and, what is more, unimportant. In her "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell", Charlotte Brontë (1963:8) offers the following comment:

Anne's character was milder and more subdued; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister (Emily), but she was well endowed with quiet virtues of her own.

Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë, published in 1857, reiterated Charlotte's own ideas about her sister, and we all know how influential was Mrs Gaskell's biography on later criticism. George Moore's (1930:260) words are, in this case, certainly symptomatic:

Critics follow a scent like hounds and I am not sure that it wasn't Charlotte who first started them on the underrating of Anne.

For too long a time Anne Brontë's work has been considered gentle and pale like herself.

W. Gérin published Anne's biography in 1959 and A. Harrison and D. Stanford brought out their book *Anne Brontë: Her Life and Work* in the same year, but apart from this fact, the tendency in the sixties was toward joint criticism of the Brontës conducting systematically either to the underrating or total oblivion of the third one. Only very recently has Anne Brontë begun to receive some serious specific critical attention. In 1983, P.J.M. Scott published his *Anne Brontë: a New Critical Assessment*, a study as interesting as necessary, although he somehow falls short in appreciating Anne's innovative contributions and the powerful feminism of her work. Robert Liddell (1990), in his *Twin Spirits: The Novels of Emily and Anne Brontë*, echoes Moore's opinion that Charlotte was at least partly responsible for her younger sister's critical underrating and carries out an intertextual analysis of Emily's and Anne's novels, even though, like P.J.M. Scott, he tends to show but a mild appreciation of Anne's talents, as appears in these words:

Anne seems to have had gifts more like Mrs. Gaskell than her sisters, and we may wish she had had time to use them. (1990:94)

Edward Chitham (1991) has edited Anne Brontë's poetry and written a well documented biography of the novelist using her poetry as a landmark to discover and

interpret concrete aspects of her life and in which, moreover, he stresses Anne's individuality in what for him is her capacity for literary retaliation, analysing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a parody and moral answer to Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. Elizabeth Langland's *Anne Brontë, The Other One* is a thorough study of the youngest Brontë from many different angles which include biographical facts, her poems and her two novels. Langland and Chitham are, perhaps, the only two critics who have not only determinedly vindicated Anne Brontë's literary independence but her literary merit as well.

Nevertheless, a lot is still to be said about the youngest Brontë, particularly when feminist criticism, which in general has successfully revised the canon and rescued some very interesting women writers from oblivion, has so far said so very little about her, which is indeed amazing if we stop to consider, not only the literary, but the feminist contribution of a novel like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Any attentive study of Anne's novels will undoubtedly discover the powerful and *different* quality of her literary achievement. This power and difference of the gentlest Brontë appears to the full in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a valiant, even revolutionary novel, which bears witness to the fact that gentleness is by no means incompatible with courage.

## 2. THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL AS AFFIRMATION OF DIFFERENCE

The name of the Brontë sisters has been traditionally linked with romantic fiction, and yet, when reading Anne Brontë's novels, this association could not be less just or accurate, since Anne Brontë's art is basically a *realistic* one. Realism, being the issue of the observation and portrayal of reality, has, logically, not only the claim to credible and coherent characterisation, but also a social and historical dimension. In the pages of a so-called realistic novel we not only expect to come across life-size, recognizable characters, but to acquire, to some extent, notions of the society and historical moment in which those characters are set.

For *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë drew ample material on the one hand from her observations of her own family domain, concretely, the personal destruction of her brother Branwell, and, on the other, from observations of the high society life of those employers for whom she worked as a governess. The social and historical dimension of this novel is to be found in the very story it contains, basically the unfortunate marriage of a principled and clever woman to a selfish and debauched husband. A story set in a concrete time and a concrete country: early nineteenth century England. Despite her integrity and intelligence, Helen Huntingdon, the heroine, is totally deprived of rights of her own: her own fortune is legally in the hands of her husband, who can use or squander it as he pleases, and her little son, whom she strives to bring up counteracting his father's debauching influence, can be lost to her if the latter decides to withdraw her custody with the support of the laws of the country. The stark injustice of the situation appears before us hand in hand with life-size characterization and dialogue. No monsters or fascinating demon-like heroes who inflict the pain can be found here. Only human beings hurting other human beings with the acquiescence of the "status quo". The historicity of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is plain to be seen. The vulnerable position of Helen Huntingdon reflects the position of the majority of English women regarding their own property after marriage before

*The Women's Property Act* of 1882, and regarding their own children before the *Infant's Custody Act* of 1839. It is indicative of the realistic portrayal of the social and historical moment present in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that one critic of Anne Brontë's time, after declaring the book utterly unfit for girls, affirmed, nevertheless, that:

The whitewashed English Society owes thanks to those who like the author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* dare to show the image of her own ugly, hypocritical visage.<sup>2</sup>

And *dare* is a key word regarding Anne Brontë's novel. There are few things more daring than the truth itself, in the same way as the horror of every day's violence cannot be surpassed by any vampire film or ghost story.

Anne Brontë believed in the power of truth as an agent of reform and improvement, and as far as she herself was concerned, she, in her own, unassuming way, was determined to expose it, no matter how unpleasant and how shocking. Hence comes the daring, radical quality of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, not only from the revolutionary step that its heroine takes leaving her husband and trying to live a life of her own with her child defying the laws of the country, but from the truthful portrayal of facts as they are, as they were in Anne Brontë's own time, for, as George Watson (1991:63) affirms:

Realism is radical because any purposive attempt to change the world depends on a conviction that it can be described, and it is the chosen task of realism to describe.

Let us also hear Anne Brontë's own humble but purposeful words concerning this same question:

Let it not be imagined that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim, and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* did not seem to gain the ear of the eldest Brontë, or at least, it certainly did not gain her approbation. Again in her "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell" Charlotte writes about her youngest sister's second novel:

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, by Acton Bell ... had an unfavourable reception. At this I cannot wonder. The choice of subject was an entire mistake. Nothing less congruous with the writer's nature could be conceived. (in Emily Brontë, 1963: 6)

It is no doubt just and logical to assume that Charlotte's dislike of this novel sprang from sisterly concern. According to the eldest Brontë, the writing of *The Tenant* was extremely painful for Anne, and she completed it out of a sheer sense of duty to the point of physical and mental exhaustion. But let us also open our eyes to the fact that there may be other reasons for her dislike which can coexist with this already

mentioned one. In the first place, the degradation and personal wreckage of the main male character, Arthur Huntingdon, must perforce have painfully recalled Branwell's own destruction. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, Charlotte, more aware than any critic, might have seen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* a defiant answer to the world and whole conception of *Jane Eyre*. For, with all its greatness and immense literary merit, Charlotte's novel is but a fairy tale, a tale in which Jane-Cinderella gets her deserved reward in the person of black-eyed, formidable Mr. Rochester, rather less formidable after becoming blind and her husband. Anne's realistic zeal made her go beyond Charlotte's "Reader I married him". It is precisely where her sister's novel ends that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* begins. For Anne Brontë marriage was not just a happy ending, the happy ending of so many novels of her time, but a door opened to the reality of married life and literary exploration. Somehow *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reads as a down-to-earth retort to *Jane Eyre*'s self-gratifying fantasy. After all, and with all her cleverness and other spiritual endowments, what plain, unconnected, poor governess can enthrall the master of the house, who is, besides, a Byronic hero? Helen Huntingdon is as clever and as spiritually beautiful as Jane, with the advantage that she is infinitely more attractive physically and an heiress, and yet, despite her attributes, she is forced to realise that to reform a man is more a young schoolgirl's ideal than a feasible achievement.

On the other hand, Anne, whose rational approach to morals and literature links her to eighteenth century thought and Enlightenment feminism, remains, like Jane Austen, impervious to the romantic fascination of the domineering and violently passionate male. As the protagonist of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1978: 150-1) affirms:

... without approving I cannot love ... It is needless to say I ought to be able to respect and honour the man I marry as well as love him, for I cannot love him without.

These words read also as a retort to Catherine Earnshaw's and Jane Eyre's passion for Heathcliff and Rochester respectively. For even if, in Charlotte's novel, the heroine acts as teacher and reformer of the sensual and unrestrained hero, it is no less evident that she has already fallen under the spell of his masculine overbearance. As Pauline Nestor (1978:35) observes, Charlotte's heroines "often respond in a disturbingly masochistic way to masculine aggression".

In Anne Brontë's novels the heroines maintain a critical, detached and ironic attitude towards those male characters who like to see themselves (with the general acquiescence of society) as epitomes of "real" masculinity. They are never impressed by masculine bravado, but oppose it calmly and defiantly. Charlotte has greatly benefitted from the feminist perspective, which has applauded the novelist's heroines in their will of self-assertion, but both *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snowe* seem, perhaps, too anxious to obtain the approval of the men they love. Despite Lucy's stubborn refusal to acquiesce to M. Paul Emanuel's tyrannical whims and Jane's struggle to maintain her integrity in the midst of the turmoil of her emotions, for the former, M. Paul Emanuel will still be her professor and, for the latter, Rochester will still be her master. Anne Brontë's heroines, on the contrary, do not look for a master, but for a partner, and in no case do they depend psychologically on male approval. We could say that Anne goes, in her feminism, a decisive step further than Charlotte, not only because of the brave quest for independence of her female characters, which reaches a defiant dra-

matic peak in Helen Huntingdon's escape from her husband and capacity to earn a living by professional painting, but because she *rationaly* rejects what could be termed the "romantic" masculine type in his lack of restraint, self-indulgence and aggressivity. That is, the Byronic hero of her elder sisters' novels.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the youngest Brontë exposes the ugly, unpoetic face of passion and violence and presents these as prosaic, vulgar and dangerous. Unlike Heathcliff, and unlike Rochester as well, Huntingdon is no Byronic hero. There is no grandeur or fascination in him. He is just a selfish, shallow man, whom alcohol has made brutal and stupid. It is this de-romantisization, this refusal to be fascinated by the demon-hero who lives inside her two elder sisters' most famous masculine creations, what contributes greatly to making *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* such a powerful artifact of social criticism. If it is true that both Charlotte and Anne show a profound concern for the position of women in their time, that both challenge generalized stereotypes of femininity, it is only Anne who openly challenges certain stereotyped models of masculinity. Both Charlotte and Anne skillfully contrast their new type of woman –intellectually independent, critical, morally valiant– with the traditional feminine "ideal" of shallow accomplishment and coquettish insubstantiality (let us think of the contrast between Lucy Snowe and Ginevra Fanshawe, that between Jane Eyre and Miss Ingram and those between Agnes Grey and Rosalie Murray or Helen Huntingdon and Annabella Wilmot) in a way that foreshadows George Eliot's contrast between Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy. But an intertextual reading of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will reveal that Anne is daringly exposing the contradictions, and perhaps inconsistency, of a relation between a "modern", even revolutionary type of heroine and a hero who is a descendant of the overflowing romantic imagination of the Gondal saga.

The reader for Charlotte's publishers, W.S. Williams, wrote to her about the resemblance he had detected between Mr. Rochester and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s masculine protagonist, Arthur Huntingdon. Charlotte denied such similarity and passionately defended her male creation (Wise and Symington 1934:244-45). It is true, as herself affirmed, that Huntingdon "is a specimen of the naturally selfish, sensual, superficial man" and that Rochester has "a thoughtful nature and a very feeling heart", but we must not forget that Huntingdon came after Rochester and is the hero of a novel which, in its treatment of the situation and relationships of man and woman, opposes a rational, realistic outlook to self-gratifying fantasy, a novel which, symptomatically, explores marriage instead of courtship. A novel, in short, which cuts its hero down to size, and shows him as a vulgar, sometimes pathetic bully. Strip Rochester of his idealised masculine attributes, his mystery and his romantic spell, and despite his higher intelligence he is not so very different to Huntingdon. Not so much as Charlotte believed or would wish. For, after all, do not the two of them keep, for a time, their respective wives incarcerated in the conjugal home? The implication of this disquieting fact I intend to analyse in the following pages.

### 3. HELEN HUNTINGDON REFUSES TO BE THE MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC

A great deal has been said and written about Bertha Mason. As was to be expected, many critics have been attracted by the mystery surrounding this figure, which Char-

lotte Brontë so superbly exploits conveying thus that intense atmosphere of intrigue that makes the novelist a master of suspense. Bertha Mason is also a character whose powerful symbolic dimension has raised well-known psychoanalytical interpretations. But besides her mystery and symbolism she has also a reality: she is Rochester's wife and he keeps her hidden and locked up in their (or, should I say, *his*) house because she is mad. "Bertha Mason is mad", explained Rochester when his secret was discovered:

... and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard! –as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points (1978:320).

Jane believes her beloved Rochester without further questioning, and this is, needless to say, a legitimate procedure, since Charlotte Brontë herself believed in her hero. After all, his story can be perfectly true. But there is, nevertheless, something disturbing in the whole situation, because no legal barriers could have prevented Rochester from getting rid of a tiresome consort by imprisoning her until she ended up becoming mad indeed by constant brutalization and ruthless deprivation of freedom. I am not of course suggesting that Rochester *did* such a thing, but that he, like any other man in his own time and place, *could have done it*, as Anne Brontë, in her *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* clearly demonstrates.

Helen Huntingdon, after having tried by all means and struggled unsuccessfully to reform her profligate husband, decides to abandon him. She has arrived at this dramatic, final decision not because of her own sake (although her matrimonial life oscillates between humiliation and solitude) but for her little son, whom she wants to save from his father and his father's friends' debauchery, from their intention to "make a man of him" by making him "tipple wine like papa, swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and send mama to the devil when she tried to prevent him" (1978:353). Once she is absolutely convinced of the justice and necessity of that step she is equally determined to take it, as the chapter entitled "A Scheme of Escape" makes clear. Unfortunately for her, however, her husband discovers her intention. He then proceeds to destroy the painting materials with which she intended to make a living:

'Now then' sneered he, 'we must have a confiscation of property. But first let us take a peep into the studio.'

And putting the keys into his pocket he went into the library. ... My painting materials were laid together on the corner table, ready for tomorrow's use and only covered with a cloth. He soon spied them out, and putting down the candle, deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire –pallette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish– I saw them all consumed. (1978:371)

The following words, that Arthur Huntingdon addresses to his wife provide eloquent information on the status of husband and wife in early nineteenth century England:

'And so you sought to disgrace me', did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself by the labour of your hands, forsooth?'



Once he has discovered her intention, Huntingdon determines to leave his wife no chance of escaping whatsoever, as he himself affirms, confiscates her property, deprives her of her rights as lady of the house and, thus, reduces her life to one of debasing dependence and seclusion. Her situation and that of Bertha Mason bear now a painful resemblance, the implications of this being that whether his wife be mad or not, a husband was at that time entitled to deprive her of freedom: 'I am a slave, a prisoner' (1978:373), Helen confides to her diary. So is Bertha. It is true that Bertha is mad and Helen is not. But who can be certain that Helen would have kept her sanity if she had remained a prisoner for ever? Madness can be a pretext for inhuman treatment or a result of it. A literary example of the first case appears in Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798, 1984) in which Maria, the protagonist, is imprisoned in a lunatic asylum by her husband, who claims she is mad. Maria, like Helen Huntingdon, is a noble-minded, intelligent woman and, as I have stated in my article "Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft: a Case of Sisterhood" (Villacañas:1993), the resemblance between *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, especially in what concerns the two heroines and their legal helplessness as married women, are indeed striking. Bertha Mason is not clever and lofty as Helen and Maria. She is, as Charlotte Brontë chooses to describe her, a 'clothed hyena' (1971:321). But, if Helen and Maria, as any other formerly sane person, could have lost their human attributes by having been treated as non-human beings, if, therefore, they might have become Bertha Mason, it is equally possible that the madwoman Bertha might have been like Helen and Maria, a principled and clever woman before having been reduced to her beastly state. The intertextual study of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* makes it possible for us to look beyond facts into possibilities. And it is precisely by suggesting a different possibility and, therefore, a different interpretation to Rochester's story, that Anne Brontë confronts Charlotte's vision. To her elder sister's imprisoned beast-like female, Anne opposes an imprisoned dignified woman. Instead of Charlotte's attic and bolt, Anne allows the prisoner to escape.

With *The Tenant off Wildfell Hall* Anne Brontë was not only giving her own rational version of a Cinderella story and a de-romantisized portrait of the "prince". She also gives a chance to a figure, the madwoman, whose story had so far been told by he who has her incarcerated. Elizabeth Langland (1989:119) affirms that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* "rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence". I would add that it rewrites the story of the madwoman as one of female excellence as well. By rewriting the story of a woman who might have become mad if locked up for life, and by giving her the freedom she has right to, Anne Brontë shows a more radical feminist stance and a mind both sympathetic and probing.

According to Edward Chitham (1991:144-5), biographer of Anne and Emily Brontë and editor of their poetry:

*Wuthering Heights*, in Anne's view, exhibited elements she later stigmatized as "soft-nonsense" in the 1848 Preface to *The Tenant*. She clearly regards Emily's romantic attachment to scenes of torment and wild passion as "soft", using the word to indicate intellectual error. In her second novel Anne gives her answer, explaining to Emily what she meant by her objections.

If, indeed, Anne regards wild passion as 'soft', as Chitham affirms, I daresay the adjective should be equally applied to the romantic fantasy of *Jane Eyre*, since *The*



*Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reads as a critique of both *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte's most famous novel.

For Charlotte, nothing less congruous with her youngest sister's nature could be conceived than her second novel, but a writer's true nature is precisely to be found in his or her works. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a radical, feminist, and courageous novel, the novel of a gentle young woman who showed, despite her elder sister's words, that her nature was not so subdued after all when she could, defying convention, offer her "wholesome truths" in the midst of a narrow moral panorama.

## Notes

1. Bold print mine.
2. Charles Kingsley, quoted by Tom Winnifrith (1977:120)
3. Anne Brontë, Preface to the 1848 Edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, reproduced in Penguin Edition, 1978, p.29.

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