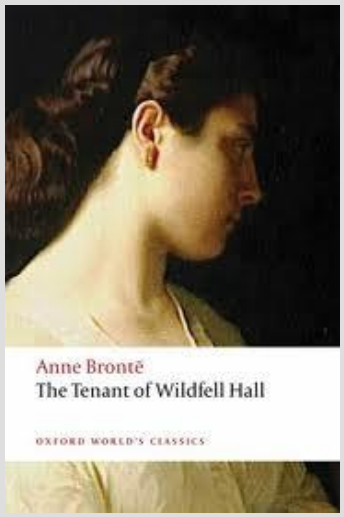
Open Letters Monthly an Arts and Literature Review

The Quiet One

By Rohan Maitzen

3 Comments

Second Glance: Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*



Anne Brontë died in Scarborough on May 28, 1849, in the company of her sister Charlotte and their dear friend Ellen Nussey. It was barely eight months since her brother Branwell died, and even less time had passed since the death of her sister Emily. Branwell and Emily resisted to the end: Elizabeth Gaskell, in her 1857 *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, reports that Branwell "resolved on standing up to die," and tells of Emily clinging "tenaciously to her habits of independence." In contrast, there is perhaps no more tranquil Victorian deathbed scene than Nussey's account of Anne's last moments:

> Ere long the restlessness of approaching death appeared, and she was borne to the sofa; on being asked if she were easier, she looked gratefully at her questioner, and said, 'It is not YOU who can give me ease, but soon all will be well, through the merits of our

> Redeemer.' Shortly after this, seeing that her sister could hardly restrain her grief, she said, 'Take courage, Charlotte; take courage.' Her faith never failed, and her eye never dimmed till about two o'clock, when she calmly and without a sigh passed from the temporal to the eternal. So still, and so hallowed were her last hours and moments. There was no thought of assistance or of dread. The doctor came and went two or three times. The hostess knew that death was near, yet so little was the house disturbed by the presence of the dying, and the sorrow of those so nearly bereaved, that dinner was announced as ready, through the half-opened door, as the living sister was closing the eyes of the dead one.

Charlotte would survive her siblings only until March 31, 1855, leaving their father to the unspeakable sorrow of having outlived his wife and all six of their children.

The Brontës' is a familiar story by now: the gloomy parsonage, the juvenilia that shows the exuberance and idiosyncrasy of the children's developing genius, the stumbling and then stunning success as novelists, the unremitting series of tragedies with which the brooding tale concludes. It's Charlotte and Emily who dominate the picture, with Branwell, drunk and disreputable, a sordid third. Anne, the youngest—pious, resolute, self-contained—is more elusive, just as her greatest novel is to this day overshadowed by her sisters' melodramatic masterpieces: it seems we can't get enough remakes of *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights* is, astonishingly, popularly considered one of the greatest love stories of all times(apparently a lot of people like a little sadism with their romance), but *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* remains, like its author, just out of the limelight.

That sense of Anne's being in the background of the family drama, quietly living as she then so quietly and peacefully dies, makes *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* particularly startling. A novel so outspoken that in its second edition Anne had to vehemently defend it against charges of immorality, so "coarse" that it was all but disowned by Charlotte after Anne's death, it's an artful but relentless exposé of the failings and abuses of Victorian patriarchy. In *Tenant*, Anne Brontë depicts in painfully explicit detail the indignities of life as a woman in a world in which men live like spoiled children, holding all the power, answerable only to themselves. While eloquent about the personal suffering that results, the novel also draws its readers outward, away from the crisis of oppressed individuality against which *Jane Eyre* so passionately rebels, to the systemic legal and economic injustices women faced—the tangible inequities against which the compensatory Victorian myth of women's influence proves exactly that: mythical. Through the complex dual framing of the novel, Bronte not only explores the problems but models a potential solution, one that puts reforming power, significantly enough, in the hands of strong-minded, pious women who know how to tell a good story.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall begins with a letter from one man, Gilbert Markham, to another, J. Halford, Esq. If you aren't paying attention, though, you might not guess the writer's sex, as the tone of the letter is intimate, affectionate, and sentimental, and its overt purpose is to apologize and atone for a failure of "confidence" by sharing a personal reminiscence. "I know you like a long story," Gilbert writes fondly, "and are as great a stickler for particularities and circumstantial details as my grandmother, so I will not spare you: my own patience and leisure shall be my only limits." Such concerns are hardly typical of male friendship, or not, at least, as commonly imagined today, and also not as depicted in the rest of the novel that follows, in which men tussle,

compete, hunt, drink, swear, and chase women rather than exchange intimate confidences. How has Gilbert turned out so differently?

The answer to that question is told in the subsequent narrative, which takes us back twenty years, to 1827, and to a young Gilbert who's actually well on his way to becoming what *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* depicts as an ordinary man—arrogant, entitled, predatory. It's not that Gilbert's a bad man—in fact, the novel would be very different if its focus were on individual moral failings. Instead, he's at the benign end of a continuum of masculine misbehaviour enabled by permissive mothers who, like Mrs. Markham, treat their men's needs and desires as unwritten law. "You'll do your business," she advises her son about his eventual marriage,

> and she, if she's worthy of you, will do hers; but it's your business to please yourself, and hers to please you. I'm sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, and after the first six months or so were over, I should as soon have expected him to fly, as to put himself out of his way to pleasure me. He always said I was a good wife, and did my duty; and he always did his—bless him!—he was steady and punctual, seldom found fault without a reason, always did justice to my good dinners, and hardly ever spoiled my cookery by delay— and that's as much as any woman can expect of any man.

Such pampering might lead to no more than harmless self-indulgence if it weren't backed up by 19th-century law, according to which men held every advantage: they not only had exclusive access to the franchise but also subsumed both women's fortunes and their legal identities upon marriage, and (prior to the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes act of 1857) rested comfortable in the knowledge that their wives were all but unable to divorce them and could lose everything, including their children, if they somehow found the ways and means to do so.

Under these circumstances, it's surprising only that women did not suffer more than they did. In fact, as Gilbert's example shows, a decent man within such a system—well-intentioned, affectionate, fundamentally kind—posed little immediate risk, except in principle. What does Gilbert do, after all, that can't be put down to unchecked high spirits? So he flirts with frisky Eliza Millward, "the vicar's younger daughter, and a very engaging little creature," even "snatching a kiss behind her father's back" in the cloakroom. Sure, Gilbert likes (even expects) to have things his own way, but it's a long way from that to spousal abuse, right?

But what of the men who are not so kindly at heart, who turn opportunity

into license, authority into abuse? What damage might they do, and what holds them in check? To explore this question, Brontë embeds within Gilbert's narrative another story, one that both illustrates for her readers the fundamental problem—that women lack economic, social, and legal power—but also works as an object lesson for Gilbert. Gilbert's opening letter to Halford shows us that the process of masculine degeneration can, after all, be derailed. Though first in the novel, the letter is last in the plot chronologically, and it testifies implicitly to the power of the experience he (and we) will undergo in reading the rest of the novel.

Gilbert's textbook and ours is the diary of Helen Graham, the mysterious tenant for whom the novel is named. Her unexplained arrival and reclusive lifestyle have provoked interest and suspicion in equal measure. As Gilbert's sister Rose remarks, "If she were a proper person, she would not be living there by herself," and this is the view widely shared in this conventional community. Though he believes himself to be "overflowing with love" for the coquettish Eliza, Gilbert is drawn to the spirited and stand-offish Helen. Though she initially rebuffs him, at some cost to his self-satisfaction, he persists, gradually realizing it might "be better to spend one's days with such a woman than with Eliza Millward," while Helen, in her turn, gradually softens towards him.

No sooner do they become friends, though, then Gilbert begins to press for more, intruding on her secrets, bringing her gifts, and claiming her possessively as his own:

> 'You must—you shall be mine!'
>
> And starting from my seat in a frenzy of ardour, I seized her hand and would have pressed it to my lips.

Far from being swept up in mutual passion, Helen pushes him away. Enraged, desperate for an explanation soothing to his ego, Gilbert falls violently upon the man he suspects of being her successful lover, beating him and leaving him for dead. In this petty tantrum, we see a premonition of the man Gilbert might become if he meets with no check upon his greedy proclivities.

Fortunately for Gilbert, salvation is at hand, as Helen, desperate in her turn to save her reputation and their developing love, hands him "a thick album or manuscript volume"—her diary:

> Panting with eagerness, and struggling to suppress my hopes, I hurried home, and rushed upstairs to my room … then, shut and bolted the door, determined to tolerate no interruption, and sitting down before the table, opened out my prize and delivered myself up to its perusal—first, hastily turning over the leaves and snatching a sentence here and there, and then, setting myself steadily to read it through.

Read it through he does, and so do we, as Gilbert reproduces it in nearly its entirety, for the enlightenment of his friend Halford. And now, just as we went back in time to understand Gilbert's transformation, we go back yet again, this time to see how Helen came to be the woman who cannot or will not marry Gilbert—at least, not as he is.

Helen's story, as related in her diary, is (like Gilbert's) one of youthful passion chastened by reality. In her early version, she too is impetuous, even rash, with desires easily inflamed, not at all

like the reserved and self-controlled Helen of 1827. Here again, we find ourselves wondering what factors wrought this transformation, and just as we have seen that it was Helen whose intervention is changing Gilbert, we discover that Helen too has been affected by a relationship, in her case with the dashing Arthur Huntingdon. But where Helen proves to be Gilbert's good angel, Arthur's influence on Helen is purely negative. Well aware of his bad reputation, given first-hand evidence that he is disrespectful, aggressive, and self-indulgently amoral, she marries him anyway, convinced that she will be able to redeem him and thus fulfill what she believes to be woman's mission. "The worse he is," sighs her exasperated aunt,

> 'I suppose, the more you long to deliver him from himself.'
>
> 'Yes, provided he is not incorrigible— that is, the more I long to deliver him from his faults—to give him an opportunity of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness— to do my utmost to help his better self against his worse, and make him what he would have been if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish, miserly father, who, to gratify his own sordid passions, restricted him in the most innocent enjoyments of childhood and youth, and so disgusted him with every kind of restraint;— and a foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent, deceiving her husband for him, and doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress … [His] wife shall undo what his mother did!'

Helen's confident declarations reflect the widely held view that while men held all overt power, women had—and should use—a special moral and spiritual influence. What Helen learns (what Brontë shows) is how little this idealized influence means in practice if the man in question prefers to continue along his own path. Against Arthur's contemptuous resistance, Helen's attempts at reformation are entirely futile—worse, even, as they inspire in Arthur first petulant complaints, then outright distaste, infidelity, and finally complete repudiation.

As her marriage worsens, Helen's only consolation is her son:

> My little Arthur! There you lie in sweet, unconscious slumber, the tiny epitome of your father, but stainless yet as that pure snow, new fallen from Heaven—God shield thee from his errors! How will I watch and toil to guard thee from them! He wakes; his tiny arms are stretched towards me; his eyes unclose; they meet my gaze, but will not answer it. Little angel!

To Helen, little Arthur is a chance to succeed in the project of re-education that has signally failed with his father. Her powerlessness to effect real change, however, is painfully brought home to her by her inability to protect her son from the baleful influence of her husband and his friends, who put on a display of drunken idiocy equal to any you'd see at a fraternity party:

> Mr. Hattersley burst into the room with a clamorous volley of oaths in his mouth, which Hargrave endeavoured to check by entreating him to remember the ladies….
>
> Meantime … Arthur placed himself beside poor Milicent, confidentially pushing his head into her face, and drawing in closer to her as she shrunk away from him. He was

> not so noisy as Hattersley, but his face was exceedingly flushed, he laughed incessantly … [and] he laughed immoderately on finding he had driven her away— drawing in his chair to the table, he leant his folded arms upon it, and delivered himself up to a paroxysm of weak, low, foolish laughter. When he was tired of this exercise he lifted his head and called aloud to Hattersley, and there ensued a clamorous contest between them about I know not what.
>
> 'What fools they are!' drawled Mr. Grimsby … 'Did you ever hear such nonsense as they talk, Mrs. Huntingdon?' he continued. 'I'm quite ashamed of them for my part: they can't take so much as a bottle between them without its getting into their heads —'
>
> 'You are pouring the cream into your saucer, Mr. Grimsby.'
>
> 'Ah! yes, I see, but we're almost in darkness here….But as I was saying, Mrs. Huntingdon,—they have no head at all: they can't take half a bottle without being affected some way; whereas I—well, I've taken three times as much as they have to-night, and you see I'm perfectly steady. Now that may strike you as very singular, but I think I can explain it:—you see their brains—I mention no names, but you'll understand to whom I allude—their brains are light to begin with, and the fumes of the fermented liquor render them lighter still, and produce an entire light-headedness, or giddiness, resulting in intoxication; whereas my brains being composed of more solid materials will absorb a considerable quantity of this alcoholic vapour without the production of any sensible result —'
>
> 'I think you will find a sensible result produced on that tea,' interrupted Mr. Hargrave, 'by the quantity of sugar you have put into it. Instead of your usual complement of one lump you have put in six.'
>
> 'Have I so?' replied the philosopher…—With your permission, I'll turn this into the slop-basin.'
>
> 'That is the sugar-basin, Mr. Grimsby. Now you have spoiled the sugar too.'

Of this motley crew, Hattersley is the worst: his meek wife Milicent pleads, as he "shak[es] her and remorselessly crush[es] her slight arms in the grip of his powerful fingers," for him to "remember we are not at home"—an ominous hint of how much worse her situation is when there are no witnesses. But it's their overall numbers that make Brontë's point: each of them is just one among many men who exploit and abuse their privileges as well as their wives.

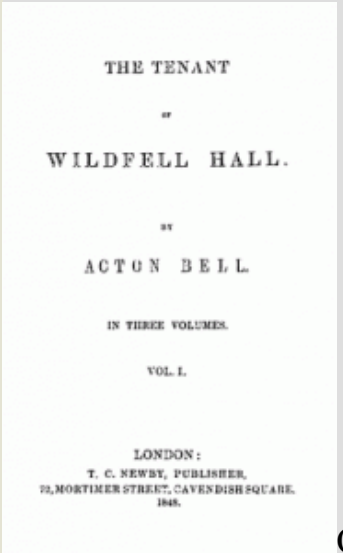
Helen, who has put up with neglect, insolence, abuse, and infidelity herself, watches with horror as her influence over her son is undone by his father's:

> My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was my son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements … So the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma, and learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr.

> Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him.

In that phrase "to make a man of him" lies Brontë's crucial insight: men are not born but raised to fill their place in society. And if that society is, like hers, patriarchal, then the single most important factor in determining the quality of life for those in it—particularly for those without power in it—is the way men are trained. If they are to have ultimate authority, they must exercise it with restraint and judgment, or it will too easily deteriorate into abuse. Patriarchy presumes the men in control will show a father's care for those in their charge, but what if instead, as in Brontë's vision, they are no better than a pack of dangerously spoiled children? Helen's dysfunctional family is easily seen as analogous to a wholly dysfunctional system of governance. And Helen's escape from it—for escape from it she does—exemplifies both the need for and the means to a better alternative. In taking her son and running away to Wildfell Hall, Helen defies the rules that subordinate her to her unworthy husband and sets herself up in authority over the next generation of men. Safely, defiantly, free of Huntingdon, she resolves to make a different kind of man of her son.

This is the story Gilbert reads in her diary, and unsurprisingly, it transforms his view of Helen and also, more importantly, his view of himself. He has seen, as we have, the many points at which his own impetuous actions approximate Huntingdon's—rifling through Helen's paintings, for instance, forcing his attentions on her, claiming kisses against her express desires. Now he can understand and respect her determination to stand by her own principles, and to keep him at bay—not only because, as a married woman, she cannot become romantically involved with him, but because all her experience to this point has taught her to suspect him as a threat to her autonomy and happiness. That she has risked so much only to find herself once more besieged by an importunate man helps us to see that the problem is not one bad man or one bad marriage, but the entire balance of power between men and women. Whatever her feelings for Gilbert (and all the evidence is that she loves him passionately), only a significant restructuring could clear the way for them to live happily ever after. That—and the convenient removal, somehow—anyhow—of her existing husband.


THE TENANT
OF
WILDFELL HALL.
BY
ACTON BELL.
IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.
LONDON:
T. C. NEWBY, PUBLISHER,
72, MORTIMER STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE.
1848.

Of course, Brontë gives us all of this (this is a Victorian novel, after all), but not without driving home the point that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not a starry-eyed celebration of love triumphing over such trivial things as marriage or religious conviction or social convention

or idealistic theories of woman's mission. Like her creator, Helen is profoundly pious, and to her marriage is truly a sacrament. Furthermore, she still believes fervently in her own improving role. What her hard experience has taught her is not to discard her values but to demand and create the conditions in which she can live up to them. She doesn't leave Huntingdon because she yearns for self-fulfilment or dreams of a career as an artist (though this is how she has been supporting herself and her child since their escape). She leaves because there is no way to reconcile her duty as a wife with her duty as a mother. In giving motherhood precedence, both Helen and Brontë play the one card they know for certain will win the hand, given the Victorian reverence (at least in theory) for maternity.

Helen's revolution, in other words, is in aid of repairing rather than destroying the cherished institutions within which women were supposed to hold sway. All she wants is to exercise within her own home the benevolent, civilizing influence she's supposed to have, according to the social contract that gives her husband everything else. She's not a bad, home-wrecking wife: she's a perfect wife. If only her husband would fulfill his side of the bargain, everything would be exactly as it should.

It's too late to save Huntingdon, though Helen gives it her best shot, returning (much to Gilbert's and most readers' annoyance) to his bedside when he's felled by a riding accident and staying nearby, urging repentance, while he dies a lingering and miserable death. This interval lets Helen prove her virtue and Gilbert prove his love can withstand the severe test of Helen's absence and continued faithfulness to another man. Huntingdon's death releases Helen but sets Gilbert up for yet another humbling experience, as, in tandem with the death of her wealthy uncle, it leaves Helen economically and socially powerful—much more so than Gilbert, who is too chastened to re-assert his love. In the end it is Helen who proposes to him:

> She turned away her glistening eye and crimson cheek, and threw up the window and looked out, whether to calm her own excited feelings or to relieve her embarrassment,—or only to pluck that beautiful half-blown Christmas rose that grew upon the little shrub without, just peeping from the snow, that had hitherto, no doubt, defended it from the frost, and was now melting away in the sun. Pluck it however, she did, and having gently dashed the glittering powder from its leaves, approached it to her lips and said—
>
> 'This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of *them* could bear: the cold rain of winter has sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.—Will you have it?'

Even then, he hardly dares accept what she's so clearly offering; it's Helen who reassures him that "the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls."

Where there is such unity, where hearts and souls truly love and sympathize, there's nothing to fear from the legal and political dominance of one partner. Through the lessons of her own story, Helen has successfully re-educated Gilbert into a safe husband, one who will not threaten her

autonomy or deny her influence within her own sphere. We see other evidence in the novel of Helen's salutary effect on those around her, chief among them little Arthur, who will grow up a very different man from his father. Her converts also include Hattersley, who repents his treatment of Milicent and turns his grateful wife towards Helen with the words 'Thank *her*, it's her doing.' Gilbert's own story will, we can safely assume, have a similarly positive effect on Halford, making him a better husband—a matter of some personal concern to Gilbert, as Halford has married his sister, Rose, whose expectations for marriage can clearly exceed her mother's.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall itself offers its readers a similarly transformative experience: a chance to see exposed the worst aspects of a system they take for granted; a vehement indictment of the harm it inflicts on the very women it pretends to revere; and a call to listen to and learn from their stories. "In the present work," Brontë wrote in her defensive Preface to the novel's second edition,

> I find myself censured for depicting … those scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read than they were for me to describe. I may have gone too far; in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Oh, reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience.

Easily the equal of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in its emotional impact and artful construction, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* exceeds them in its commitment to the moral and political possibilities of fiction. Perhaps that's actually *why* it's less popular: reading it, we are no more able than Helen or Gilbert to forget that the personal *is* always political, that love is not enough to make everything turn out well, that individuals have duties as well as desires. And Helen's values and choices are harder to square with contemporary romantic fantasies than Jane Eyre's, or even Catherine Earnshaw's. But if we make a little room and time for her, there's no doubt Anne has as much to say to us as her more prominent sisters—and there's nothing at all quiet about it.

____

Rohan Maitzen teaches Victorian literature in the English Department at Dalhousie University in Halifax. She is an editor at *Open Letters Monthly* and blogs about literature and criticism at Novel Readings.