“To Walk Honorably Through the World”:
Temperance, Gender and Religion in Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

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I. The Temperance Movement: Social History and Biographical Context

Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* undoubtedly functions as a temperance novel. Arthur Huntingdon’s alcohol abuse harms everyone around him, and drives his wife Helen to leave him and go into hiding at Wildfell Hall. Before analyzing the novel, I feel it is critical to understand the temperance movement, which was at its height in England during the time *Tenant* was published. Further, temperance activism affected Anne Brontë’s life, as did her brother’s substance abuse. In *Tenant*, Anne Brontë uses anti-alcohol arguments as a focal point to question both the gender politics and the religious orthodoxy of her time.

*Temperance: Definitions and Organizations*

Before alcoholism was accepted as a disease, in approximately the 1860s, the dangers of excessive drinking to one’s mind and body were widely discussed. Critic Gwen Hyman in “An Infernal Fire in my Veins’: Gentlemanly Drinking in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” asserts that this was partially due to industrialization and the desire to keep factory workers as efficient as possible (453). The 1820s, however, when the main action of *Tenant* is set, was a time when drunkenness was seen as “a man’s right,” according to Lilian Lewis Shiman in *Crusade against Drink in Victorian England* (2). Everyone from gentility to the working class drank in social settings, including “fine ladies” (Hyman 452).

The first British organization to promote abstinence from alcohol, focusing on spirits, was the Glasgow and West of Scotland Temperance Society, founded in 1829 by John Dunlop and his aunt Lillias Graham.1 In *History of the Temperance Movement in Great Britain and Ireland; from the Earliest Date to the Present Time*, Samuel Couling claims that when Dunlop observed the working-class in France, he decided to improve the working-class people in his native

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Scotland by keeping them from liquor (40). In order to gain support for his cause, Dunlop began travelling within Scotland, finally organizing a lecture in Glasgow in October 1829 which marked the official beginning of his society (Couling 40). By 1835, Joseph Livesey had started publication of his teetotal magazine The Preston Temperance Advocate and the British Association for the Promotion of Temperance had been established, bringing the anti-spirits movement onto the national stage. In 1847, the year before The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was published, the first Band of Hope was founded—a name given to the children within the Leeds Temperance Society (Shiman 134). Lilian Lewis Shiman notes that this is the history which the group itself accepts; there is however some doubt as to the actual date (Footnote 3 p. 268). Members had to pledge to “abstain from all liquors of an intoxicating quality… except as medicine.” The term ‘Band of Hope’ was eventually used for several juvenile temperance groups tied to different Protestant denominations, while the Roman Catholic Church named the equivalent group within its church the ‘Children’s Guild’ (Shiman 134). By the late nineteenth century, individuals affiliated with the Band of Hope were still promoting temperance in lectures such as Frederic Smith’s “The Temperance Sketchbook.”

Social conceptions of alcohol were undergoing a vast paradigm shift before and during Anne Brontë’s writing life. The definition of temperance itself, which has become synonymous with complete abstinence from and legal prohibition of alcohol, at one time meant moderation in its consumption. During the years from 1834 to 1848, a battle raged between “moderationists” and

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3 Nick Brownlee. This is Alcohol. Sanctuary, 2002.
“teetotalers,” which Brian Harrison delineates in chapter 7 of *Drink and The Victorians*. While Anne Brontë’s personal beliefs will be discussed later, it is significant that this period coincides with her adult life and the writing of *Tenant*. The conflict between moderation and teetotalism is enacted in the novel through the characters of Mr. Millward and Helen Graham. Early temperance organizations such as the London Temperance Society and the British and Foreign Temperance Society believed in moderation, and felt that ‘drunkards’ were responsible for their own condition (Harrison 141, Shiman 10). Teetotalism, however, steadily gained popularity and by 1848 it was more widely supported than moderation (Harrison 145). See Fig. 1 for a more complete timeline of the several temperance movements founded in the nineteenth century.

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**Fig 1.** Timeline of national temperance organizations, 1830-1873

From *Drink and the Victorians*, Harrison, 1971, p. 141.

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What, specifically, did these opposing camps believe? Teetotalers believed that *any* alcohol could lead to addiction and personal ruin, while moderationists—as their name suggests—were not opposed to alcohol consumption in limited amounts. The teetotalers’ “long pledge” required not only personal abstention but also required those who signed it not to provide alcohol to others (Harrison 139). In 1839, the New British and Foreign Temperance Society and the British and Foreign Temperance Society, which had split in 1835, upheld the long pledge (Harrison 140, 142).

Teetotalers’ tactics were dramatic and effective. They staged speeches during which “reformed drunkards” described the horrible things they had done while under the influence and their path to “salvation” in teetotal organizations (Harrison 131). As Harrison points out, these speeches always followed a similar pattern of crimes, remorse, and salvation, much like a religious conversion (131). The crimes were always safely in the past by the time of the speech. This pattern evokes religious testimonials, which likely contributed to its popular appeal. Working people, provided they stayed away from alcohol and gave speeches which held to the aforementioned pattern, were held up as “respectable” members of their class (132).

The work of the Band of Hope, which focused on working class children, and teetotal organizations’ working-class speakers support the argument that the working classes were seen as more susceptible to the so-called “evils” of alcohol.6 John Dunlop, when asked where the teetotal movement had been most impactful, replied that “‘with regard to the respectable portion of the working class we have done a great deal’” (Harrison 142).

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Moderationists—as Tenant’s Mr. Millward is—were frequently members of the upper classes and did not want to deny alcohol to their guests, or themselves. They benefited by disseminating the view that people of higher socioeconomic status were at less risk of abusing alcohol. The focus was not on making sacrifices themselves, but on changing the behavior of others. The failure of the Beer Act of 1830, which allowed unlimited beer houses in the hopes of reducing gin consumption, showed that the moderationist reformers were out of touch with the very people they were trying to help (Shiman 15). Gin was the preferred drink of the poor in London, who felt that they were being made to suffer while “‘[the] drink of the rich was safeguarded’” (Shiman 17). Teetotalism overtook moderationism in large part because it won the support of poor and working-class people.

Because of the temperance movement’s usual focus on the working class, Hyman views Anne’s focus on “upper-crust drunkenness” in Tenant as a comment on the role of “the Gentleman,” a figure displaced by a changing society (451). This is not my view, but I do find it significant that Tenant’s least sympathetic characters are upper class gentlemen.’

Prohibition

The United States officially implemented prohibition on January 16, 1919. In Britain, by contrast, alcohol was never legally prohibited. This is partially because Pubs were not just where people bought alcohol, they were also important social gathering spaces for everyone.7 There was, however, a strong movement for prohibition, beginning its activity in earnest in about 1853. Historians Harrison and Shiman both detail this movement as a rebuttal to the moral suasionists,

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7 Based on personal observation over four months in Bath, England, this is still how Pubs function in British culture.
who believed right example would result in improved behavior. As Harrison states, however, “in the 1850s public opinion was… hostile to the Maine Law [prohibition]” (198).

In *Tenant*, Helen’s views align with moral suasion. She never suggests that alcohol should be prohibited. Instead, she believes people should decide individually not to drink, based on the negative experiences of others. Yet we must also confront the fact that Helen’s good example is not enough to change her husband. Despite the fact that *Tenant* was published before the prohibition movement gained traction in public discourse, Helen’s experience suggests that drastic changes must be made—which may well include new laws.

*Temperance and Religion*

Religion played a strong role in Anne Brontë’s life, as well as in the temperance movement. John Dunlop’s Glasgow and West of Scotland Temperance Society, as well as the Band of Hope, maintained the position that alcohol was an immoral influence. *The Temperance Sketchbook* highlights passages in the Bible and details how these passages discourage Christians from drinking alcohol. Even when the Bible mentions wine, the *Sketchbook* argues, it is not the fermented, intoxicating variety.

It is hardly new or surprising to say that temperance and religion are connected. What is surprising, however, is that many churches were reluctant to embrace teetotalism. Shiman details this conflict in *Crusade Against Drink*, writing that “drinking was as much a part of religious as of secular life” (43). Many church officials, of all denominations, did not want to discontinue the use of alcohol in religious ceremonies or at parish gatherings (Shiman 43). The Church of England “ignored” teetotalism, while Wesleyan Methodists signed anti-teetotal resolutions in 1841 (Shiman 45, 55). A petition signed by over 100 Quakers, in support of teetotalism, did not change their church’s official position in favor of moderation. Mr. Millward, the vicar, is the
only church leader depicted in *Tenant*. He is deeply offended by Helen’s rigid anti-alcohol attitude, which represents the reluctance of church leaders to move from moderation to teetotalism. Some church leaders argued that while drunkenness was a sin, and a grievous one, it was the fault of individual drinkers and not alcohol itself. 8 As we shall see, this is an argument which Anne Brontë problematizes in *Tenant*.

Regardless of their church’s official position, many clerics formed and were active in temperance societies (Shiman 45, 47). This included Anne Brontë’s father, Patrick Brontë (Shiman 48). He cooperated with clerics and ministers from other religious denominations to form the Haworth temperance society, including the Rev. M. Saunders, a Baptist minister (Shiman 48). The West Riding of Yorkshire, where the Brontës occupied Haworth parsonage, was known for strong temperance sentiment. In this region there was “a strong tradition of temperance work in the parish churches” (Shiman 47). While Mr. Millward is no temperance activist, Helen functions as a voice for the moral-religious temperance argument in *Tenant*.

**Sacramental Wine**

The question of sacramental wine widened the rift between teetotalists and many churches. Moderationism caused no such issue, because taking a sip of wine during communion could not be seen as immoderate. Strict teetotalists, however, maintained that any alcohol could lead to addiction and should be avoided. As many teetotalers were also quite religious, this caused a “serious dilemma” (Shiman 69). The resolution signed by the Wesleyan Methodists explicitly stated: “no unfermented wines [shall] be used in the administration of the sacrament [communion]” (Cited on Shiman 55). Teetotal leadership also had to confront the fact that “wine

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8 This sentiment was still expressed in 1876 by Cardinal Manning, in his introduction to T.E. Bridgett’s *The Discipline of Drink*. 
[was] habitually referred to and mentioned with favour in the Bible” (Shiman 69). A Reverend Beardsall, who later started a temperance society, campaigned to replace sacramental wine with “non-alcoholic grape juice,” and sold grape juice to churches (Shiman 69).

Anne Brontë was quite religious herself, which informs her portrayal of Helen in Tenant. As she was a thoughtful person, it is almost impossible that she did not reflect deeply on the question of sacramental wine. When Mr. Millward in Tenant calls wine “a gift of providence,” he alludes to the sacramental wine issue. As Brontë portrays him as old-fashioned and misguided, one infers she does not see wine as necessary to religious observance.

An Early Historical Work

One of the earliest histories of the temperance movement in Britain was History of the Temperance Movement in Great Britain and Ireland from the Earliest Date to the Present Time, by Samuel Couling, published in 1862. Couling’s history is itself highly biased against “intemperance” and praises “departed temperance worthies.” Before this, Couling had written The Traffic in Intoxicating Drinks, its Evils and its Remedy, and Our Labouring Classes, their Condition considered. When his History was written, he had been active in temperance organizations for twenty-two years. I wish to highlight here the connection in public consciousness between the working classes and temperance, as one author concerned himself with both subjects.

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9 One of Anne Brontë’s longest surviving letters is to a clergyman about the religious doctrines she grapples with in Tenant (Barker, The Brontës: A life in letters, p. 220). This letter mostly concerns universal salvation, but it shows a pattern of deep reflection which marked Anne Brontë’s religious life.
Couling dedicates his *History* to John Dunlop, co-founder of the Glasgow and West of Scotland Temperance Society, and William Janson, described as “the friend of temperance in London.”

Couling gives the early dates of the movement as 1804-1832 and characterizes England and Ireland in the years before this as a scene of lawless pandemonium. Before the temperance movement, readers are informed, one could expect “a duel every day and gambling every night—especially on Sundays” (10). This is undoubtedly an exaggeration. When Couling describes the widespread availability of alcohol, however, he is not wide of the mark. Literary critic Gwen Hyman, as well as temperance historians Lilian Lewis Shiman and Brian Harrison all write that pubs were an integral part of British social life, as they still are today. There was a pub located mere hundreds of feet away from the Brontë parsonage, which Anne Brontë’s brother Branwell frequented.

Couling’s work was published after Anne Brontë had died, but he devotes three chapters to events which occurred during her lifetime. These events include the rift between long pledge and short pledge supporters. Another chapter in the *History* details temperance activism from 1840 to 1846. Yet another chapter covers 1846 until 1851. One infers that the years from 1840 to 1851 saw an increase in temperance activism, since the first chapter of Couling’s book covers a much larger time span, 1804 to 1832.

Further, the religious underpinning of Couling’s work is unmistakable. His concern about duels “especially on Sundays,” for example, is meant to rouse the ire of religious audiences. He also relates the story of Father Matthew, a catholic priest who administered the teetotal pledge to 100,000 people in Yorkshire. Couling views alcohol as an ‘evil’ influence, and as such he dedicates large portions of his work to promoting “total abstinence,” or teetotalism (242).
Couling’s work ends by stating “as a general rule, society finds it necessary to apologize for the use of intoxicating liquors, and to profess opinions in favour of abstinence” (240). Again, Couling is sharing his belief in teetotalism. Helen in *Tenant* is also a teetotalist, despite the fact that this is not what she calls herself. Unlike Couling, Anne Brontë does not simply have Helen state that drinking alcohol is immoral or harmful. Her moral authority on this subject comes from experience, as does her creator’s.

*Sheffield*10

Sheffield, located in Yorkshire, served as a central location for much nineteenth century temperance activism. Sheffield became the headquarters for the British Temperance League in 1880. This society still operates out of Sheffield today, and in her preface to *Crusade against Drink in Victorian England*, historian Lilian Lewis Shiman thanks them for their help in writing her book (ix). Haworth, where the Brontës lived, was in a different part of Yorkshire than Sheffield, but still in the north of the country (see map). This region of England saw more temperance activism than others, which Caroline Reid notes in “Teetotalism and Local Culture,” as does Pam Lock in “Death and the Alcoholic.” The “provincialism” of Sheffield was particularly conducive to temperance activism, as it allowed positive relationships between the middle and working classes and a central role for religion (Reid 250-251). Even when temperance societies elsewhere in the country were wracked by conflict over teetotalism, Sheffield made the transition to teetotalism naturally, and retained the support of middle-class leaders (Reid 264).

Anne Brontë, as well as her siblings, were deeply curious about the world. They read *Blackwell’s* magazine for news, wrote stories featuring the Duke of Wellington, and created fictional worlds, Gondal and Glasstown, full of political intrigue. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Anne would not have been aware of the temperance activism in communities surrounding her own. Her own father, as I shall detail later, participated in temperance activism. Even if Branwell had not suffered from alcohol addiction, temperance would likely have been an interesting subject to the sensitive, religious, and idealistic Anne. As it was, geography and personal experience combined to make a temperance novel the natural thing for Anne Brontë to write.

![Map of Yorkshire with stars indicating the location of Sheffield and the approximate location of Haworth.](image)

**Fig 2.** Map of Yorkshire with stars (my addition) indicating the location of Sheffield and the approximate location of Haworth.
Women and the Temperance Movement

To many, temperance activism is naturally associated with the struggle for women’s rights. Harrison states “in its overall pattern the temperance campaign resembles the campaign for female emancipation” (196). I am inclined to believe that the two movements were similar: In both Britain and America, many women who fought for temperance also fought for women’s suffrage. When expounding upon the detrimental effects of alcohol, activists pointed to domestic abuse which occurred when men were intoxicated. Most of these stories portrayed women as angelic, passive victims. This picture was quite far from reality. In America, women gained unprecedented political power through temperance activism. The primary example was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, which also fought for women’s suffrage and engaged in missionary work.

In England, women did not become leaders of temperance activism the way they did in America. They were, however, “active workers” in the movement whose “contributions to the temperance cause were invaluable” (Shiman 182). Some women joined predominantly male societies, and were often relegated to stereotypically ‘female’ work, for example teaching children (Shiman 182). In the 1870s, Margaret Parker returned from a trip to America, impressed by the activism she had seen, and started the British Women’s Temperance Association. This organization experienced considerable growth but was unable to gain the same level of influence as its American counterparts (Shiman 183).

_Tenant_ was published well before the 1870s. Anne Brontë had died in 1849, so she never saw the establishment of women’s temperance societies. Yet she recognized that women felt just
as strongly about temperance as men did. She had seen how Branwell’s alcohol abuse affected her own family. Through Helen, Anne Brontë provides more than a cautionary tale about drinking. Helen is a principled, active, and independent heroine who gains agency despite every effort to wrest it from her. Underneath the surface temperance narrative, Tenant is a feminist, or at least a proto-feminist, manifesto.

Temperance in Anne Brontë’s Life

Anne Brontë’s discussion of alcohol and temperance in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall took place in this complex social context. Alcohol abuse, as well as addiction generally, had been viewed as a personal moral failure for hundreds of years by the time Anne Brontë was born. Hyman gives the 1860s as the date by which alcoholism had been widely accepted as a disease (454). By the 1840s, however there were sections on “intoxication” and its relation to “insanity” in medical textbooks—including a textbook which Patrick Brontë owned and made extensive notes in, as Pam Lock notes in her essay “Death and the Alcoholic.” One of the notes in the section “On Intoxication,” written when Branwell was physically and mentally weakened by alcohol, is about Delirium Tremens. 11

Critical developments in the British temperance movement took place during Anne Brontë’s lifetime, and the Brontë family was at the center of the temperance movement in Haworth, their village. 12 Brontë’s experience with her brother Branwell’s substance abuse, and her father’s reliance on a progressive medical textbook by Dr. Thomas John Graham informed Anne’s nuanced portrayal of Arthur Huntingdon’s alcoholism. 13 Brontë portrays Huntingdon’s

11 Lock 33.
13 Ibid 33
addiction not simply as a moral failing but as a disease—Lock points out that he suffers from not only “weakness” of the mind but the medical condition of “depression.”

Anti-alcohol sentiment was part of Anne Brontë’s life from an early age. Patrick Brontë helped form the Haworth Temperance Society in 1834 (Lock). Anne, at this point, would have been fourteen. Before this, he had advised a Mrs. Collins, a member of his parish, to leave her abusive and alcoholic husband (Lock). In addition, the medical textbook which I refer to above included a section outlining the perils of excessive drinking, a warning Patrick Brontë would have been keen to pass on to his children. In fact, he made Branwell (then seventeen) secretary of the Temperance Society—a tragic irony in light of later events. There is evidence to suggest Branwell was already drinking by this time. Patrick Wiggins, a fictional caricature of Branwell created by Charlotte in 1834, visits a “Public [house; i.e. Pub]” in the course of a story and orders “two bottles of… ale” and “a double quart of porter.”  

Branwell’s 1835 trip to London further exacerbated his substance abuse problem. In addition to his alcohol problem, he developed an opium addiction, and spent much of the family’s money. As a result, he could not provide for his sisters in the event of their father’s death. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne had to earn money as teachers and governesses. From 1843 to 1845, Anne and Branwell were both employed at Thorp Green Hall. They left because Branwell began an affair with the lady of the house. Anne never explicitly wrote anything about this episode, though she did state in a letter “we hope he [Branwell] will do better and be better in future.” It is likely this traumatic experience informed the writing of Tenant, which depicts similarly ‘shocking’ situations. Tenant describes not just alcohol addiction, but also spousal abuse and extramarital affairs. Charles Kingsley, in

15 Ibid.
his review, called the novel “utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls.” Though if a girl—
Anne—was “fit” to witness such behavior, why should she not write about it? For that matter, 
plenty of girls and women throughout England experienced similar situations, whether or not they read about it in books.

Many readers and critics have connected Arthur Huntingdon to Branwell Brontë. Winifred Gerin, who published the first biography of Anne in 1959, argues by contrast that Branwell is more similar to Lord Lowborough. I disagree with this view, but also do not feel it necessary to project Branwell completely onto a single character. However, some similarities between Branwell and Huntingdon feel significant. The primary point of comparison between Branwell and Huntingdon is that both men are addicted to alcohol and are sexually promiscuous. Huntingdon has red hair, as Branwell did. Like Huntingdon, Branwell returned home from London quite ill. Tragically, Branwell never overcame his addictions, and died in September 1848 at the age of 31. Arthur Huntingdon dies in Tenant, though Branwell had not died by the time Tenant was published. Still, Anne saw that not many addicts were so lucky as to reform. To her, writing a happy ending for Huntingdon would not have been truthful—and as she writes in the preface to the second edition of Tenant, her object was “to tell the truth” (3). I do not highlight the similarities between Arthur Huntingdon and Branwell Brontë to suggest that they are the same. I simply mean to show that Anne Brontë was qualified to write a book such as Tenant, something reviewers, literary critics, and her sister Charlotte seemed to doubt.

As temperance and religion are inextricably intertwined in space and time, it is crucial to highlight key events in Anne Brontë’s religious and moral development. Helen, in Tenant, shares some of Anne Brontë’s religious beliefs, such as universal salvation. One of the largest

16 See Sinclair, Frawley, and Lock.
influences on Anne was her aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, a strict Wesleyan. The Wesleyans were a Methodist sect preaching earthly suffering for eternal gain, as well as universal salvation. “To me/ To live is Christ/ To die is gain” is inscribed on a teapot which historians believe belonged to her. “Aunt Branwell” came to stay with the Brontës for many years after the death of their mother, and she and Anne shared a room. She chose the sisters’ reading material, and tried to limit their use of a nearby circulating library—novels were, at that time, held to be potentially morally dangerous. 17 She did not succeed in her effort to control what the girls read, partially because Patrick Brontë allowed his children unlimited access to his own library.

As Anne was the youngest of the Brontë siblings, and at an impressionable age when her aunt came to stay, she absorbed more of her aunt’s religious teachings than her siblings. For instance, Anne stitched the following passage from Proverbs on a sampler under her aunt’s direction:

“Honour the LORD with thy substance and with the first fruits of all thine increase. So shall thy barns be filled with Plenty, and thy Presses shall burst out with new wine. My child despise not the chastening of the LORD, neither be weary of his correction.” 18

The passage in question, however, mentions wine, suggesting that Elizabeth Branwell was not concerned with temperance or teetotalism. In fact, Lilian Lewis Shiman writes in Crusade against Drink that “Wesleyan methodists were officially the least sympathetic to teetotalism,” though some “ministers had been prominent in the moderation movement” (53). It appears, then, that not a singular influence, but multiple influences, converged to inform Anne Brontë’s anti-alcohol views and their manifestation in Tenant. Her aunt’s religious asceticism

18 Ibid 24.
may well have been one of these influences, along with Patrick Brontë’s temperance activism and Branwell’s tragic decline.

II. Temperance and Gender in Tenant

While Tenant has a temperance agenda, with the goal of presenting alcohol as dangerous, it expands beyond the framework of other temperance literature. This other literature included Samuel Couling’s 1862 History of the Temperance Movement, Joseph Livesey’s Preston Temperance Advocate, and transcribed speeches from teetotal meetings. None of these mediums aimed for subtlety, with the Preston Temperance Advocate running the following text in January of 1836:

“The enemy has possession of the field. More than two millions [sic] of acres of British land are in possession of the enemy, preparing the instruments of war; and the capital, ingenuity, and labour of more [sic] than a million of persons are employed in scattering firebrands, arrows, and death: every town, village, and hamlet is disgraced with licensed drunkeries” (Preston Temperance Advocate 1, January 1836).

As Tenant is a temperance novel, one expects it not to be subtle. We assume the characters who abuse alcohol will be dirty, physically ugly, and cruel from the beginning of the story. Hindley in Wuthering Heights fits this pattern, as well as Bill Sikes from Oliver Twist. However, Arthur Huntingdon is handsome, at least when Helen first meets him. He is funny, he lavishes attention on her, he is charming. Huntingdon is also wealthy, unlike Bill Sikes, and unlike the working-class people who were the target of temperance literature. Why else would Joseph Livesey urge readers not to turn to alcohol to remedy exhaustion after “long confinement at [their] work?” (2)
Further, while Anne Brontë has a moral agenda, her novel is not sententious. Helen is drawn in by Huntingdon’s emotional manipulation, showing that she is fallible. She explicitly asserts “I am no angel” (Brontë 267). Gilbert Markham, whom Helen marries at the end of the novel, argues at one point that moderate consumption of alcohol is not harmful. It is unclear that he has changed this position by the end of *Tenant*. He reports that he “[does] not deny [himself] needful refreshment on the road” when he travels from Grassdale to Staningley to seek Helen—this could mean alcohol, but Brontë does not specify (471). Last, no good woman, not even Helen, ‘saves’ Huntingdon. He dies, afraid and in pain, crying out “I can’t repent; I only fear” (446).

In this chapter, I shall argue that *Tenant* uses alcohol to highlight the harmful nature of gendered power dynamics. To the extent that *Tenant* was palatable to the public, it was because Brontë’s more radical feminist critiques were disguised in the temperance narrative of Huntingdon, a heavy drinker who abuses his wife.

*Contemporary Reviews*

While sales for *Tenant* were good, reviewers for literary magazines hid their obvious interest in the novel behind a scandalized front. Several reviewers described *Tenant* as “powerful,” and then qualified that statement by calling the book “coarse.” Charles Kingsley wrote in *Fraser’s Magazine* “the fault of the book is coarseness.” An unnamed reviewer for *The Literary World* declared that *Tenant* and *Jane Eyre* were written by the same author, and described the “mind which conceived [these novels]” as “coarse almost to brutality.” An unsigned review in *The Spectator* stated: “there seems in the mind of [Tenant’s author] a morbid love for the coarse.” *Sharpe’s London Magazine* went so far as to call *Tenant* “unfit for perusal.” The novel’s chief offense, according to these reviews, was that it dwelt on scenes of debauchery in too much detail, not that it questioned Victorian gender politics.
Some reviewers, however, speculated that the author of *Tenant* was a woman, and it informed their perception of the novel. *The Literary World* declared “we shrewdly suspect these books [*Tenant* and *Wuthering Heights*] to be written by some gifted and retired woman” (Talley 428). The same reviewer asserts that “all that is good or attractive about [*Tenant’s* male characters] is or might be womanish” (428). Another reviewer, writing for the *Rambler*, insists that all the ‘Bell’ novels are the work of a single “Yorkshirewoman” (435). This same review takes issue with Helen as a heroine because she is “utterly unattractive and unfeminine” (436). Sexism clearly affected the way reviewers saw both female characters and female authors, yet it seems Brontë succeeded in drawing their focus to Huntingdon’s alcohol abuse rather than the underlying critique of Victorian marriage laws and power dynamics.

*Introducing Themes*

Through the debate between Helen, Mrs. Markham and Gilbert Markham early in *Tenant*, Brontë seamlessly connects the question of temperance with the question of gender. A discussion of temperance begins when Helen and her son Arthur refuse the wine Mrs. Markham offers them (Brontë 30). Helen explains that she has “been accustomed to make [Arthur] swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water by way of medicine… and, in fact, [she has] done what [she] could to make him hate them” (31). Here Anne Brontë shows that Helen has already embraced teetotalism as opposed to moderation. The main action of *Tenant* is set in 1827, while teetotalism was not popular until the late 1830s. Therefore, in the eyes of the people around her, Helen is advocating for a new and unpopular idea. Yet the fact that teetotalism eventually overtook the temperance movement suggests that Helen has foresight.

Anne Brontë suggests in this passage that the way boys are taught about both morality and alcohol is dangerous when they become men. This argument is woven in throughout the
novel, but Brontë first brings it to readers’ attention in the dialogue of this debate. Mrs. Markham’s speeches express the views of wider society, which today would be called toxic masculinity. She accuses Helen of treating her son “like a girl,” saying that he will be “the veriest milksop that ever was sopped” or “a mere Miss Nancy” (Brontë 31, 33). Milksop means “a feeble, timid, or ineffectual person” (OED n. 1a). Milksop and Miss Nancy both refer to weak or effeminate men. Mrs. Markham is suggesting, and her family agrees, that it is unmanly to abstain from alcohol. Through the characters of Huntingdon and his friends, it becomes clear just how mistaken this idea of manliness is—and how much harm can be done when men live by it.

Further, while neither Helen nor Anne Brontë see alcoholism as a medical issue—no one did at this time—Helen does not trust to her son’s moral fortitude alone to keep him from intemperance. She does not subscribe to the popular belief that “a strong man” is automatically “able and willing to resist temptation,” as Gilbert Markham puts it (Brontë 31). Instead, she decides to actively disincentivize her son to drink, making him associate alcohol with illness. Helen’s method is somewhat similar to aversion therapy, in which a patient is exposed to the stimulus they want to avoid while simultaneously being exposed to discomfort. For instance, a patient may take a drug which induces nausea or vomiting whenever they drink alcohol. Studies on aversion therapy as a treatment for alcoholism have been done as recently as 2017. By showing that Helen uses what could almost be called a scientific practice to keep her son from drinking alcohol, Anne Brontë reinforces for her readers that Helen is a voice for new ideas.

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Helen also opposes the idea that boys and girls must be educated differently. After explaining her effort to make her son hate alcohol, Helen continues “‘I wish I could render the incentives to every other [vice] equally innoxious in his case’” (31). “Innoxious” is a synonym of “innocuous,” meaning “not noxious or harmful” (OED adj. 1). Helen’s use of this word suggests that “incentives to vice” are harmful, like a poison. The poison has worked when temptation (or incentive) translates into action. People who drink alcohol often have the same incentive: they want to reach a better mental and emotional state. If Helen’s son does not have this incentive, because alcohol makes him feel worse, then the temptation to drink will not have any harmful effect on him, because it will not affect his actions. It is unclear what Helen means to do regarding other “vices,” but the principle will be the same. By using the word “innxious,” which contains the word “noxious,” Brontë alludes to the argument that alcohol is a poison. She does not explicitly call alcohol a poison as the Preston Temperance Advocate did. She does not even call alcohol a “destructive evil,” which was reportedly how the Haworth Temperance Society members spoke of it at their inaugural meeting. 20 Rather, she shows her audience what alcohol addiction can do, and as it comes from her own painful experience, it reads as authentic and not sermon-like.

Helen’s statement regarding vice and temptation opens a debate not just about alcohol but about education, and the responsibility of parents for their children’s moral development. Helen says she will not send her son to school, because he will there “‘learn to despise his mother’s authority and affection’” (32). What she means is that the way boys are educated leads them to despise women. Boys’ schools had no female role models or authority figures, and the texts that

20 The Leeds Mercury, November 22nd 1834.
were taught tended to reinforce gender stereotypes. By educating her son herself, Helen aims to prevent his initiation into patriarchal power structures. Markham disagrees with Helen’s plan to “lead [her son] by the hand,” comparing boys to oak trees made stronger by storms (33). Helen retorts “would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?” (33). When Markham admits that he would “certainly not,” he is expressing a double standard (33). Helen concludes that she “would have both [boys and girls] … benefit by the experience of others,” so that they can determine what is right and wrong without causing harm to themselves (34). Helen believes that gender should not determine how a child is educated, another idea which shocks those around her.

During a party at the Markham’s, which Helen does not attend, Mr. Millward makes the case for moderation as opposed to teetotalism. He insists that wine is a “gift of providence” and advocates for “moderation in all things” (42, 44). He also pours two glasses of Mrs. Markham’s ale for himself in quick succession (41). Critic Gwen Hyman writes that by the time Tenant was published, Mr. Millward would have been seen as old fashioned (453). The action of the novel may be set in 1827, but the novel was published in 1848, so teetotalism had already overtaken moderation in temperance circles. In contrast to Mr. Millward, Mr. Lawrence points out that “with some persons temperance—that is moderation—is impossible” (42). This assertion likely stems from Anne Brontë’s personal experience with her brother. Mr. Lawrence, too, seems to have some family history of alcohol abuse, as “it was generally believed his father had shortened his days by intemperance” (42). Anne Brontë’s statement here through Lawrence is quite radical for her time. Most people believed that anyone could practice moderation with enough effort, but

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21 This included the biblical view of women as immoral, usually supported by the story of Eve, the philosophy of Aristotle, and some of Shakespeare’s plays, such as The Taming of the Shrew.
Brontë problematizes that view. By calling moderation “impossible” for some, she suggests excessive drinking is not the fault individual drinkers, but of alcohol. It follows that people who cannot practice moderation should abstain completely, which is the prescription of Alcoholics Anonymous even today.

_Huntingdon and Power_

Even before Arthur Huntingdon spirals into alcohol addiction, the power dynamic which exists between him and Helen is unhealthy. He is controlling in his behavior toward Helen from the beginning of their acquaintance. His very name suggests that he is predatory, as it includes the word “hunt.” Hunting was a stereotypically masculine pastime, and one we later learn Huntingdon participates in. In Anne Brontë’s earlier _Agnes Grey_, the only character who hunts is Uncle Robson, who laughs as his nephew tortures baby birds, praising the boy’s “spunk.” This suggests that Anne Brontë viewed men who hunted as cruel and immoral. Huntingdon seems to metaphorically ‘hunt’ Helen in _Tenant_. For instance, he only asks Helen to dance when he has observed that she is dissatisfied with her partner, the “ugly and disagreeable” Mr. Boarham (134, 135). Based on this observation, he knows that Helen is a suitable target.

Another traditionally masculine quality Huntingdon displays is a gregarious temperament. He is never emotionally vulnerable. Even when Huntingdon is kind to her, Helen wonders “what [she] will do with the serious part of [her]self” when the pair are married (201). At a dinner party, he comes to the table where Helen and her friend Milicent Hargrave are sitting (144). He carelessly looks at and then tosses aside Milicent’s paintings, all the while talking to Helen (144). Helen’s diary entry reports that he was “quizzing,” or mocking, other “members of the company” (144). At this point it does not occur to Helen that Huntingdon may toss women aside like he does these paintings, or that making jokes at the expense of others who are present
is inappropriate. Huntingdon does not ask Milicent if he can see her paintings but declares “let’s have a look at them” (144). Based on the fact that he tosses them aside without comment, he does not care about them. His mocking of others at the party foreshadows his snide and distasteful comments about Helen later in the novel. While speaking with Helen alone during the dinner party, he “[presses]” her hand with “more of conscious power than tenderness” (146). This is perhaps the most perceptive comment Helen makes in this diary entry.

When Huntingdon comes to visit Helen’s uncle at Staningley, he continues his predatory behavior toward her, and in fact both literally and metaphorically traps her. For example, he discovers that Helen has sketched him on the back of one of her paintings and declares “by George, I’ll keep it!” (155) He also pores over the backs of her other paintings in an invasive manner, finding evidence that she had sketched him before but erased it (156). Though Helen has agreed to show her drawings to all of the guests, Huntingdon’s behavior shows a lack of respect for Helen’s privacy. He forcibly takes her property from her, which shows that he does not think she has a right to it. His behavior here also foreshadows his abusive destruction of her art supplies later in the novel. Huntingdon knows at this point that he has succeeded in luring in Helen—so much so that she writes “I love him” even after he steals her painting (156).

Huntingdon proceeds to “[attach] himself” to Annabella Wilmot to provoke Helen to jealousy and manipulate her into admitting her affection for him (156).

Huntingdon waits until Helen exits the library on her way to bed, at which point he “[places] himself in the doorway” and “[seizes] Helen’s hand much against [her] will” (157, italics mine). Before he lets Helen leave, he puts “his arm around [her] neck and kisses her” without warning and without her consent (157). He has manipulated Helen’s mind, and now her body as well.
When Huntingdon asks Helen to marry him, Anne Brontë describes the scene using the language of violence—even of rape. First, Huntingdon finds Helen in the library alone, a highly vulnerable position. He “forcibly [possesses] himself” of Helen’s hand, and when she tries to leave the room, she finds he is “kneeling on her dress” (167). His declaration of his ‘love’ for Helen is a turbulent soliloquy which leaves her no room to interrupt. Huntingdon declares at one point “Silence… that means yes.” Terms like ‘consent’ and ‘agency’ are of course anachronistic here, but they help to explain why this statement is so alarming. Huntingdon takes Helen’s silence as affirmation that she loves and will marry him, not as consent to sexual activity. The frightening element of this scene, however, is that Huntingdon uses the same logic as a rapist would, and the same language. At the end of his speech, he asks, “will you bestow yourself upon me?” and does not wait for a response before declaring “you will!” One could argue that he says “you will” based on Helen’s facial expression or her previous conduct. Yet he is essentially commanding her to marry him. He is not leaving her any control. He asks her to “[bestow]” herself on him, indicating that he thinks of her as property. Bestow can mean “to settle or give in marriage,” but it can also mean “to confer as a gift, present” (OED n. 4, n. 6 a). Additionally, Huntingdon does not say the word “marry” or “marriage.” In the sense of Helen ‘giving’ him her body, ‘bestow’ could also have a sexual sense. After Helen admits she loves him, Huntingdon “nearly [squeezes her] to death” and “[smothers her] with kisses” (168). Even Huntingdon’s love is suffocating. Brontë introduces this unhealthy power dynamic before she introduces Huntingdon’s alcohol addiction, suggesting that she disapproves of the social and legal subjugation of women, irrespective of whether or not men drink too much.

*Huntingdon and Alcohol*
Huntingdon’s alcohol abuse problems do not become clear until Helen has been married to him for over two years. Helen reports in her diary that her husband’s “appetite for the stimulus of wine [has] increased upon him. It is no longer an accessory to social enjoyment: it is an important source of enjoyment in itself” (260). Through Huntingdon and his companions, Anne Brontë depicts a perversion of traditional masculinity, revealing that alcohol exacerbates what is already unhealthy.

The first time the subject of drinking is raised between Huntingdon and Helen is during the time they are engaged, when Huntingdon narrates the story of Lord Lowborough. Here we see that, if not engaged in self-destructive behavior himself, Huntingdon encourages other men in such behavior. Lowborough, forced to give up gambling by his dire financial situation, turned instead to excessive drinking. His drinking was encouraged by Arthur Huntingdon and other members of his club. After much mental and physical agony, Lowborough left the club and stopped drinking altogether. Huntingdon reports his advice to Lowborough was not to “‘kill himself like a fool, and not to abstain like a ninny’” (194). This statement encapsulates the belief of moderationists that people who drank too much simply needed to exercise more self-control. Modern knowledge about addiction shows how tragically mistaken this idea was. Huntingdon’s speeches here echo the views expressed by the Markhams when they insist abstaining from alcohol will make Helen’s son “a milksop.” Yet Lord Lowborough’s story makes clear that he had to exercise almost Herculean strength to finally give up drinking. While his old companions may see him as a “ninny” or a “milksop,” Anne Brontë does not.

During his narration of Lowborough’s story, Huntingdon pauses to assert “‘don’t think, Helen, that I’m a tippler. I’m nothing of the kind, and never was, and never shall be. I value my comfort far too much’” (194). Huntingdon’s declaration is a signal that he will indeed become
dependent on alcohol. The speech may appear too obvious a signal, but it is not out of character for him, as it displays his selfishness and hubris. To Huntingdon, the only reason not to drink excessively is his own comfort—and the preservation of his looks (194). He does not consider that he might become a burden to others by being a “tippler,” or that God would not approve of such behavior. Further, even after witnessing the struggles of Lord Lowborough, Huntingdon is confident his strength will preserve him from similar physical or mental anguish. It is clear Huntingdon believes his masculinity depends on consuming alcohol, as well as controlling Helen.

Alcohol, however, does not make Huntingdon more ‘manly’ by any definition. Rather, he is reduced to a state of childlike dependence. When Huntingdon returns from London after his first long absence, he is “flushed and feverish, listless and languid” (224). After seeing him, Helen laments in her diary “how altered!” (224) Huntingdon may, as he says, value his comfort, but not enough to avoid this illness. Helen “[plays] and [sings] for him for hours together…[writes] his letters for him and [gets] him everything he wants” (224). She indeed treats him like a sick child. The second time Huntingdon returns from London, he is worse still, claiming “‘my head is… all on fire with this consuming fever” (255). He swears at a butler for breaking a dish, complaining that his “nerves were racked and torn to pieces” by the noise (254). And when Helen leaves him for only an hour to take care of their baby, Huntingdon laments “you’re overflowing with kindness and pity for everything but me” (255). When Helen begs her husband to repent for his sins, “throwing her arms around him,” he accuses her of treating him “‘savagely’” (257). Claiming that she has thus made his fever worse, he demands “‘get me a glass of wine… to remedy what you’ve done, you she-tiger!’” (257) He has become demanding, irritable, and both physically and mentally weak—bad qualities for anyone, and which certainly
would have been considered the opposite of ‘manly.’ Even as he deteriorates, he refuses to ‘‘stay at home and take care of [himself] like a woman’’ (255). In one of the most poignant lines of the novel, Helen asks ‘‘Is it impossible, then, to take care of yourself like a man?’’ (255)

Nor does Huntingdon’s descent into alcohol dependence only harm himself. The further alcohol weakens Huntingdon, the more controlling he becomes toward Helen, even abusive. Anne Brontë uses her commentary on alcohol to reveal the power dynamics inherent in a patriarchal, heterosexual marriage of her era and takes them to a logical extreme. Huntingdon’s entire belief system is riddled with misogyny. At the beginning of Helen and Huntingdon’s marriage, for instance, he rushes her through Europe, disliking that she can “take delight in anything disconnected with himself” (203). He later complains that she is “‘too religious,’” and that it might “‘lessen her devotion to her earthly lord’” (204). Huntingdon is asking for so much power over Helen that it is equal with God’s power. He reveals himself at this point to be unreasonably demanding and narcissistic. Huntingdon will not even accept when Helen needs to attend to their son, exclaiming “‘Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly!’” (241) Later, Huntingdon praises Milicent, Ralph Hattersley’s wife, as a “‘pattern to her sex’” because she is “‘meek’” and “‘never [complains]’” (257) Huntingdon verbally abuses Helen, saying her “sour, pale face [is] perfectly repulsive,” among other things “calculated to hurt [her] feelings” (320, 321). Helen even describes his language to her as “the vilest and grossest abuse” (359).

When Helen confronts her husband about his flirtation with Lady Lowborough, he accuses her of breaking her vows to “honour and obey” him (235). He refuses to “be dictated to by a woman” (235). All Helen asks, however, is fidelity from her own husband, which is hardly dictatorial. As a man in a patriarchal society, and a member of the gentry, Huntingdon is
accustomed to being obeyed. He has a distorted sense of himself and how others should interact with him because he has grown up with too much power. And what does he do with the power society has given him? He hunts, “often [takes] too much [wine],” and flirts with a married woman in plain sight of his own wife (234). Later, he moves from flirtation to an affair. After this, he has another affair, with the governess Miss Myers. Anne Brontë makes clear that Arthur Huntingdon does not deserve a position of authority.

Neither, it seems, do the men he calls his friends. Helen writes of them as “gentlemen (so-called),” meaning their actions do not merit this title (339). All of them drink excessively, which is perhaps one of their main attractions for Huntingdon. Anabella praises their “‘bold, manly spirit,’” but as the chapter continues, it seems she must have been talking about different men (271). When Huntingdon and his companions are intoxicated, their behavior becomes horrific. During one representative scene, Ralph Hattersley shakes his wife, throws her from him, and proceeds to throw a footstool at Huntingdon (277). Huntingdon, meanwhile, is so drunk he is overcome by “a paroxysm… of foolish laughter” (274). Mr. Grimsby pretends to be unaffected by drink, but betrays himself by putting six lumps of sugar in his tea and pouring cream into his saucer instead of his cup (275). Walter Hargrave is less drunk and less boisterous than the others, but perhaps from the wrong motives. He says, “if thine eye be single thy whole body shall be full of light,” a blasphemy of Matthew 6:22 (275, Notes 527). Such an offense may signify little to modern readers, or those who are not Christian, but Anne Brontë was highly religious. What the passage from Matthew truly means is that Christians should focus solely on God. Mr. Hargrave, by contrast, suggests that his “eye” is directed toward Helen, and alludes to his belief that Helen does not owe her husband any “allegiance” (315). In his view, if Helen’s “eye” is “single,” i.e. if she only has a sexual or romantic relationship with one man, then she will not offend God.
Despite Mr. Hargrave’s superiority to his companions, Brontë means to show here that he is putting on an act, and that inwardly, he is immoral. Later, he proves this immorality by romantically pursuing Helen, attempting several times to get her to break her marriage vows.

In short, none of these men really deserve to be called ‘bold’ or ‘manly.’ Ironically, through their dependence on alcohol, they become the ‘ninnies’ and ‘milksops’ they profess to hate. Brontë suggests, however, that the problem did not begin with alcohol, but with an erroneous and harmful definition of masculinity.

The final, most horrendous act by which Huntingdon attempts to dominate Helen is the destruction of her art supplies. Until the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, all of a wife’s property was legally her husband’s, so Huntingdon has a legal right to do what he does. The scene begins when he reads Helen’s diary, an invasion of privacy reminiscent of when he examined her paintings. Helen’s diary reveals her plans to leave. Huntingdon, finding this out, takes the “‘keys to her cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else [she possesses],’” so that he may take all of her money and valuable possessions (365). He throws all of Helen’s art supplies into the fire, giving the easel to the butler to be burned later. He then praises himself for “[carrying] his point like a man” (367). We see here that cruelty and spirit-crushing dominance define a ‘man’ to Huntingdon. Having lost control over his drinking, he grasps for control over anything to remain ‘manly’ in his own eyes. Not only does he harm Helen, he also harms himself. He refuses to “‘be dictated to by a woman’” or “‘take care of [himself] like a woman,’” and as a result he becomes something less than a man.

While marriage laws do not specifically come to mind during this traumatic scene, they are an important background force. Stevie Davies asserts that Tenant concerns itself with marriage laws. I agree, insofar as such laws supported the social oppression of women and maintained the
power dynamics I have been discussing. Huntingdon and Milicent at separate points bring up the vow of wives to “obey” their husbands. Helen does not legally own her art supplies, as the Married Women’s Property Act was not passed until 1870. This means her husband has a legal right to destroy these items. Of course, what he does would have been seen as immoral, but that is a different question. Brontë suggests in this horrific scene that women should be allowed to earn money and that they should legally own their possessions. Otherwise, they have no recourse to escape a man like Huntingdon. Her point is not simply that Huntingdon is what her contemporaries would call “a brute.” Rather, her point is: what he has done here is legal, and it should not be.

At this juncture of the novel, Anne Brontë has made two things clear. First, Huntingdon and his drinking companions possess power because of their gender and their class; power which is protected by England’s laws. Second, they do not deserve this power. They have internalized a definition of power, and of masculinity which hurts not only others but themselves. Far from a traditional, formulaic narrative of a drunken brute and his victim, Tenant uses a critique of alcohol to problematize the gender hierarchy at the center of society.

Ralph Hattersley

Ralph Hattersley and his wife, Milicent, put traditional gender roles into practice. In representing this marriage, Anne Brontë pulls the romantic veneer off of the ‘submissive/patient wife’ trope, showing that it is unhealthy for both parties.

Milicent responds to social power dynamics in quite a different manner than Helen. She is first described as a “gentle” woman who has taken “a violent fancy” to Helen (143). When Ralph Hattersley expresses his desire for a wife that will “let [him] have [his] own way in everything,” Huntingdon recommends Milicent (221). This exchange, which Huntingdon reports
to Helen with some pride—“I have managed pretty well, both for your friend and mine,” he boasts—exposes deeply embedded patriarchal notions of power (221). By Hattersley’s own description, what he wants is some sort of puppet or doll; no human being is so easily controlled as the hypothetical wife he describes. He learns over the course of the novel, however, that always “having his own way” is not as satisfying as he imagined.

At first, Milicent is quite as submissive as Huntingdon promises. When Hattersley proposes, she writes to Helen “I didn’t think I had accepted him; but Mama says I have, and he seems to think so too” (221). After being coerced into marriage, Helen reports that Milicent “either is, or pretends to be quite reconciled to her lot” (227). While Milicent is certainly “ill-married,” as Helen is, she refuses to complain about her situation, even to a diary (Jacobs 212). She writes to Helen “don’t say a word against Mr. Hattersley [at this point in the novel, her fiancé], for I want to think well of him” (222). She emphasizes that, in her wedding vows, she will promise “to love, to honour, and obey [her husband]” (222). Huntingdon later accuses Helen of breaking her marriage vows by disobedience. By mentioning this part of the marriage ceremony twice, Anne Brontë suggests that wives should not be asked to “obey” their husbands. The husbands she depicts hardly deserve to be obeyed, and they mightily abuse the power this vow gives them.

Huntingdon praises Milicent because she is “‘meek,’” and allows her husband to “‘amuse himself…in regular bachelor style’” while in London (257). As Helen points out, however, this does not mean Milicent “‘has no will but [her husband’s]’” (258). Helen is sure that “‘he makes her life a curse to her’” (258).

And indeed, he does just that. Hattersley is perhaps the loudest and most physically violent of Huntingdon’s circle; his gentle, meek wife’s “anxiety for him” does nothing to change
him (258). During the most dramatic scene of debauchery at Grassdale, Hattersley “[bursts] into
the room with a clamorous volley of oaths in his mouth” (274). He proceeds to demand why
Milicent has been crying (277). He declares “come now, you shall tell me!” (277). Readers
easily infer that her tears are because of the drunken spectacle her husband is making; he remains
unaware. In order to get her to answer him, Hattersley “[shakes] her and remorselessly [crushes]
her slight arms in the gripe of his powerful fingers” (277). Milicent enjoins her husband to
“remember that we are not at home” (277). This chilling statement offers insight into just how
much of a “curse to her” her marriage is.

Later in the novel, Hattersley begins to tire of Milicent’s constant “‘exceeding
goodness’” (287). He uses the analogy of sand, a “‘soft, easy carpet- giving way at every step-
yielding the more the harder you press” (287). After “‘[plodding] along… for half an hour,’” on
the sand, he argues, one is “‘glad enough to come to a bit of good, firm rock’” (287). This
analogy suggests that the dynamic between Hattersley and Milicent is unhealthy for both parties.
After this brief moment of self-awareness, however, Mr. Hattersley simply tells Milicent “don’t
mind my talk” (288). He admits privately to Helen “I positively think I ill-use [Milicent]
sometimes… but I can’t help it, for she never complains” (288). Of course, his treatment of
Milicent merits a harsher term than ill-use, and he could help it, no matter how “invitingly
meek and mim” she might be (289). Despite troubling statements like “I can’t help it,” it is clear
that Mr. Hattersley is beginning to question his beliefs about marriage; possibly about women.
He realizes, at least, that “‘we [humans] shouldn’t always have what we want’” (289). His
conversation here with Helen represents his first steps, however small, toward reformation.

In contrast to Huntingdon, Ralph Hattersley is not without hope, and he does change his
behavior. He tells Helen of his resolution to act “with all decency and sobriety as a Christian and
the father of a family should do” (378). When he speaks with Helen, he has left Huntingdon and
the rest of their circle, an important symbolic victory (377). Seeing he is inclined to change,
Helen shows him two of Milicent’s letters about him, which make him “blush” and then “dash
away a tear” (380). Blushing and tears were considered feminine. Hattersley’s moral
reformation, Brontë suggests, begins when he becomes more “woman-like.”

Further suggesting an escape from gender roles, Helen’s “unfeminine” behavior in large part effects Hattersley’s reformation. She is honest and sometimes harsh with him. She tells
Hattersley he is Milicent’s “evil genius” and she chastises him for “[delighting] to oppress the
weak” (288, 289). When Hattersley tells her that he means to change his behavior, she declares
“that is a resolution you should have formed long ago” (378). Helen also shows him Milicent’s
correspondence, an active and daring step. Milicent cannot, or at least does not, speak for herself, but
Helen has voice enough for both of them.

Hattersley is later the only ‘friend’ who stays with Huntingdon during his illness (442). Milicent appears “happy and well” to Helen at this juncture; evidence that Mr. Hattersley has
made good on his promises (442). Hattersley also “evinces considerable sympathy for his
unhappy friend [Huntingdon]” (442). In Hattersley’s abusive behavior, and in his reformation,
Anne Brontë shows that Victorian society must move past gender roles and gendered power
dynamics in order to avoid self-destruction.

Walter Hargrave

While Huntingdon is tyrannous, and Ralph Hattersley is violent, Walter Hargrave evinces
a subtler, but just as toxic, form of misogyny. His attitude is similar to the chivalric code,
famously depicted in Chretien de Troyes’ *Arthurian Romances*. To Hargrave, women are
delicate and therefore need protecting. This explains why he attempts to “check” Hattersley’s
“clamorous volley of oaths” by “entreating him to remember the ladies” (274). Yet Hargrave also views women as sexual objects for men. This line of thinking leads him to become sexually predatory toward Helen. He sees that her marriage is unhealthy, and tries to use this to lure Helen into a relationship with him. Through Hargrave, Anne Brontë represents the dark elements of chivalry.

During his first visit to Grassdale, we learn few details about Mr. Hargrave, but Anne Brontë foreshadows his sexual pursuit of Helen. Helen opens her description of him reflecting that she “might [i.e. could] retaliate” against Huntingdon for his flirtation with Lady Lowborough (229). She goes on to explain that Mr. Hargrave “is disposed to be very polite and attentive to [her]… especially so when Arthur [Huntingdon] is the most neglectful” (229). This recalls Huntingdon’s ‘rescue’ of Helen from Mr. Boarham earlier in the novel. Helen was blind then to her future husband’s machinations, but she is wiser with Mr. Hargrave. She reports “his civilities are highly distasteful to me” (229). She resents being “pitied as a neglected wife when [she] is not such” (230). Mr. Hargrave’s treatment of Helen, even here, evokes chivalry. He feels that women must have the attention of men. He sees Helen’s husband being “neglectful” and sets himself up as a proverbial ‘knight in shining armor.’

The next time Hargrave and Helen meet, he actually rides up to her on a horse, as a knight would (246). The horse is a “black hunter,” which does not bode well for his character (246). The color “black” suggests evil—as in “black magic” or the devil as “the prince of darkness.” I want to make clear that I take issue with the literary tradition of darkness as evil: it is often racist, and originated from racism. However, it is the cultural shorthand for evil with which Brontë was familiar, and which she chooses. Mr. Hargrave’s horse is a “hunter,” which suggests immorality even more strongly. In Tenant, as well as in the earlier Agnes Grey, Anne
Brontë depicts hunting as immoral and as a symbol of male chauvinism. Uncle Robson in Agnes Grey, for instance, is a hunter. He praises his nephew for torturing baby birds and for defying “petticoat government.” Huntingdon’s predatory behavior when he meets Helen is comparable to hunting and trapping prey. In Tenant, Huntingdon and his circle hunt, as does Helen’s uncle. None of them are sympathetic characters. Anne Brontë writes of Hargrave’s “hunter” to highlight his predatory character.

After riding up to Helen, Hargrave gives her “a delicately worded” and “modestly delivered” compliment (247). Anne Brontë gives us no specific phrasing, because his words are empty flattery. He attempts another ‘rescue’ of Helen by inviting her to dinner, worried that she “will feel solitary in this great house [Grassdale] all alone” (247). First, she is not truly alone, as she has Rachel and little Arthur with her. Mr. Hargrave has romantic notions of Helen as a ‘damsel in distress,’ trapped in a large but lonely dwelling. 22 Knights also rescued damsels in distress in many stories: in the Arthurian Romances and in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, for example. Yet there was an understanding that these women would marry, or at least have sex with, the knights who rescued them. In a similar manner, Mr. Hargrave’s overtures to Helen are not selfless. As the conversation between Helen and himself continues, he rails against Huntingdon, who has long been absent in London. He accuses his so-called friend of “infatuated blindness and perversion of taste” (248). He insists he would never spend time with “reckless and dissipated companions” if he had “such a home, and such a partner to share it” as Huntingdon has (248). He means to imply here that he deserves Helen and Huntingdon doesn’t. This thought pattern denies Helen’s humanity, making her a prize to be won. In addition, Hargrave intends his

22 Rapunzel in her castle is one example. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Emily St. Aubert is also trapped in a castle.
words to deepen the rift between Helen and her husband. Helen perceptively writes in her diary that Hargrave is “presuming on the absence and neglect of [her] husband” (249).

When Mr. Hargrave sees Helen’s son, he says “and this, too, he [Huntingdon] has forsaken!” (251) Once again, Mr. Hargrave’s language is too dramatic for the occasion. Huntingdon has not really “forsaken” Helen and little Arthur; he means to return. When he says “and this, too,” Hargrave places Helen and her son in the same category. Of course, it is insulting to compare an adult to a child. Yet there is a deeper issue here. To Hargrave, evidently, women and children both exist as rewards for men; not independently.

Later in the novel, Hargrave attempts to reveal Huntingdon’s affair with Annabella Lowborough. He insists he has “‘a disclosure to make’” to Helen which requires “‘a few minutes of [her] attention in private’” (293). Anticipating Helen’s objections, he assures her he does not mean to alarm her “superhuman purity” (293). While this statement seems like a compliment, it continues Hargrave’s pattern of hyperbolic flattery, which Helen does not want. His mention of “superhuman purity” feels sarcastic, suggesting Helen is irrational not to break her marriage vows. Within the context of the novel, we infer Hargrave’s “‘wonderful piece of intelligence’” concerns Huntingdon’s affair (293). Hargrave claims that this information is “‘[as] painful for [him] to offer as for [Helen] to hear’” (293). However, considering that he is attracted to Helen, negative information about her husband would not be painful to him. Hargrave may claim he has “‘no selfish motive’” for wanting to divulge this information, but Anne Brontë shows that he does (293).

Hargrave and Helen’s chess match enacts their metaphorical struggle on a literal level. Power dynamics form a central part of this struggle. Hargrave “challenges [Helen] to a game of chess,” and at first, she declines (298). When she agrees to play, she senses that this game is “the
type of a more serious contest,” i.e. Hargrave’s continuous pursuit of Helen (299). Hargrave sees
the same parallel, remarking: “‘you [Helen] are a good player, —but I am a better: we shall have
a long game, and you will give me some trouble; but I can be as patient as you, and, in the end, I
will certainly win’” (299). Hargrave’s statement here at the very least displays his arrogance. He
brags that he will “certainly win,” which would feel arrogant even if his “anticipated success”
were confined to the chess match (299). But taken as a revelation of how he sees his relationship
to Helen, his statement is repulsive. Helen is right to dread that “present success [in the game]”
will augment Hargrave’s “conscious power” (299). Helen also refers to Huntingdon’s “conscious
power” in an earlier chapter when he squeezes her hand. Both men display their power
differently—but both have power, and both are dangerously aware of this fact. Anne Brontë uses
the chess pieces themselves to signify the relationship between Helen and Hargrave. Hargrave,
for instance, admits “‘it is those bishops that trouble me’” (300). The bishops signify Helen’s
religious convictions. Hargrave’s “‘bold knight,’” which he says “‘may overleap the [bishop]’”
not only signifies his predatory sexuality, but also evokes the chivalric tradition (300). Hargrave
wins the chess match, and Helen describes herself as “foolishly disconcerted” (300). In order to
win, Hargrave traps Helen’s queen, which indeed signifies her “integrity as a woman” (Notes
528). Even more than this, queens had power. Helen’s queen represents what power she has: and
Hargrave takes it. Helen does not, however, admit defeat in the “more serious contest” after
losing at chess. Hargrave “[murmurs] ‘beaten, beaten,’” to which Helen replies “‘no, never’”
(301, italics in original).

For all his efforts, Mr. Hargrave’s sexual pursuit of Helen indeed fails. As the novel
progresses, he becomes increasingly desperate. After once again riding up to Helen on a horse,
Hargrave begins an “appeal to [her] humanity,” a phrase which Brontë uses ironically (332). He
claims he has “‘endured a perfect martyrdom… suffered more than [he] can tell… become a
burden to [himself] and others’” (332). This language of suffering for love is part of the chivalric
romance tradition. In Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, for example, Arcite and Palamon’s ‘love’ for
Emily causes them physical and mental anguish. Through Hargrave, Anne Brontë shows how
absurd this conception of love is. Hargrave is in no way a martyr, and it is not Helen’s job to
assuage his supposed suffering. Hargrave does not simply describe his own suffering—revealing
his misogynistic worldview, he accuses Helen of cruelty because she will not start a sexual
relationship with him. He pleads “you [Helen] might save me by a word -a glance, and will not
do it- Is this right?” (332). Helen responds, “‘if you will be such a fool, I can’t hinder it’” (333).
She “[refutes]” the rest of his arguments “to the best of [her] power” (333). She then admits that
her “power [is] provokingly small, at the moment” (333-34). Brontë repeats the word “power”
twice here, continuing the language of power she uses throughout the novel. What Hargrave calls
his love for Helen is really a desire for power over her.

Despite the limited power she has, Helen manages to achieve a temporary victory in this
scene. She asks Hargrave if he has “enough disinterested affection” for her to “risk a little
discomfort to [himself]” (334). He eagerly affirms that he does. Helen turns his answer to her
advantage, and asks him to “never mention this subject [his attraction to her] again” (334). She
also tells him that if he “persists, [she] must regard [him] as [her] deadliest foe” (334). Helen has
learned from her relationship with Huntingdon and knows not to trust men who seem chivalrous.
Such men may claim they want to protect her, but in truth they want to exercise “conscious
power.”

*Annabella*
While Helen, and to some extent Milicent, are sympathetic female characters, Annabella Wilmot (Lady Lowborough) is not. She declares herself “too great a flirt to be married,” before “courting [Lord Lowborough] for his rank” (143, 186). She flirts constantly with Huntingdon, and eventually they start a sexual affair. While this would be enough to establish her as an antagonist, she is also unkind to her husband and “insolent” to Helen (311). I do not, however, think Annabella’s character undermines the novel’s feminist message. In fact, she accepts the gender roles of her society to a greater extent than she admits. She also attempts to use these accepted gender roles to gain psychological power over the male characters. She fails so completely in this effort that she becomes a tragic figure, if not a sympathetic one.

Readers first meet Annabella at a dinner party. Though she is a “flirt,” she is “greatly admired by the gentlemen, who universally [pronounce] her a splendid woman” (143). The gentlemen, it seems, like women who are flirtatious and aim to be desirable. The male perception of Annabella at this dinner party evokes Freud’s Madonna-Whore Complex. These men claim they want to marry someone like Milicent (as Hattersley does) but find themselves attracted to Annabella. Annabella, for her part, clearly cares about getting ‘gentlemen’ to like her. She “[seems] bent on engrossing [Huntingdon’s] attention to herself” and calls him “to be the arbiter of a dispute between herself and another lady” (144). Here, she uses gender norms in an attempt to gain power.

When Helen’s uncle invites a party to Staningley, Huntingdon flirts with both Helen and Annabella. When Helen burns her sketch of him, he takes a “place beside Miss [Annabella] Wilmot” to retaliate (162). Annabella, meanwhile, “is playing double between [Huntingdon] and Lord Lowborough” (163). Her opportunism does not incite sympathy. However, her scheming also represents an attempt to exercise power in any way she can.
Lady Lowborough’s treatment of her husband also indicates a desire for power which she cannot have. She tells Huntingdon that she “loves nothing about [Lord Lowborough] but his title and pedigree, and ‘that delightful old family seat’” (196). About men in general, she says “I detest [them] all!” (197). She realizes that marriage will not be an equal partnership, so she attempts to gain whatever advantage she can by marrying a man of rank. Her language also suggests that she thinks marrying for love would weaken her. According to her worldview, if she loved her husband it would give him too much power over her.

Later, a married Annabella and Lord Lowborough join other guests at Grassdale. Annabella still flirts with Arthur Huntingdon as she did before her marriage. After Helen confronts Huntingdon about this behavior, Annabella notices Helen has been crying. She remarks “you’ve been weeping I see- that’s our grand resource, you know” (237). Annabella’s experience of power dynamics has led her to see everything in life as a game. Crying, to her, is a woman’s winning move. Weeping was considered the quintessentially feminine way to express unhappiness.23 If crying is the best “resource” women have access to, they have very little power indeed.

When Arthur Huntingdon and company engage in “a regular jollification,” Lord Lowborough leaves them and joins the ladies, because he does not drink (270). Annabella disapproves, complaining “it looks so silly to be always dangling after the women” (270). This statement reveals deeply internalized misogyny, because it implies that talking to women is “silly,” and that women belong in a separate, second-class social sphere. Helen defends Lord Lowborough’s decision, whereupon Annabella declares “At least… I know the value of a warm

23 In Chaucer and in Shakespeare, for example. In Keats’ Eve of St. Agnes, Madeline weeps upon waking up from a pleasant dream. In Tenant, Milicent cries often, but it does not change her husband’s behavior.
heart and a bold, manly spirit!’” (271) In this speech, Annabella expresses her society’s
definition of masculinity better than the male characters do themselves. For, indeed, Huntingdon,
Hattersley, and the rest convince themselves that drinking makes them “bold” and “manly.” A
“warm heart” suggests strong or passionate sexuality, another aspect of normative ‘manliness.’ A
warm heart also suggests alcohol, which was known to make people feel both literally warm, and
also sexually uninhibited.

Helen later overhears Annabella and Huntingdon talking, confirming they are having an
affair. Annabella’s language reveals not only a willingness to betray other women for the sake of
a man, but also a hidden insecurity. She laments to Huntingdon “it was here you kissed that
woman [i.e. Helen]” (302). She continues “tell me, don’t you love her still—a little?” (303)
Annabella may have declared earlier in the novel that she “detests” men, but it seems she is
desperate for this particular one to love her. Under her mask of callousness and casual flirtation,
Annabella feels insecure. Annabella also calls her affair with Huntingdon “dearer than life,”
suggesting that however independent she pretends to be, she is the opposite (311).

Before she leaves Grassdale, Annabella informs Helen of how she has made Mr.
Huntingdon a more “‘sober, temperate man’” (317). This is precisely what Helen believed she
was doing earlier in the novel. Helen was much mistaken in her idea of her own power—one
infers Annabella is mistaken as well. She asks Helen “‘not, by harshness and neglect, [to] drive
[Mr. Huntingdon] back to his old courses’” (317). Of course, Annabella’s intention is to infuriate
Helen. However, it is clear that she does hold Helen responsible for Huntingdon’s behavior. To
some degree, she accepts the societal myth that women are responsible for men. Further, the
‘power’ to coax, threaten, amuse, and be responsible for a grown man as if he were a spoiled
child, is not power.
In the end, Annabella reportedly “[dies]… in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness” (456). While this reveals an Austenian impulse to “restore everyone, not greatly at fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and have done with all the rest,” it also signifies more.24 All of Annabella’s efforts to gain power fail. She loses her husband, friends, money, and finally her life. What Anne Brontë shows here is that women trying to gain power within a misogynistic, patriarchal system is a doomed project.

_Helen at the Center_

Few novels by Anne Brontë’s time had dared to suggest that women should exercise sole control over their own lives.25 When _Tenant_ was published in 1848, wives could not initiate divorce proceedings, their possessions became their husband’s upon marriage, and an injunction for wives to ‘obey’ their husbands was an integral part of the traditional wedding vows.26 The ‘patient Griselda’ trope, to give just one example, painted patience and obedience as essential virtues for a wife.27 As for nineteenth century female protagonists, many were one dimensional and almost angelic. That is not to say all, or even most female protagonists fit this pattern, but it was a pattern used in several novels. Stevie Davies, for example, discusses _Tenant_ as a disputation of novels like Samuel Richardson’s _Clarissa_. Clarissa “endures her 1,500-page trial of virtue (p. 430) transcendentally” (xiii). Another such character is Rose Maylie in Dickens’

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24 From Austen’s 1814 _Mansfield Park_.
25 In _Pamela_, the heroine marries a man who has previously sexually assaulted her. In _Vanity Fair_, Becky Sharp is indeed an active agent in her own life, but she is shown as manipulative and often unkind.
27 Griselda, first appearing in the writing of Bocaccio, obeyed her husband even when he told her they must kill their children. See Chaucer, “The Clerk’s Tale,” and Shakespeare’s _The Winter’s Tale_ for later iterations of this figure.
Oliver Twist, who remains morally pure and physically beautiful, despite being orphaned in childhood and facing a near-fatal illness as a young woman. Nancy is another character in Oliver Twist symptomatic of a problem with female representation in novels. She is murdered by her lover, Bill Sikes, whom she refuses to leave even when Rose offers to help her.

Nor was this problem solely confined to male writers. Even female authors portrayed passive women. Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, is maddeningly patient and demurring. Isabella Linton of Wuthering Heights does nothing to escape from Heathcliff’s abuse. Wuthering Heights and Mansfield Park also depict active women, but neither goes as far as Tenant does. Wuthering Heights does not depict Isabella positively, but Emily Brontë does not affirm Catherine Earnshaw-Linton or young Catherine either. Through these examples of female protagonists, I do not mean to generalize about all female characters or all authors. I mean to illustrate that when Huntingdon asks Helen to “exercise patience, ‘that first of women’s virtues,’” he speaks of a long and troubling tradition (220).

Yet Helen is not obedient, nor is she especially patient. Imperfect, intelligent, principled and often angry, she fights against the power dynamics underlying her life and her marriage. She is anything but a stereotypical ‘battered woman.’

One early act of defiance occurs when Helen “‘[locks herself] up in [her] own chamber’” and will not let her husband in (Brontë 210). “‘You have displeased me,’” Helen declares, “‘and I don’t want to see your face or hear your voice again till the morning’” (210). Here Helen asserts that she is not her husband’s sexual property, against all social norms of her time. May Sinclair in 1913, despite her insistence that Tenant was “unspeakably and lamentably dull,” called this door-slamming a “startling and reverberating sound” (ix, x). This assertion helps
contextualize for modern readers the significance of Helen’s action. Anne Brontë’s affirmation of a heroine who takes such an action was radical for her time.

As the novel continues, Helen retains “‘a will of her own’” (221). She tells Huntingdon honestly that his drinking is “‘a practice she detests’” and that if he continues his flirtatious behavior he will “‘lose [her] affection forever’” (233, 234). When Helen discovers Huntingdon’s affair, she informs him she is his wife “‘in name only,’” showing a continued refusal to be passive; to be treated as a sexual object. Helen declares “‘if I tire, it will be of living in the world with you; not of living without your mockery of love’” (306). Instead of crying, begging, or threatening her husband, Helen simply makes clear that she does not need him. In a society where wives were assumed to depend on their husbands for both emotional and economic support, this is a powerful assertion.

Even after the first shock of discovery, Helen does not respond to her husband’s affair in the same way other female characters might. A few examples come to mind from Greek mythology: Dido, for example, commits suicide after being abandoned by Aeneas. Echo pines away, quite literally to nothing, because Narcissus does not love her. Hera is famous for her vindictive jealousy regarding Zeus’s sexual affairs. Helen, however, “[endeavours] to live peacably with [her husband],” and does not “bitterly [weep] or [deplore] his lost affection” (320, 321). After Helen establishes that she does not need her husband’s “mockery of love,” he is “particularly ill-tempered to [her]… [according to him] everything [she does is] wrong” (320). Because Helen does not behave the way her husband expects her to, he accuses her of being “unnatural” and “unwomanly” (321).

And indeed, for the nineteenth century Helen does transgress norms of femininity. She is active and refuses to relinquish agency over her own life. When Helen decides to leave
Huntingdon for the sake of her son, she resolves to “sell what pictures [she has] on hand that would do for such a purpose” (352). She also decides to sell “jewels… the few [she] brought with [her] from home and those [her] uncle gave [her] on [her] marriage” (352). Having formed this plan, Helen uses the library to paint from “daylight till dusk” each day (353). Rather than waiting for anyone else to come to her aid—i.e., a Cinderella story—Helen makes plans and carries them out. The remarkable feature of Helen is that she does not indulge in self-pity, nor does she suffer passively. As Davies notes, Helen has “exceptional strength and stability as a person” (xi). Brontë effectively shows through Helen that strength and determination are qualities women can and do have.

In her final escape, Helen does rely on a landowning man, namely her brother, Frederick Lawrence. He offers to rent Wildfell Hall to her, which is their old family home. This is how Helen becomes the titular “tenant.” One might argue that being dependent on her brother robs Helen of agency. Indeed, Stevie Davies, in her introduction to the 1996 edition of Tenant, asserts that Helen can “call neither her name nor her home her own” (xi). However, in writing to her brother, packing things away, arranging for a carriage, and actually leaving, Helen exhibits remarkable agency. She makes a choice for herself and her son, and acts on it.

In leaving her husband, Helen does more than exhibit agency. And Anne Brontë does more than establish a “strong heroine.” No matter how willful, intelligent, or strong, heroines in nineteenth century British novels simply did not leave their husbands. In fact, novels from Pride and Prejudice to Jane Eyre end with the marriage of the heroine, positioning marriage as an ultimate goal, and devoting very little attention to what happens afterward. Middlemarch’s Dorothea finds herself dissatisfied with her marriage to Mr. Casaubon, but he (rather conveniently) dies; Dorothea does not leave him. In Tenant, Helen acknowledges that society in
general will not approve of her leaving her husband. She is sure that her decision will be seen as “madness” by her brother Frederick, her aunt and uncle, and her friend Millicent (352).

While neither Frederick nor Millicent derides Helen’s plan as “madness,” Walter Hargrave comes close. Learning of Helen’s plan to secretly escape, Mr. Hargrave expresses his shock that Helen would go “alone—and unprotected!” (356) However, Helen plans to take her “son and possibly his nurse [Rachel]” along with her, so she will not really be “alone” (356). Mr. Hargrave also reveals here that he does not consider Helen capable of protecting herself. He emphasizes this chivalric-misogynistic worldview when he presses on “‘what can you do in the cold, rough world alone? you, a young and inexperienced woman, delicately nurtured…” (357).

While Helen may be young at twenty-five, it is absurd at this point in the novel to call her inexperienced. She, like Anne Brontë, has had “unpleasant and undreamt-of experiences of human nature.”28 She has not been “delicately nurtured” in any sense by her husband. Further, twenty-five is not so much younger than Mr. Hargrave’s age, which exposes his double standard.

At Wildfell Hall, Helen continues to defy patriarchal expectations by successfully living alone, caring for her son, and making money by painting. According to Davies, “female artists [usually] dabbled in water-colours or sketched decoratively in pen or pencil and ink; ‘ladies’ did not engage in trade” (xi). Therefore, what Helen is doing might have been considered ‘unnatural.’ To Anne Brontë, however, it was not unnatural for women to do art or earn money. Helen is a sympathetic character, and one we come to know intimately through her diary, which

suggests Brontë affirms her actions. Additionally, as writers, Anne and her sisters were personally connected to the figure of the female artist. 29

The achievement of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is that it promotes its temperance agenda while managing to move past the tradition of passive female characters. Helen forges her own path and successfully fights her way out of dire circumstances. The same cannot be said of other tragic heroines, for instance Shakespeare’s Hero. Sophocles’ Antigone does retain a will of her own, but at the cost of her own life. Helen does not exist to save her husband; she does not exist to die at the altar of female martyrdom. Therein lies Anne Brontë’s powerful feminist statement, which she has expertly interwoven in a temperance narrative.

### III. “Hell Broth”: Temperance and Religion in *Tenant*

I have established *Tenant’s* temperance agenda and proto-feminist agenda, and shown how they intersect. In this chapter, I will focus on a third theme of great—perhaps the greatest—importance to Anne Brontë. Namely, *Tenant’s* religious arguments. Helen believes in universal salvation, as Anne Brontë did. Helen was raised by a strictly religious Aunt, and Anne Brontë was deeply influenced by the religious beliefs of her own aunt, Elizabeth Branwell. In *Tenant*, Brontë alludes to or quotes passages from the Bible several times. Often, she mistakes a word or punctuation, because she quotes from memory. *Tenant* consistently incorporates Biblical imagery in its temperance argument—not a new concept, but *Tenant* does it in a new way. In this chapter, I shall recall the more traditional religious temperance arguments discussed in the first chapter, and show how *Tenant* refreshes or subverts these arguments—especially as regards gender.

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29 Davies goes into greater detail about the female artist figure in her 1996 introduction to *Tenant*. 
Traditional Arguments

First and foremost, churches’ stance on temperance was that excessive drinking was immoral. Recall that most religiously affiliated temperance organizations promoted moderation, assuming that everyone could control their alcohol intake with sufficient effort. Moderationists believed that ‘drunkards’ simply needed to exercise more self-control, and that it was immoral of them not to.

Teetotalers such as Joseph Livesey used the threat of hell as a deterrent from drink: he wrote of “the enemy… scattering firebrands, arrows, and death.” The testimony given at teetotal meetings evoked religious testimony in the sense that the speaker was ‘saved,’ but also in the sense that they were saved from some form of eternal punishment. Temperance activists also borrowed religious language in characterizing alcohol as ‘a demon’—even Arthur Huntingdon in Tenant refers to “the demon of drink” (189). Joseph Livesey’s “the enemy” evokes Christian labels for Satan as “the enemy”—for instance in Matthew 13:39 and Luke 10:19.

As Harrison’s and Shiman’s accounts of the British temperance movement show, temperance narratives centered on men, either as reformed drunkards or activists. The women in the stories, when they were present, were sometimes relegated to the status of martyrs—their experience was rarely at the center. Joseph Livesey writes that “thousands of men, once degraded and wretched in the extreme, are now become sober and happy” (1, my emphasis). To illustrate the reasons for abstinence from alcohol, he invokes the image of “a weeping and dejected wife” (4). To return to an example from literature, Nancy from Oliver Twist becomes a sort of martyr when she is killed by the drunken Bill Sikes—her death seems to restore to her the ‘purity’ she lost as a prostitute, and to awaken Bill’s long-stifled conscience. While Oliver Twist is not a temperance novel, Dickens’ female character here functions in a similar way to temperance
narratives. By using women as martyr-figures in an effort to increase the pathos of temperance arguments, activists such as Livesy are doing something paradoxical. They raise women, especially wives, to a high religious status, but deny them their humanity. Anne Brontë takes issue with this, and allows Helen both her humanity and her religion, as I shall demonstrate.

In short, most temperance literature of Anne Brontë’s time did what it could to spark outrage against alcohol and those who drank excessively, while also engendering fear of eternal punishment should one give in to temptation. Most temperance narratives centered the male experience and featured women as martyrs or saviors, affording them religious status but denying them their humanity. Anne Brontë, like other temperance activists, is concerned with gender roles, but she argues against excessive alcohol use while also disaffirming the traditional role of women as reforming men. She questions the religious rhetoric of her time, and suggests it is intertwined with harmful gender roles.

Mr. Millward

The first religious figure we become acquainted with in Tenant is Mr. Millward. He is a moderationist, and does not object to drinking alcohol himself. Anne Brontë creates in Mr. Millward a humorous caricature, but she also uses him to problematize traditional, patriarchal Christian notions. He is “a man of strong prejudices…intolerant of dissent in any shape,” and is described as “a patron of malt liquors” when we are introduced to him (19). He recommends “strong meats” such as beef as “good and wholesome for everybody,” when they are not (20). From Helen’s early debate with Gilbert Markham about morality and education, we understand she, rather than Mr. Millward, is the moral-religious voice of the novel. Indeed, the first place Markham sees her is in church, her “eyes bent upon her prayer-book” –gaining religious instruction from the text itself rather than the Vicar (17). Helen demonstrates a clearer
understanding than anyone in Linden-Car of how to “‘render [her son] virtuous,’” declaring “‘I shall lead him by the hand until he has strength to go alone!’” (31) Despite Helen’s impassioned defense of her proto-feminist and anti-alcohol beliefs to the Markhams, Mrs. Markham says “‘I’ll get Mr. Millward to talk to you… [he’ll] tell you what you ought to do” (33). By establishing this contrast between the privately devout and passionate Helen and the ridiculous Mr. Millward, Anne Brontë shows the strong religious convictions of which women are capable. Even more, she deconstructs through satire the very foundation of Victorian religious orthodoxy, represented by men such as Mr. Millward. In the rest of the novel, she shows how tragically incompetent people such as Mr. Millward are to mitigate the real evil extant in the world.

*The Good-Evil Dichotomy*

A key aspect of religious discourse which Anne Brontë subverts in *Tenant* is the marked contrast between entirely good and entirely evil, and also the traditional representation of ‘evil’ as embodied in a seductive woman. Brontë may very well view alcohol as a demon, but those who are addicted to it remain for her all too human. And yet because of hierarchies of her time, especially class and gender, these men are not held to the same standard as other human beings. Victorian religion licenses a certain amount of their bad behavior. The good-evil dichotomy still exists to some degree in the novel: Huntingdon harms everyone around him while Helen attempts to check him. Brontë does not portray the ‘fraternity’ at Grassdale in any way sympathetically. However, Brontë does not allow us to view her novel simply in terms of good and bad; of only demons and angels. Further, the characters in *Tenant* who embody evil to any extent are men who would traditionally be immune from such use in religious narratives.

First, Arthur Huntingdon is not always unsympathetic. He is not only likeable, but attractive, when Helen meets him, and she continues to perceive him this way until after they are
married. He ‘rescues’ Helen from the company of Mr. Wilmot, and Helen reports “[it] was like turning from some purgatorial fiend to an angel of light” (146). Even Huntingdon’s bad qualities are amusing at first. As Davies writes, “we smile at his Branwellian antics in church [when he draws a caricature of the preacher]” (xxvi). Even as his behavior grows more repulsive, his mind and body weaken dramatically, so he is not “a fiend incarnate” (Davies xxiv). He becomes bored, he becomes incredibly irritable, he becomes ill. He can sometimes manage no more than weak laughter. By the time Helen leaves him, he rarely even stays awake for much of the evening. Because of these descriptions, one feels embarrassed for him in addition to indignant at him. By the time he dies, he is so alone and afraid that even Helen cries for him. While Huntingdon is a clear antagonist, he is not an ‘enemy’ to be destroyed.

    Nor do other characters strictly fit the mold of all-good or all-evil. Ralph Hattersley, while he begins Tenant loud, violent, and irresponsible, demonstrates an ability to change which renders him dimensional. Lord Lowborough has given up drinking when we meet him in Tenant, but only after years of effort, and after his addictions to alcohol and gambling have wreaked havoc on his life.

    While the antagonists are not monsters, even the most sympathetic characters are not perfect. Helen is the clear heroine of the story, but she is fallible. She agrees to marry Arthur Huntingdon despite his flaws, because she finds him attractive and because she believes she has the ability to save him from himself. She later writes in her diary “I no longer love my husband- I hate him! ... I hate him! - I hate him!” (308) Especially after she discovers her husband’s affair, readers sympathize with Helen’s anger. However, in a strictly religious sense, Helen’s “hate” represents a flaw. Helen herself declares “I am no angel”— and indeed she is not (267). This does not mean that she cannot function as the moral-religious voice of the novel.
Brontë thus rejects the good-evil dichotomy prevalent in the religious discourse of her time, but she also rejects the evil behavior licensed by Victorian gender roles.

**Universal Salvation**

The most prominent, and most subversive, religious concept in *Tenant* is Helen’s belief in universal salvation. This is the idea that every person, no matter how bad on earth, will eventually enter heaven. This was a cherished belief of Anne Brontë’s. She struggled to reconcile the notion of hell and eternal torment with her idea of God as a loving father. Universal salvation was also a core tenet of Wesleyan methodism, the sect Elizabeth Branwell belonged to. Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, opposed predestination, and allowed women to preach if they felt they were called. Using the ideas of Wesleyan Methodism, Anne Brontë implicitly argues in *Tenant* against the idea of God as wrathful, and suggests that this idea of God is intertwined with harmful definitions of masculinity.

In *Tenant*, Helen performs the role of a female preacher. She expresses her belief in universal salvation to her aunt when she insists that no one will go to Hell “for ever [sic]” (178). She argues “‘He that ‘is able to subdue all things to Himself, will have all men to be saved’” (178). Her aunt strongly disapproves of this doctrine, demanding “and is that the use you make of your Bible?” (178) Yet, unlike Helen’s love for Huntingdon and her naïve insistence that she can save him, this belief remains with her. On Huntingdon’s deathbed, Helen assures him “there is joy and glory after [death], if you will but try to reach it!” (445). While she has given up trying to save him, she has not given up hope that God will do what she couldn’t.

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Huntingdon does not share Helen’s hope. Indeed, he is so frightened of his own idea of God that he laments “oh, if I could believe there was nothing after [death]!” (446) Here we see how Huntingdon projects his own worldview onto God - he views God as a father, but an angry one, waiting to punish him. Huntingdon continues “I can’t repent. I only fear” (446). He has learned to fear harm to himself, but not to feel empathy for those he has harmed. Huntingdon’s worldview and definitions of masculinity have poisoned not only his relationships on earth, but his relationship to God. Still, even after Huntingdon dies, Helen still believes “God, who hateth nothing that he hath made, will bless [Huntingdon’s soul] in the end!” (447)

Tenant’s support of universal salvation caused great consternation among reviewers, who thought the “authoress” of Tenant should “contrive to elevate her general notions of all human and divine things.”32 Sharpe’s London Magazine called the doctrine of universal salvation “dangerous,” “a forced distortion of the divine attribute of mercy,” and “repugnant to scripture.” I would suggest that part of the problem which reviewers had with Tenant was the central place of Helen’s—a woman’s—voice in the text’s religious narrative.

Anne Brontë indeed meant her novel to question the religious orthodoxy of her time. To be dangerous or repugnant to scripture, however, was the furthest thing from her intentions. She did not believe that “a man may spend [his life] as he pleases, just contrary to God’s decrees” and be rewarded for it (445). It is clear enough throughout Tenant that Anne Brontë condemns the actions of Huntingdon and his companions, very often on religious grounds. She simply sees Hell as “purging fires” rather than an eternal punishment (447). She does not see God as wrathful or angry. Anne Brontë does not want people to follow god’s decrees out of fear. Nor does she seek to win people to her own cause by fear. By placing Helen as a sort of preacher, Anne Brontë

suggests a version of Christianity which centers female voices and rejects a narrative of God
based on toxic definitions of masculinity.

*Huntingdon- before marriage*

During Helen and Huntingdon’s courtship, Brontë foreshadows that Huntingdon’s
exterior charm will not match his behavior. In fact, she uses the imagery of Lucifer to describe
Huntingdon. When Helen looks up from her conversation with Mr. Boarham to see that
Huntingdon has squeezed her hand, she reports “it was like turning from some purgatorial fiend
to an angel of light” (146). The name Lucifer literally means “bringer of light,” and he was an
angel, both facts which Brontë no doubt knew. In the Bible, Paul warns the Corinthians that
“Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” (*King James Bible*, Cor. 2.11). He writes “I
fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be
corrupted” (*King James Bible*, Cor. 2.11). Brontë, alluding to Saint Paul, means to indicate here
that immorality can be clothed in beauty. However, she also troubles traditional Biblical notions
in this passage. For instance, if Helen metaphorically ‘falls’ when she is ‘beguiled’ by
Huntingdon, the fall is not permanent. Huntingdon, too, can hardly be called “Satan himself,” or
as Davies puts it, “a fiend incarnate,” if for no other reason than that he is not intelligent enough
(xxiv). “Subtilty,” or subtlety, is not a trait he possesses, as I have already established.

Further, Huntingdon acts the *part* of Lucifer without any of the malicious scheming we
associate with that figure. Anne Brontë establishes that the demonic force at work through
Huntingdon is Victorian patriarchy, enacted in his drinking and womanizing behavior. When
Helen’s aunt interrupts her conversation with Huntingdon, he “[mutters] maledictions against his
evil angel,” an ironic indication that he will enact the part of the evil angel himself. He tempts
Helen before he marries her, he tempts Lord Lowborough to drink, he tempts Annabella into an
affair with him. And yet, as I have discussed, these actions are taken in an effort to be ‘manly’
according to Victorian society’s standards, which includes having power over women and
drinking. Huntingdon demonstrates a selfishness and lack of regard for others which can be
called thoughtlessness. Thoughtfulness, defined as “considerateness, kindliness,” would reduce
Huntingdon’s perceived power, and his perceived ‘manliness,’ and therefore he avoids it (OED
n. 3). Indeed, Huntingdon’s trajectory shows that people can be led down a harmful path—
harmful to others and themselves—by nothing worse than thoughtlessness. Helen’s aunt
demonstrates foresight when she reminds Helen that “‘thoughtlessness… may lead to every
crime,’” speaking in a religious context (177). And Huntingdon’s thoughtlessness stems from his
society’s notions of masculinity, suggesting that Victorian patriarchy is not only harmful to
people on earth but destructive to religious goodness.

_Huntingdon’s religious disillusion_

While Anne Brontë does not shy away from the fact that Huntingdon is to blame for his
own downfall, she also establishes that organized religion has driven him away. He sees the
religious leaders he is familiar with as hypocrites and has not been convinced that heaven even
exists. In other words, Anne Brontë continues to question the religious orthodoxy of her time by
depicting a person whom it fails horribly— specifically, in the context of alcohol abuse.

The first time Helen and Huntingdon discuss religion, Huntingdon wishes to marry
Helen, and so he wishes to overcome her aunt’s prejudice against him. Helen informs him that
her aunt “‘wishes [her] to… marry none but a really good man,’” at which Huntingdon scoffs
“‘what, a man of ‘decided piety?’” (174) He declares that he will go to church “‘morning, 
afternoon, and evening,’” to hear “‘dear Mr. Blatant’s discourse’” and that Helen’s aunt will see
him as “‘a brand plucked from the burning’” (174). This image derives from Zechariah 3:2 and
Amos 4:11, and it was popular among Wesleyan Methodists especially as a symbol of salvation (Notes 517). Huntingdon pokes fun at the preacher by calling him “Mr. Blatant,” and paints an unflattering picture of Helen’s aunt as a sort of zealot who wishes everyone around her to be overcome with religious fervor. The word “blatant,” meaning obtrusive or noisy, implies that the preacher’s words are simply noises void of meaning. Huntingdon later draws a caricature of the preacher *during* a sermon, turning the “respectable… elderly gentleman” into “a most absurd old hypocrite” (179). While we are not meant to affirm Huntingdon’s conduct here, we as readers are faced with a question: has Anne Brontë not been performing a similar action in the outer frame of her narrative with Mr. Millward? Undoubtedly, he is a comical figure, and one might very well call him a caricature. For all of Huntingdon’s bad qualities, we infer, there is some truth to his view of religious leaders of the time.

Later, Huntingdon and Helen discuss his capacity for religion and spirituality. He maintains that he is not made for a religious life. As proof, he takes off his hat and asks Helen “what can a man do with a head such as this?”, referring to phrenology, which held that the shape of a person’s skull revealed character traits (205). The top of the skull, which sinks “rather alarmingly low” on Huntingdon, was supposed to indicate ability for reverence or worship (205, Notes 522). Helen does not let her husband rely on this excuse, insisting “you are not without the capacity for veneration, and faith and hope, and every other requisite to a Christian’s character” (205). She also argues “[of] him, to whom less is given, less will be required, but our utmost exertions are required of us all” (205). She uses the parable of a servant who will not use his “one talent in his master’s service,” which comes from Matthew 25:24, to support her assertion (205, notes 522). Wesleyanism emphasized personal responsibility, and Helen voices that belief powerfully here. And yet, as we have seen, Huntingdon’s life has not prepared him for personal
responsibility, which is partially his own fault and partially the fault of the society in which he exists.

Helen insists Huntingdon can be a “‘good Christian’” while being a “‘happy, merry-hearted man’” (206). However, the novel suggests the two are indeed incompatible for Huntingdon in the context of his alcohol use. If we take “merry” in the sense of “boisterous or cheerful due to alcohol,” we understand Anne Brontë’s meaning (OED n. 4c). Her implicit argument in Tenant is that Christians should completely abstain from alcohol. By the time Helen argues with Gilbert Markham, she explains that she has done what she could to keep her son away from alcohol entirely, not that she has tried to teach him balance or moderation. However, religious discourse at the time did not support this agenda, and nor does Helen before she sees for herself how powerless doctrine is to combat the actual harm of alcohol abuse.

Huntingdon has not been convinced, even by his death, that heaven exists. Anne Brontë suggests that this, too, is because of traditional Victorian gender roles, which habituate males to having what they want at the point when they want it. Hattersley expresses this exact problem to Helen when he says, “too much of [having one’s own way] doesn’t answer for any man” (289). Huntingdon compares life to a “good substantial dinner,” and wonders whether heaven (“a sumptuous feast tomorrow”) is not “all a fable, got up by the greasy-faced fellow that is advising me to abstain [the preacher], in order that he may have all the good victuals to himself?” (206). First, in this speech he projects his owns selfishness onto everyone, including clergymen. But as we have established, this is not entirely an unfair assessment, given the depiction of Mr. Millward and the history of exploitation by churches (for example, selling relics and taking tithes). Further, we see in this passage that Huntingdon has not been taught to look beyond the present moment and his enjoyment in it. Part of the power structure Huntingdon has been
indoctrinated into involves not delaying his personal gratification. The words of clergymen to the contrary, especially when they do not live by those words themselves, have no effect on him. As Brontë shows, this inability to delay gratification becomes disastrous.

Although Huntingdon does not count on the promise of heaven, he comes to fear hell. As he dies, he laments “Oh, if I could believe there was nothing after!” (445) He fears that his alcohol use and his treatment of others have made him irredeemable, and traditional Christian temperance discourse would agree with his assessment (see chapter 1 and the beginning of this chapter). Helen assures him that he should “sincerely repent,” and that once he does so he can still be admitted to heaven. In a truly heartrending display of pain, Huntingdon cries “I can’t repent; I only fear” (446). Religion, or religious temperance discourse, has only achieved half of its intended purpose in Huntingdon’s case. He does fear hell, once the threat comes near enough to him, but he has never learned to repent, which would involve admitting his mistakes and delaying his own gratification.

Good Women, but not Saints

When Helen marries Huntingdon, she determines that she will save him, in the fully religious sense of the word. “His wife will undo what his mother did!” she declares (177). Yet this ascribes, in the first place, a great deal of power to women, the wife and the mother, which the rest of the novel shows they don’t have. This paradoxical belief that a good wife will save her husband is not unique to Helen. In Pamela, for example, the eponymous heroine remains virtuous despite Mr. B.’s attempts to seduce her. She eventually marries him, after which he repents for his past conduct, and they seem to be happy.

Helen’s Aunt tries to warn her that she is mistaken, asserting “‘What fellowship hath light with darkness; or he that believeth with an infidel?’” This conflates 2 Corinthians 6:14 and
15, suggesting that Anne Brontë quotes from memory (Notes 527). Aunt Maxwell expresses the belief that contact with immorality will contaminate even a principled person like Helen. This belief becomes tragically prophetic as the novel continues. However, Helen’s reply to her Aunt’s admonition encapsulates a key point of the novel: “I am not light, and he is not darkness,” Helen insists (177). “I am not light” is echoed later when Helen admits “I am no angel” (267).

As Tenant progresses, we see Helen fail in her project. At first, Huntingdon calls her his “‘angel monitress’” and says that “if he had [her] always by his side, he should never do or say a wicked thing” (149, 199). Later, he gets angry with Helen for disobeying him, and when she begs him to repent he calls her a “‘she-tiger’” (235, 257). It is clear he had no intention of taking Helen’s advice, and only pretended to in order to manipulate her. By chapter 30, Helen painfully admits herself to be “contaminated by the union” between herself and Huntingdon (262). She fears she will become “familiarized with vice and almost a partaker in his sins” (262). Here Brontë acknowledges that Victorian religious and social orthodoxy asks too much of wives. It is not fair for Huntingdon to project his view of Helen as an “angel” onto her behavior, or for Hargrave to see in her “superhuman purity” (199, 293). Helen has the potential for vice, and the potential to be contaminated, because she is human.

East of Eden

In Tenant, not only is Helen no angel, Grassdale is no garden of Eden. And yet Brontë emphasizes the outward beauty of Huntingdon’s manor. It is a place which could be a paradise but has been ruined; not by female weakness but by Victorian definitions of masculinity. Helen feels, during Huntingdon’s first long absence, that the beauty of her surroundings has been corrupted by her husband’s actions. She remarks “I too often shame that glorious scene [the grounds of Grassdale] with thankless tears because he cannot feel its freshening influence” (223). Unlike the story of the fall, in this case it is the man who sins. It is Huntingdon who leaves his
home behind for the “smoke and dust of London,” and for his drinking companions (224). Helen later describes her husband as a “voluntary exile”—though the term “exile” suggests his actions are less voluntary than he imagines. He remarks that Grassdale seems “‘a paradise’” (247). Helen, too, notes her home’s “sunny park, imposing swell and slope, its placid water, and majestic clumps of trees” (247). Helen then thinks “how little of a paradise it has been” in reality (247). When Helen does leave Grassdale, it is not her own sin but her husband’s which causes her involuntary exile.

**Hargrave**

Chapter 9 of *Tenant* is titled “A Snake in the Grass.” This biblical image signifies one of *Tenant*’s key themes; temptation—to drink, to gamble, to have sex. The temptation to drink destroys Huntingdon, and very nearly does the same to his friends. The chapter in question, however, does not deal with them. It depicts the inhabitants of Linden-Car giving in to the power of jealousy and petty gossip. Helen herself does not face temptation at this point in the novel. Yet the image of the biblical serpent aptly illustrates a situation Helen reports in her diary. Brontë intends Hargrave’s relationship with Helen to reenact the story of the fall, and for Hargrave to play the role of the serpent. He tempts Helen to leave her marriage, as the serpent tempted Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. However, Brontë does more than reenact the story of Adam and Eve. She subverts it. Church leaders before and during Anne Brontë’s time used the story of Eve to argue that women were innately weak. Yet Helen is strong enough to resist temptation, as I demonstrate when I discuss her rebuffs to Hargrave. Meanwhile Hargrave, an upper-class man, performs the role of tempter.

If Grassdale represents a perversion of the Garden of Eden, Hargrave’s place as the serpent becomes more clearly focused. Twice in one chapter, Hargrave meets Helen alone when
she is outside. When Hargrave rides up to speak to Helen, he does so “[crossing] over the grass,” as the serpent would have (247). He refers to Grassdale as a “paradise,” knowing it is not so for Helen. He means to manipulate her into insulting her husband, just as the serpent manipulates Eve into admitting there is one tree she and Adam cannot eat from. He asks Helen “is it possible ... you can rejoice at his [Huntingdon’s] return?” (251) Helen does not yield, maintaining “is he not my husband?” (251)

Helen also rejects knowledge offered to her by Mr. Hargrave, further suggesting his connection to the biblical serpent. The tree Adam and Eve were not to eat from was “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” Hargrave insists that he has “something to reveal” to Helen which will be “as painful for [him] to offer as for [her] to hear” (292, 293). We infer it is knowledge of Huntingdon’s affair with Lady Lowborough—literally knowledge of evil. If Helen had accepted this knowledge from Hargrave, she is right that he would have attempted to use it for “his own bad purposes,” namely his sexual pursuit of her (294). By rejecting the knowledge Hargrave offers her, Helen avoids Eve’s mistake, and Brontë subverts the traditional story of the creation and the fall.

Eventually, Helen tells Hargrave that if he does not give up his pursuit of her, she must “regard [him] as [her] deadliest foe” (334). She further adds that “if [he] torments [her] ... anymore, she must conclude that... [he hates] her” as much as he “[professes] to love [her]” (334). The language Helen uses suggests that Hargrave, as her “deadliest foe,” is demonic or satanic. Satan was sometimes called “the Enemy” in Christian discourse. False protestations of love also evoke the behavior of the serpent, who professes to be Eve’s friend.
Thus, Hargrave enacts the role of serpent, and Helen enacts the role of a new Eve, who gives in to temptation in marrying Huntingdon, but knows not to repeat her mistake with Hargrave.

_“The Fraternity”_

Hargrave is not the only of Huntingdon’s companions to feature heavily in the religious argument of _Tenant_. As a group, Anne Brontë suggests that they enact the role of demons, chiefly by tempting each other to drink to excess. However, she also illustrates their humanity. She suggests that every person must guard themselves against the influence of alcohol. Even more, she argues that simply because these men have social and political power does not mean religious precepts don’t apply to them. As I have argued, the society these men live in has given them license to be immoral and irreligious, and Anne Brontë takes issue with this pattern in _Tenant_.

Stevie Davies, in her Introduction, alludes to a contemporary review of _Tenant_ which complained of “‘a defective chord’” in the narrative (vii). She suggests that the chord is “the key of ‘H’” (vii). The characters of Huntingdon, Hattersley, and Hargrave indeed strike a sour note with both Helen and with readers. Helen’s name also starts with ‘H,’ which might be considered a reminder of what a narrow line separates people from self-destruction. Further, the letter ‘H’ begins the word “hell.” If the characters, despite being human—which also starts with H—enact the role of demons, there is no more fitting letter for their names to start with. Yet these characters who seem to come from hell, and certainly put Helen through a sort of hell-on-earth, are also ‘gentlemen.’ I suggested earlier that Anne Brontë viewed the Victorian patriarchy as destructive to religious goodness, and here we have confirmation.
When Huntingdon relates the story of Lowborough and his escape from the club, we see clearly how people can become demons, especially where alcohol is concerned. Lord Lowborough calls alcohol “hell broth,” and based on the rest of the text, he is right. Huntingdon, ironically, suggests the demonic comparison himself when he says “[Lowborough] soon discovered the demon of drink was as black as the demon of play” (189). He means this in jest, but his phrase accurately expresses the moral stakes set up in the rest of the narrative. Huntingdon then admits that the members of the club “did everything they could” to entice Lowborough to drink to excess with them (189). Helen then takes up his jesting comparison in seriousness, saying that Lowborough’s ‘friends’ were “demons themselves” to convince him to drink (189). Grimsby admits that the group’s habits will end in “hell fire,” but even this threat does not deter them (190). The group resents Lord Lowborough for refusing to “drink like an honest Christian,” complaining that he casts “a cloud over all [of them]” (192). The phrase “an honest Christian” shows how twisted Huntingdon’s view of religion is—and how his society has allowed him to continue in this view, because being able to hold liquor is seen as a requisite for being ‘manly.’

The old idiom ‘misery loves company’ also illuminates the conduct of Huntingdon and his companions toward Lord Lowborough. Anne Brontë implicitly argues that norms of masculinity have hurt not only the people around these men, but also the men themselves. Despite their laughter and jocularity, they are not happy, because they are spiritually bankrupt. As such, they want to draw Lowborough down with them, and have him “resemble [them] all” (274). Further, if these men were happy, they would not need alcohol or other temporary pleasures to make them feel so. Anne Brontë suggests their spiritual bankruptcy by the casual and bitingly ironic manner with which these men use terms such as hell, demons, and Christian.
They curse and ‘damn’ each other with reckless abandon, leading Helen to remark at one point “Don’t curse yourself Mr. Hattersley. If God had heard half your invocations of that kind, you would have been in hell long before now” (380). This is meant to make Mr. Hattersley consider his language more carefully, but it also raises an important question: if these men enact the role of demons, and if they wish to drag others into their misery with them, have they not been in a metaphorical hell for long before Helen meets them?

During the scene of “regular jollification” at Grassdale, Brontë underscores the demonic role of Huntingdon and his companions. Hattersley utters “a clamorous volley of oaths” (taking the lord’s name in vain) and blasphemes, alluding to Mathew 6:26 and 28 by threatening to kill Hargrave and leave him to “the fowls of heaven and the lilies of the field” (274). Huntingdon sits at the table and laughs, unable to move, declaring “I [couldn’t] do anything else if my life depended on it! I’m quite used up” (276). Here we see that alcohol has made Huntingdon slothful. The Bible specifically warns against sloth in Ecclesiastes 10:18, Proverbs 19:15, and Proverbs 31:27.

Walter Hargrave, meanwhile, places himself in the category of an enemy of heaven without intending to. He bursts into the room where Helen and Millicent wait, having left his drinking companions after much difficulty, and declares “I consider this an apt illustration of heaven taken by storm” (272). The actual passage to which he alludes reads: “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). Hargrave’s statement, in light of this passage, becomes ironic on many levels- Hargrave attempts to take Helen “by force,” he is an enemy of heaven in that he tempts Helen to sin, and while he has resisted the others of the “fraternity” in this case, he has no real right to claim superiority over them. I would also suggest that while the passage from
Matthew disaffirms violence, as do other Christian teachings, Hargrave notes the violence as a positive thing *because of the world he lives in.* This is a world which Ralph Hattersley feels he can physically harm his wife free of consequence, a world where Arthur Huntingdon kicks his dog to feel control, and a world where Lord Lowborough feels that he not only can but should duel with his wife’s lover to the death.

Anne Brontë in *Tenant* does more than depict these men as demonic: they embody the antithesis of true morality and Christianity. She makes clear that this is because of the power they have been granted within a patriarchal, nominally Christian system. By establishing Helen as the religious voice of *Tenant,* and arguing against a wrathful and punishing view of God, Brontë suggests a better version of Christianity, free from gendered power dynamics.

**IV. Conclusion**

While *Tenant* reads as a temperance novel, I hope I have shown that it expands on temperance arguments with great skill and poignancy. Certainly, the novel owes much to the British temperance movement, to Patrick Brontë’s activism in the Haworth Temperance Society, and to Anne Brontë’s experience of her brother’s substance abuse. However, Anne Brontë does much more in her novel than argue against alcohol consumption. First, she shows that the power dynamics which allow men like Arthur Huntingdon to exist are inherently unhealthy. She strengthens this argument further through her portrayal of Huntingdon’s companions, such as the violent Hattersley and the sexually predatory Hargrave. Through Helen’s diary entries, Brontë allows readers interiority into a character who, like herself, has gained moral authority through painful experience. In a way, *Tenant* reveals Anne’s experience as well, which lends considerable power to her moral argument. And *Tenant* does not stop at questioning the secular gender dynamics of its time. The novel implicitly questions Victorian religious orthodoxy,
suggesting it, too, is built on toxic gender roles. She portrays high-class men (the most powerful people in Victorian Britain) as near-demonic libertines. Brontë offers a radically different version of Christianity through ideas such as universal salvation, through positioning Helen as a religious voice for the novel, and by deconstructing the idea of women as martyrs or saviors.

While Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has a temperance agenda, she uses that agenda as a tool to critique the very foundations of her society.

Despite its radical challenging of drinking culture, gender politics, and religious orthodoxy in Victorian Britain, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has fallen since its publication into an undeserved obscurity. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* enjoy more name recognition—a phenomenon I have experienced myself in speaking about my work with friends and family. This lack of recognition is partially the fault of Anne’s own sister: despite good sales, Charlotte refused to re-publish the work in England until 1854. Juliet Barker argues that this is because Charlotte “considered [Tenant’s] subject at odds with her own perception of what Anne’s character was and ought to have been.”

Both critics and readers have believed Charlotte Brontë’s characterization of her sister as “sensitive, reserved, and dejected,” but brimming with “mild, steady patience” (xiii). Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* describes Anne in a similar way. May Sinclair, who made much of Helen slamming her bedroom door, still characterized *Tenant* as “dull,” which very well may reflect how she saw its writer. Helen fits none of the characteristics ascribed to Anne: she is not patient, mild, sensitive, or consistently dejected. Yet she is the heroine Anne created, suggesting Barker’s argument holds merit. I have established that Helen shares belief systems with Anne—which suggests that Helen could share other, unacknowledged, similarities with her creator. Charlotte Brontë herself admitted her objections to *Tenant*, in her “Biographical Notice of Ellis
and Acton Bell.” In this piece, published with an 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, she writes that “the choice of subject” in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was “an entire mistake” (xii). She claims “[Anne] hated her work, but would pursue it” (xiii). And yet, on a close examination of the novel and its powerfully delineated arguments, it seems Anne felt anything but ‘hate’ for her work. She certainly felt she was taking on an important task, writing in the “Preface to the Second Edition,” “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” (Preface 3). However, simply because she felt *Tenant* was important work does not mean she took on that work reluctantly. While Anne may have sincerely felt what she wrote in her “Preface,” the text of the novel suggests she felt more “competent” in her ability to change her world, or at least question it, than she would admit in a public-facing document. Her “quota”—her contribution to social reform—which *Tenant* represents, was not recognized during her life, nor for a considerable time after her death. In her 1996 Introduction to the novel, however, Stevie Davies acknowledges *Tenant* as Anne Brontë’s “feminist statement” (xx). 24 years later, I now contribute *my* humble quota toward bringing this powerful feminist-temperance novel, and its author, out of their relative obscurity.
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