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The Professionalization of the Woman Artist in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

ANTONIA LOSANO

IN a simple pencil sketch a slim young woman stands on the edge of a rock, gazing out at a sunrise over a sea so tranquil that it seems doubtful whether the sailboat in the left background could be moving at all (see Figure 1). The sketch is the work of Anne Brontë at age nineteen, done during her first post as governess in 1839. While most of the Brontë sisters' artwork consists of copies of engravings of famous paintings, images in books or newspapers, or landscape etchings used for educational purposes, this sketch is one of the few surviving drawings that cannot be traced to an existing print. Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars suggest that Anne's drawing is at least partially—if not entirely—the product of her imagination, rather than copied from another source.¹

Edward Chitham tells us that the sketch, titled *Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape* (also called *Sunrise at Sea*), should be taken as a self-portrait, symbolic of Brontë's dawning matu-

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¹ See Alexander and Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 142, 406. Brontë drawing reprinted with kind permission of the Brontë Parsonage Museum.



FIGURE 1. Anne Brontë, *Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape*, 1839. Reprinted with kind permission of the Brontë Parsonage Museum.

riety; he argues that in this sketch “Anne portrays herself creatively in a symbolic setting.”² Chitham gives roughly the same interpretation to a sketch that Brontë made the following year, representing a young woman peering nervously out from between some trees: this sketch he terms “a second romantic self-characterisation” (p. 23). For Chitham both sketches are the symbolic self-expression of a girl poised on the edge of womanhood, and he gives neither sketch significant nonbiographical commentary. The overall tenor of Sellars’s discussion of Brontë’s work in *The Art of the Brontës* is similar: Brontë’s artwork punctuates her life like so many iconic snapshots, full of personal significance. Of the *Woman gazing* sketch Sellars writes: “it is refreshing to look at a drawing by Anne in which she has invested some of her own feelings” (*Art of the Brontës*, p. 142). Sellars clarifies these “feelings” by suggesting that the young

² Edward Chitham, “Introduction,” in Anne Brontë, *The Poems of Anne Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Chitham (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 23.

woman in the sketch “expresses the emotion of yearning for contact with a larger world than her own,” and, more specifically, Sellars argues that the sketch also reflects Brontë’s emergent interest in “William Weightman, her father’s new young curate” (p. 142). To accuse a Brontë sister of such bland and simple sentiment seems rather blasphemous, given the sharp anger and Gothic brooding for which Anne Brontë’s more famous sisters are known. Yet, as I argue in this essay, such statements regarding women’s artwork are reminiscent of a particular nineteenth-century stance on women artists, one that privileges the biographical and focuses attention upon the artist herself and away from her productions. The biographical readings of Brontë’s artwork are even more problematic given the resolutely unsentimental and distancing force of the visual arts in Anne Brontë’s second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), published nine years after the *Woman gazing* sketch was completed.

Tenant features a painter-heroine, Helen Graham, whose juvenile works receive aesthetic interpretation of a similarly dismissive kind as that leveled at her creator’s. In one scene of the novel, the young Helen is at work on what she rather audaciously considers her masterpiece. She writes of the picture in her diary:³

I had endeavoured to convey the idea of a sunny morning. . . . The scene represented was an open glade in a wood. A group of dark Scotch firs was introduced in the middle distance to relieve the prevailing freshness of the rest; but in the foreground, were part of the gnarled trunk and of the spreading boughs of a large forest tree, whose foliage was of a brilliant golden green—not golden from autumnal mellowness, but from the sunshine, and the very immaturity of the scarce expanded leaves. Upon this bough, that stood out in bold relief against the sombre firs, were seated an amorous pair of turtle doves, whose soft sad coloured plumage afforded a contrast of another nature; and beneath it, a

³ Helen’s diary, recording her courtship and marriage with Arthur Huntingdon and her eventual escape from him, forms the middle portion of *Tenant*. The novel’s extensive frame narrative is presented by Gilbert Markham, the young farmer who falls in love with Helen after she has fled from her husband and come to live as the elusive “tenant” of the derelict Wildfell Hall.

young girl was kneeling . . . , her hands clasped, lips parted, and eyes intently gazing upward in pleased, yet earnest contemplation of those feathered lovers.⁴

Arthur Huntingdon, the handsome young rake who stumbles into the library in search of Helen, has no trouble reading the painting's message: "Very pretty, i'faith!" he pronounces it, "and a very fitting study for a young lady.—Spring just opening into summer—morning just approaching noon—girlhood just ripening into womanhood. . . . Sweet innocent! she's thinking there will come a time when she will be wooed and won like that pretty hen-dove" (pp. 156–57). He follows up his praise with one version of what will become a refrain spoken by more than one of Helen's admirers throughout the novel: "I should fall in love with her, if I hadn't the artist before me" (p. 157).⁵

Arthur Huntingdon here analyzes Helen's painting iconographically,⁶ searching for particular symbolic motifs and assigning significance to various visual elements in her picture. The spring landscape symbolizes "girlhood just ripening into womanhood," while the dove, predictably, stands for the erotic desire that Arthur wishes to uncover in Helen. Arthur, like many Brontë critics today, reads biographically: Helen's picture bears meaning only with reference to her self. In fact, the girl in the picture and Helen are, in Arthur's mind, structurally identical. When he complains that Helen, who is dark-haired, has made the girl in the picture fair, his disapproval indicates his belief that a young woman's paintings should be precisely autobiographical and contain nothing more or less than the artist herself. To paint anything else is a risk: the fair girl in the picture becomes an auxiliary temptation, a possible replace-

⁴ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 156. Further references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Arthur Huntingdon's comment invites comparison to one made by Gilbert Markham (Helen's second admirer) while watching Helen paint: "if I had but a pencil and a morsel of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers, admitting I had the power to delineate faithfully what is before me" (*Tenant*, pp. 64–65).

⁶ Arthur fails to make the jump from Iconography to Iconology (in Erwin Panofsky's terms), from cataloging particular symbolic images to interpreting the complete symbolic horizon of a work. The next jump, toward the concern of W.J.T. Mitchell for the "idea of the image as such," is well beyond Arthur's aesthetic power. See W.T.J. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 2.

ment of Helen (recall that Arthur says “I should fall in love with her, if I hadn’t the artist before me”). In deviating from her own experience—indeed, from the very image and likeness of herself—Helen has deviated from Arthur Huntingdon’s understanding of the feminine aesthetic.

A Huntingdon-style interpretation of Helen’s painting has been, oddly, the one most frequently adopted by those critics of *Tenant* who tackle, however tangentially, the meaning of Helen’s artwork throughout the novel. I use the adverb “oddly” for two reasons. First, Arthur’s iconographic and biographical interpretation applies only to what we might call Helen’s juvenile work: he never sees her mature productions, as they are done either in secret while the two are living together after their marriage or at Wildfell Hall after her flight from him. Hence, any interpretation by critics that takes Helen’s first artistic attempts as the only site from which to explore the meaning of painting in the novel ignores the very different products of Helen’s later career. Second, it seems decidedly awry to accept the aesthetic assessment of a character whose primary role in the novel is as its villain—for Arthur becomes the alcoholic, adulterous, and abusive husband from whom Helen is forced to flee with her son, taking up residence at last in Wildfell Hall. Anne Brontë’s point, surely, is that Arthur’s appraisal of Helen’s artwork is misguided, motivated solely by aesthetic ignorance on the one hand and sexual interest and egotism on the other. Arthur sees in Helen’s artwork precisely what he wants to see: a young girl just coming to sexual awareness and waiting for his advances.

This is not to say that Arthur Huntingdon’s reading of Helen’s painting is incorrect, for Brontë’s novel is as much a treatise about how and what women should paint as it is about how men (and possibly critics) should interpret women’s artwork. The novel details Helen’s artistic development from precisely such overtly sentimental, symbolic art as was exhibited in her early “masterpiece” toward resolutely less self-expressive art, and simultaneously from starry-eyed amateur to rigorous professional. Brontë’s novel dramatizes the transition from amateur, accomplished woman to professional female artist—a historical transition that is in its earliest stages at precisely the moment of the writing and publication of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Even in Helen’s early career as a painter her aesthetic in-

tentions provide her with a radically different reading of her own artwork. In fact, while Arthur's judgment of Helen's painting gives the impression that it is pure romantic fantasy, Helen's own description of her picture is along very different lines. She writes in her diary:

I intended it to be my master-piece, though it was somewhat presumptuous in the design. By the bright azure of the sky, and by the warm and brilliant lights, and deep, long shadows, I had endeavoured to convey the idea of a sunny morning. (p. 156)

The "presumptuous" design hints at the intervention of the artist into the realities of nature, the presence of conscious aesthetic form rather than systematic copying from nature; likewise, the statement "convey the idea" indicates something beyond mimetic reproduction: to convey an idea here is not simply to represent a landscape as it appears, but rather to represent it as it is felt or thought. Helen deals here in ideas as well as images; more important, her description of the painting first in terms of color, light, and shadow—form rather than mimetic content—also distances her reading of her work from Arthur's interpretation, which is solely based on a symbolic reading of discrete figures. When she briefly explains the content of her painting, she refuses to draw any conclusions—any autobiographical meaning—from the figures that she has created. Instead, in her description of her painting quoted above, she talks of balancing the colors, shapes, and moods of the painting. In Helen's reading the turtledoves are present simply to add color-contrast to the work, not because of their symbolic resonance. In addition, the use of the passive voice ("A group of dark Scotch firs was introduced . . .") seems to distance the young artist from the work under scrutiny: by depersonalizing her own relationship to the painting, Helen paradoxically claims for herself the position of *artist* rather than mere recorder of personal emotions. Hence, while she does not say "I introduced" a particular motif (thereby claiming agency through direct authorship or personal feminine experience), she does claim authority through the fitness of the work, the perfect balance of its form with the effects that she wants to produce.

Critics of *Tenant* have expended little energy considering

the ramifications of Helen's career as a painter, and those who have considered Helen's artwork follow Arthur Huntingdon's lead, consistently assigning Helen's paintings the narrative role of blatant symbolism. In one of the few critical essays on *Tenant* that considers Helen even briefly as an artist, Margaret Mary Berg writes of the young Helen's artworks: "In these scenes, 'self-expression' . . . is trivialized, reduced to the embarrassingly naive representation of romantic fancies."⁷ In this reading, Berg, like Arthur Huntingdon, sees in Helen's paintings only the expression of the desire of the self—and a naive self at that. I wish to argue here that, to the contrary, Helen's art cannot be considered either as mere background to the novel or as the simple expression of adolescent desire. Instead, we must see the scenes of painting in *Tenant* as barometers for the novel's radical view of women's role as creative producers during a particularly complex moment in art history—just at the time when early-nineteenth-century female amateurism is beginning its gradual transition into the artistic professionalism of the later decades of the century. At the narrative level, the novel's many scenes of painting provide its readers with detailed, if oblique, guidelines for interpretation, and the novel is formally and ideologically impacted by the presence of its painter-heroine. Most particularly, such a reevaluation of the role of painting in the novel resolves a central critical debate over the novel's problematic narrative structure.



Recent cultural-materialist and historicist accounts of the history of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics have emphasized the paradigmatic change in the focus of aesthetic experience from the art object to the artist. Eighteenth-century aesthetics theorized art from the point of view of the spectator and the art object, as Friedrich Nietzsche writes: "all I wish to underline is that Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and

⁷ "The *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Anne Brontë's *Jane Eyre*," *Victorian Newsletter*, no. 71, (1987), 14.

the beautiful purely from that of the ‘spectator,’ and unconsciously introduced the ‘spectator’ into the concept ‘beautiful.’”⁸ In Kantian aesthetics the spectator approached the art object with disinterest: the aesthetic experience was an ideal meeting between an unconscious art object and an unself-conscious viewer. Value (in Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s use of the term) was thought to inhere in the art object, which was the site upon which aesthetic debate centered.⁹ Nineteenth-century aesthetics, in contrast, privileged the figure of the artist in the aesthetic scenario; as Giorgio Agamben writes, during the nineteenth century “the focal point of the reflection on art moves from the disinterested spectator to the interested artist.”¹⁰

Recent critics have examined the institutional and cultural status of the artist, which became part and parcel of this Foucauldian paradigm shift. Jonah Siegel argues that museums and the emergent tradition of art criticism in the nineteenth century partake of a dramatic change in the focus of aesthetic interest: “the artist came to replace the art object as a figure of unattainable perfection.”¹¹ In part, this transformation is signaled by the flourishing of artist biographies in the nineteenth century. Such a cultural obsession was part of the figuring of the artist as an object, something to be seen as art objects are seen. The artist (who for Siegel is always a “he”) becomes a cultural artifact in his own right, and the artist’s biography is the manifestation of that objectification. The eighteenth-century view of the artist, in Siegel’s terms, “was gradually overwhelmed by a growing fascination with genius and personality, with the artist’s self” (*Desire and Excess*, pp. 97–98).

In John Ruskin’s writings in particular, attention to the personal qualities of the artist devolves perpetually upon a concern for the *physical* being of the artist—whose body becomes, suddenly and at key moments, an object for intense scrutiny. If,

⁸ *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 104.

⁹ See Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988).

¹⁰ *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 2.

¹¹ *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), p. 96.

as Ruskin believed, the art of a society could be used as a gauge of the quality of that society in other registers, then the artist had a considerable responsibility. In *Lectures on Art* (1870) Ruskin writes: “You can have noble art only from noble persons.”¹² Similarly, in *Queen of the Air* (1869) he writes: “Great art is the expression of the mind of a great man.”¹³ This belief is not limited to (or even invented by) Ruskin, who was perhaps the most vocal supporter of the notion during the mid nineteenth century—many other nineteenth-century writers, thinkers, and even run-of-the-mill citizens also made the moral goodness of the artist of paramount concern. But concern for the body of the artist was also of great public concern. In *Lectures on Art* Ruskin attempts to delineate the spiritual power of a great artist, but he quickly fixates upon the artist’s body before moving to ethical realms:

Try, first, to realise to yourselves the muscular precision of that action [drawing a line], and the intellectual strain of it. . . . Then imagine that muscular firmness and subtlety, and the instantaneously selective and ordignant energy of the brain, sustained all day long . . . and this all life long. And then consider, so far as you know anything of physiology, what sort of an ethical state of body and mind that means! . . . what fineness of race there must be to get it, what exquisite balance and symmetry of the vital powers!

(*Lectures on Art*, pp. 78–79)

Similarly, in an unpublished addition to Volume 2 of *Modern Painters* (1846) Ruskin asserts: “a great painter must necessarily be a man of strong and perfect physical constitution.”¹⁴ This fascination with the body of the artist—here identified as solely male—must cause considerable turmoil when the “constitution” of the *female* artist comes into question. Should she, too, be “sensitive, active and vigorous,” like Ruskin’s male artist? Need she be able to hold her pencil all day and all her life with “muscular firmness?” Intellectual and spiritual genius aside, is

¹² John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*, in *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: G. Allen, 1903–12), XX, 39.

¹³ Ruskin, *Queen of the Air*, in *Works*, XIX, 389.

¹⁴ Ruskin, “Notes on a Painter’s Profession as Ending Irreligiously,” in *Modern Painters, Volume 2*, in *Works*, IV, 386.

it possible for a woman to have the physical qualities necessary for great art?

It is curious that nearly all recent critics of the nineteenth century who turn toward increased interest in the personal qualities of the artist fail to consider—as does Siegel—the crucial role of gender in this cultural conjuncture. If, as Terry Eagleton famously suggests in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body,” then the gender of that body must be considered—although Eagleton, equally famously, fails to consider it.¹⁵

The intersection of gender and aesthetics must be considered in any examination of the aesthetic ideology of any historical period, but the nineteenth century in particular offers a rich field for study, for this period saw a dramatic rise in the number of women artists as well as women art historians and museum-goers. The English census figures show that in 1851, 548 women officially considered themselves professional female artists; in 1861 that figure rose to 853; and by 1871 the number was 1,069.¹⁶ Painting was one of the rare ways by which a woman from the middle classes in England could earn a living and support herself (or her family), and the number of women embracing art as a profession rose steadily through the remainder of the century.¹⁷ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a properly accomplished middle- or upper-class woman was expected to be well trained in the rudiments of perspective, portraiture, and nature painting, and painting became intimately connected with cultural theories of the domestic development of women. Before the eighteenth century, amateur art (drawing in particular) was largely a courtly

¹⁵ See Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 13. See also Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 28–32, for a brief but excellent analysis of Eagleton’s argument that considers the issue of gender.

¹⁶ See Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 23, n. 5.

¹⁷ Even a critic such as Siegel, for whom the artist is consistently male, offers unconsidered quotations revealing that artists in the period were not by default male. Siegel quotes a line from William Blake’s *Laocoön* (1818), an engraving-with-text: “A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect, the Man / Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian” (*Desire and Excess*, p. 88). Blake specifically notes that *both* men and women must become artists in some way in order to maintain a spiritual life.

male pastime; as the century progressed, a powerful “feminization of amateurism” occurred,¹⁸ in which the divide between the production of original works of genius and the production of derivative works meant for amusement or home decor becomes solidified. Women were debarred from the production of original works and relegated to the role of reproductive amateur. As Ann Bermingham writes in her impressive study *Learning to Draw*, “the female amateur became a useful and necessary foil for male professional artists” (p. 181).

Because this division was foundational within the ideological construction of the male professional artist, the rise of the professional woman at mid-century—both in numbers and in social visibility and prominence—provoked what Pamela Gerish Nunn aptly terms an “unprecedented fuss” (*Problem Pictures*, p. 3). The period also saw an intimate connection between women artists and the emergent feminist movement—as Deborah Cherry writes, “women’s art and feminism were inextricably intertwined.”¹⁹ Painters and art historians such as Barbara Bodichon and Anna Jameson were prominent proponents of women’s rights, and battles over women’s access to art education became paradigmatic of the women’s movement.

Public backlash against the rise of the professional woman painter was considerable. Writers in the periodical press, art critics, male artists, and others complained loudly that the entrance of women into the profession of art would damage not only the fragile domestic ideology but also the realm of art itself, at a time when the quality of British art was a subject of great public concern. More specifically, however, this public disapproval of women painters shows a marked though unacknowledged unease with the disruption of traditional erotics of art: a woman holding a brush threatened to disrupt the proper flow of desire. A cartoon by Florence Claxton from the mid nineteenth century offers a humorous representation of this situation (see Figure 2). Claxton, a painter and engraver active in the battle for women’s rights, produced a series of drawings

¹⁸ See Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), p. 129.

¹⁹ Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain, 1850–1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 9.

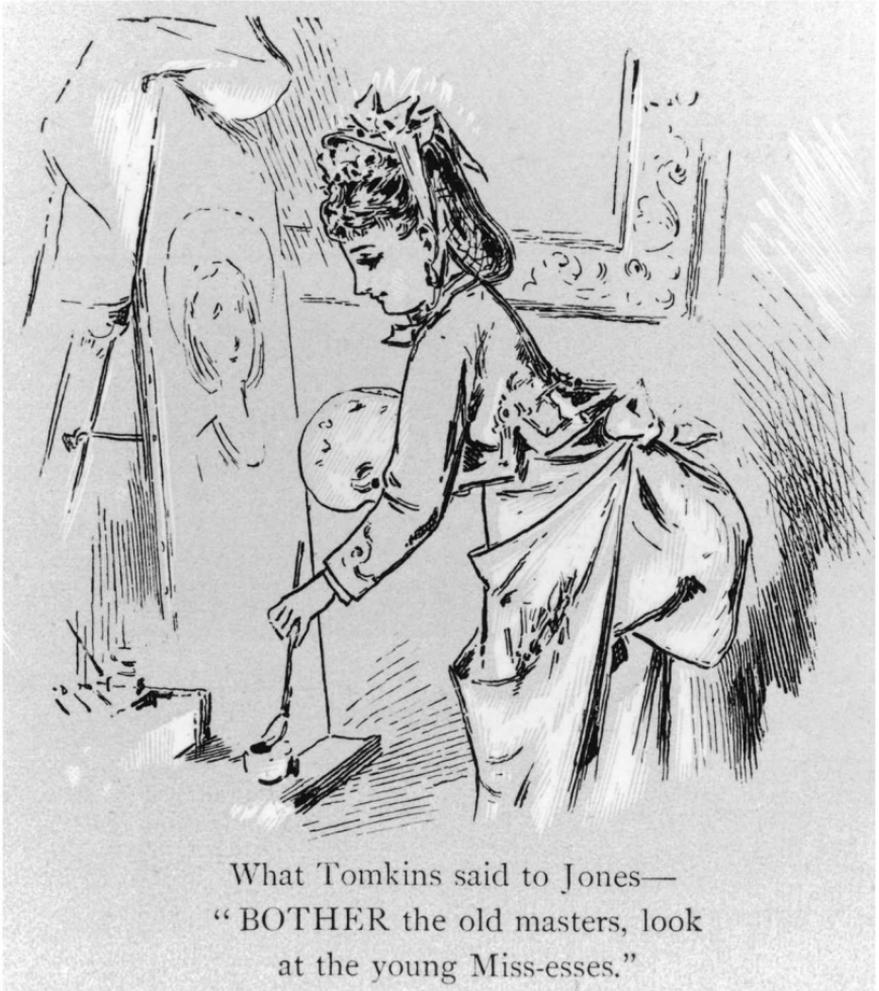


FIGURE 2. Florence Claxton, detail from *The Adventures of a Woman in Search of Her Rights*. London: The Graphotyping Co., 1871. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

titled *The Adventures of a Woman in Search of Her Rights* (1871), and this panel from the series neatly dramatizes the aesthetic scenario that Helen Graham repeatedly faces in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.²⁰ The young artist in Claxton’s drawing leans suggestively before her easel, her backside emphasized and her

²⁰ Florence Claxton, *The Adventures of a Woman in Search of Her Rights . . .* (London: The Graphotyping Co., 1871), p. 17. Detail reprinted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

figure sexualized by a bustle and the bow from her painter's apron. The very clothing that marks her as an artist, then, also serves to heighten her femininity. The caption offers multiple verbal puns: at first, of course, there is simply the slippage from the respectful "old masters" to the "young Miss-esses," signaling that the speaker (Tomkins) views the young artist not as an artist but as a sexually available young woman. The second pun involves the proximity of "Miss-esses" to "mistresses," which in the period could mean either an unmarried sexual partner or the respectable Lady of the house. In either case, the young "miss-ess" in the cartoon has lost her status as aesthetic producer and has become, for Tomkins, a female object, something to be looked at. "Look at the young Miss-esses," he says—not "look at the works of the young Miss-esses," but look at the women themselves.

Proponents of women artists scrambled to justify women's aesthetic production to a critical public, and these justifications were forced to pay particular attention to the problem of the visible female body. One of the most comprehensive nineteenth-century sources for biographical and ideological information about professional women artists from the Renaissance through the mid-Victorian era is an impressive two-volume compendium titled *English Female Artists*, published in 1876 by Ellen C. Clayton, a diligent researcher and writer whose work has been largely lost to history. The fact that Clayton could amass information on several hundred English women artists, from the time of Charles the First to the mid nineteenth century, speaks volumes both for the history of women artists and for Clayton's extraordinary research achievements. Clayton's entries are largely biographical, and often fanciful: she tells quaint stories about the early girlhoods of her artists, creating mini-narratives that attempt to position working women artists as heroines in a lively and romantic history. Yet Clayton begins her massive compilation with a plaintive gesture of submission and apology, desperately insistent upon the physical invisibility of women artists:

Artists, especially English artists, and above all, English Female Artists, as a rule lead quiet, uneventful lives, far more so than authors. In the majority of instances, their daily existence flows tranquilly on within the limited precincts of the studio,

only casually troubled by anxious meditations respecting the fate of . . . minor works . . . or by the unkind slights of a hanging committee. Eminently respectable, they affect little display; they leave surprisingly few *bonmots* or personal anecdoteana for the benefit of future biographers. . . .

Our native paintresses, as the old-fashioned art critics and compilers of biographical dictionaries quaintly term them, have left but faintly impressed footprints on the sands of time. They do not glitter in the splendour of renown, like their sisters of the pen or of the buskin. It is a difficult task to obtain a sparse list of their original works, or glean any scattered remarks on their most valued copies of great masters. Even the most romantic or admired of these fair dreamers on canvas or ivory have scarce an incident beyond the commonplace in the brief record of their public or private career.²¹

At first meeting, Clayton's heroines are quiet, tranquil, and respectable, and thus very different from the muscular artist imagined by Ruskin. Clayton's woman artist is intently domestic, inhabiting the "limited precincts of the studio" (something that only the most successful women artists would have had) rather than venturing into the outside world. Clayton's artist is also fragile of ego, vulnerable to "slights" (a word more suited to social interaction than aesthetic judgment), and above all remarkably invisible for someone involved in visual arts. Women painters are hidden within a studio: "they affect little display," "they do not glitter," they leave behind them no mark or trace or echo of their endeavor. They are almost literally weightless and bodiless, leaving "but faintly impressed footprints on the sands of time."

In addition to such art-historical writings, novels with artist-heroines were another critical part of the cultural discourse surrounding women painters in this period. Still, scholars have tended to read the woman-painter character as a simple extension of the novel writer. Deborah Ellen Barker, for example, argues that "the woman painter-as-heroine . . . provided women writers with an artistic alter-ego, and allowed them to explore issues of creativity and sexuality which conflicted with the limitations of feminine decorum that readers and critics often ex-

²¹ Ellen C. Clayton, *English Female Artists*, 2 vols. (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), I, 1–2.

pected of the woman writer.”²² While it is historically accurate to suggest that women painters were often more radical (both sexually and politically) than their sister artists (the writers), it is an oversimplification to see the painter-as-heroine as a mere fictional double for the woman writer. The fictional woman painter functioned as a complex nodal point around which the novelist attempted to articulate concerns over aesthetics, politics, the female body, and women’s cultural production. From *Emma* (1816), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), to lesser-known works such as Mary Brunton’s *Self-Control* (1811), Dinah Maria Mulock Craik’s *Olive* (1850), Charlotte Yonge’s *Pillars of the House* (1873), and Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s *Miss Angel* (1875), the remarkably common scene or spectacle of a woman in the act of painting becomes a way for women writers to express complex and contradictory aesthetic theories, political analysis, and cultural critique. Women novelists who wrote about women painters engaged in a reevaluation and, often, an upheaval of the traditional discourse of aesthetics. These women writers struggled to rewrite the relations of gender and art in order to make a space for female artistic production, but doing so required them to explode one of the seminal ideological constructions in art: the image of the woman as art object, an object of desire rather than a productive aesthetic subject.

Using *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a prototype, we can see that scenes of painting in these novels are miniature cultural dramas of the role of women in society: such scenes become spaces within which writers can work through issues of courtship, desire, and social gender roles. At the same time, scenes of painting are also self-contained aesthetic treatises, dramatizing through reference to another art form a writer’s theories of art in general and of the novel in particular. Such representations of visual artistic production become loci for debates concerning the nature of fiction as an art form: writing about painting and painters allowed women to write, obliquely, about novel writing itself. Scenes of painting can therefore be read as coded manifestos for formal aspects of women’s writing. These

²² Deborah Ellen Barker, “Painting Women: The Woman Artist in Nineteenth Century American Fiction,” Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1992, p. 2.

two readings (as cultural drama and aesthetic treatise) of the scene of painting quickly become inextricable: the sociohistoric realm consistently infects the aesthetic realm.

Anne Brontë's novel offers a vivid example of how profoundly the aesthetic turn to greater interest in the artist impacted women who took up professions in the arts. As the number of female visual artists increased, the cultural interest in the life, personality, and history of the artist became problematic: suddenly the artist in question was a woman artist, a female body and life that became available for scrutiny at the same time as the artistic production of that body did. Emily Mary Osborn's painting *Nameless and Friendless* (1857) is the exemplary case here.²³ This painting depicts the trials that a young woman painter might have faced when attempting to sell her productions. The artist stands in the foreground, gazing forlornly down before the counter in an art dealer's shop as the dealer scrutinizes her small oil painting. By her clothing we can see that she is poor—and the painting's title reinforces this reading. That she is "nameless" suggests that her painting has brought her neither fortune nor fame; that she is "friendless" further marks her situation, as she has no one to intercede for her in the art world. The young woman's face registers sorrow and, perhaps, shame—the shame of being in a public place with the intent of selling her productions for profit. She modestly does not look at the dealer; the small boy, however (perhaps a brother, or a boy hired to help carry her art supplies, but obviously poor himself, wearing trousers that are much too big for him and a coarse coat), looks straight at the dealer who is critically examining the painting—as if the boy (because of his gender) is ready to take charge of the economic exchange that might ensue. The young woman registers her nervousness by twisting a piece of string between two very dainty and delicate hands—hands, the viewer may be meant to imagine, that were once the hands of a woman of leisure but are now the hands of a working woman.

The painting offers three representations of female iden-

²³ For an excellent reading of this painting, to which my own reading is much indebted, see Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 78–81.

tity. First, there is the wealthy, well-dressed woman customer (just visible in the background) leaving the shop, spending money rather than earning it. Second, there is the sketch of a ballet dancer that we see held by the two men on the left. The dancer represents the spectacle of the female body, a professional body open to the most intense public scrutiny—an object of desire and aesthetic appreciation, and perhaps one even for sale, as the drawing of her is. The woman painter in the center, as Deborah Cherry writes, “introduces a third figuration of femininity, the middle-class working woman who could not easily be categorised . . . and whose respectability, the basis of her class identity and her sexuality, is at risk” (*Painting Women*, p. 79). The risk involved in the painter’s profession is precisely her public visibility, her intrusion as an economic producer (rather than a consumer) into a male business enclave.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall engages with a similar problem. The novel is in part a *Künstlerroman*, a “growth of the artist” narrative dramatizing both what it takes to become a woman painter against immense obstacles and how the profession of art transforms an individual into that separate species, an artist. Brontë is in the vanguard of writers who attempt to tackle the problematic relationship between embodiment and female aesthetic production. *Tenant* was published in 1848, a crucial moment at the beginning of the rise to prominence of professional women painters—while there had been several women artists practicing their craft for profit prior to the mid nineteenth century, the most startling rise of the professional woman artist occurred in Britain after 1850. Brontë’s vision of Helen Graham’s artistic development (from turtledove-drawing amateur to moneymaking professional) is precisely the change occurring in women’s art at the mid-century. While Anne Brontë’s own visual artworks may fall squarely within the realm of the early-nineteenth-century female amateur, her heroine’s adult artistic activity hints at the emergent potential for professional female identity.



In a passage that figures prominently on the covers of some paperback editions of Anne Brontë’s novels,

the fin-de-siècle writer and critic George Moore claims that Anne's Brontë's first novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847), was "the most perfect prose narrative in English literature."²⁴ But *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* came in for its share of praise from Moore as well, because of what he called Brontë's "quality of heat"—by which he seems to mean a powerful but unfulfilled sexual or religious passion that is transmitted or represented without loss of intensity. Heat to Moore is an "almost animal emotion" (*Conversations*, p. 255), rare enough in the real world but almost unknown in fiction. But Moore qualifies his praise of *Tenant* because of what he sees as a seminal structural failure in the novel, a failure that many subsequent critics have also called attention to—and one that almost all recent criticism has concerned itself with justifying. Although Moore says that the "weaving of the narrative in the first hundred and fifty pages of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reveals a born tale-teller," he also feels that "Anne broke down in the middle of her story" (*Conversations*, pp. 256, 253). The first section that Moore refers to is the first-person narrative by Gilbert Markham, who has settled himself down on a rainy afternoon to write a letter to his brother-in-law. In this letter Gilbert details what he calls "the most important event of [his] life" (*Tenant*, p. 6): his meeting with Helen Graham, the "fair recluse" (p. 11) who moves into the derelict old Wildfell Hall with her young son. The first half of the novel tells the story of Helen and Gilbert's meeting, their gradual and fraught friendship, and Gilbert's eventual passionate attachment to her.

Gilbert's frantic and intent pursuit of Helen and her painfully restrained avoidance of him set up an erotic tension that evidently pleased Moore. But the breakdown of this heat, as Moore sees it, occurs at the moment midway through the novel when Helen hands her diary to Gilbert, by way of explaining her inability to return his affections. At this point the narrative shifts from Gilbert's voice to Helen's, and we read in her diary the story of her past, of her starry-eyed courtship and dismal marriage to the dissolute, alcoholic, and abusive Arthur

²⁴ George Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), p. 257.

Huntingdon. Helen, we now discover, is not the widow that the townsfolk have taken her for, but is in fact still married, and is hiding from her husband at Wildfell Hall under an assumed name. The diary takes us from the saga of her courtship with Arthur Huntingdon, through her marriage, and up to the point where Helen, escaping from Arthur, arrives at Wildfell Hall and meets Gilbert. There Helen's diary breaks off, and Gilbert resumes his own narrative, telling the rest of the story (Helen's eventual return to her ailing husband, his death from alcoholism, and finally Helen and Gilbert's reconciliation and marriage) and providing the other edge of the frame for the internal narrative in Helen's diary.

This nesting narrative structure of the novel has drawn frequent complaint from critics, whose negative opinions may have helped position *Tenant* where it is today, resting uneasily on the borders of the nineteenth-century canon. Winifred Gérin shares Moore's view of Brontë's narrative "breakdown" and considers the novel marred by "the clumsy device of a plot within a plot."²⁵ The multiple narration, then, is the problem, for it serves to lessen the intensity and presence of the fiction. Moore writes that "the diary broke the story in halves" (*Conversations*, p. 254), and, in doing so, cooled off an otherwise hot narrative. Gérin quotes Moore's animadversions and follows up with the words: "How right was Moore! By the device of the diary the drama . . . is seen at one remove, not in the heat of the action" ("Introduction," p. 14). Much modern criticism of *Tenant* seems just a footnote to George Moore, who first put his finger on the sore spot of the novel's structural organization.

It has been the goal of almost all recent critics of *Tenant* to justify Brontë's technical decision to include Helen's diary, and their accounts, to my mind, have been overwhelmingly successful. Juliet McMaster defends the diary by insisting that it is immediate rather than passive: the diary records Helen and Arthur's relationship and its deterioration more powerfully than if Gilbert had recorded Helen's verbal telling of the tale.²⁶

²⁵ Winifred Gérin, "Introduction," in Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. G. D. Hargreaves (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 13.

²⁶ See McMaster, "'Imbecile Laughter' and 'Desperate Earnest' in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 43 (1982), 363.

Naomi Jacobs argues that *Tenant* shares with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) a reliance upon the "gothic frame-tale" to deal with an unconventional or socially unacceptable subject matter.²⁷ In this reading, the frame narrator—Gilbert in *Tenant*—reports or relays the shocking story of events that occur outside (narratively and literally) the respectable reality of the narrator's world. Jacobs's point is that in both *Tenant* and *Wuthering Heights* the framing narrative and the framed narrative are "like competing works of art, or outer rooms in a gallery, or even the picture painted over a devalued older canvas" ("Gender and Layered Narrative," p. 207); the framing and the framed narratives demand equal attention and are of equal narrative value.²⁸ According to Elizabeth Langland, this reevaluation of the nested narrative allows for a radically feminist reading of the novel in which Helen's diary diffuses Gilbert's narrative rather than (as critics have argued) being subsumed by it. Langland argues that the two narratives interact as exchangeable narrative currency with "a transgressive economy that allows for the paradoxical voicing of feminine desire."²⁹ It is within this "transgressive economy" that visual art makes its most critical contribution.³⁰

Elizabeth Signorotti offers a caution to Langland and other critics who see Helen's diary as liberatory: she suggests that Gilbert's use of Helen's diary within his letter to his brother-in-law is Brontë's way of dramatizing male control over Helen.³¹ Signorotti notes Gilbert's duplicity throughout the novel and lays out very compelling reasons why Gilbert is not the noble

²⁷ See N. M. Jacobs, "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 16 (1986), 204.

²⁸ Jacobs presents an excellent summary of the opinions of the few critics of *Tenant* in regard to the relative importance or quality of the frame narrative and nested diary.

²⁹ Elizabeth Langland, "The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1992), p. 112.

³⁰ Another, equally central, reading of *Tenant* centers on the heroine's role as mother: see Elisabeth Rose Gruner, "Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and Isabel Vane," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 16 (1997), 303–25. I see many connections between Helen's role as mother (producer of children) and artist (producer of paintings).

³¹ See Elizabeth Signorotti, "'A Frame Perfect and Glorious': Narrative Structure in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Victorian Newsletter*, no. 87 (1995), 20–25.

hero that he pretends to be. In Signorotti's reading, then, the novel becomes a much bleaker account of Helen's inability to resist masculine control in any way, even through her own narrative—and Gilbert's framing narrative is Brontë's elegant way of dramatizing Helen's complete binding by masculine authority. In contrast to these arguments, Rachel K. Carnell opens up a way to rethink this structural division: by pointing out that most analyses of the bifurcated narrative rely upon the overly simplified and historically inaccurate doctrine of separate spheres, Carnell offers a reading of the novel in which "Helen challenges the separate gendered spheres by offering herself as one of the rare enlightened women who could claim a voice in public debate."³² The dual narrative, then, becomes a way for Brontë to undermine any static confinement of women or men into separate cultural realms.³³



My goal here is not to prove yet again that Brontë's decisions regarding the structural makeup of her novel were valid—the critics discussed above, I believe, have amply justified Brontë's technical decisions. I wish instead to suggest that any criticism of *Tenant* that takes Moore's dismay over the structure of the novel as a starting point has failed to read the reasons behind this dismay—and hence has chased a hare that never really existed. Moore's argument about structural mistakes, in fact, obliquely reveals his real problem with the novel,

³² Rachel K. Carnell, "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 53 (1998), 11.

³³ While I agree with Carnell's broader argument, I do not consider the novel's ending to be a final suppression of Helen's voice or a retreat into "a nostalgic vision of domestic harmony within the Enlightenment public sphere" ("Feminism and the Public Sphere," p. 23). Critics who consider that the end of the novel is Brontë's last word fail to take into account several crucial factors. First, there is no textual evidence that Helen gives up painting after marrying Gilbert. Second, Helen has left one husband already in the course of the novel, and she is absent from home with the children while Gilbert writes his letter to his brother-in-law. This is a small point, but Brontë does seem to be telling us that Helen is gone long enough for Gilbert to write a three-hundred-page letter. We have only Gilbert's word that the marriage is the "nostalgic vision of domestic harmony" that Carnell finds so problematic—but Gilbert has not proven himself to be an entirely trustworthy narrator.

which involves the sexual politics of spectatorship and is incarnated in the profession of the heroine. As a painter, Helen Graham is a creative producer in her own right, rather than an aesthetic object; *this* is where the real “heat” of the novel is—in Helen’s painting and the ideological arguments arising from it. Helen’s position as creative producer is what truly distresses Moore, beneath all of his complaints about narrative structure. Moore reveals his real complaint when he articulates his (ostensibly technical) denunciation of *Tenant’s* structural mistakes:

Anne broke down in the middle of her story, but her breakdown was not for lack of genius but of *experience*. An accident would have saved her; almost any *man of letters* would have *laid his hand upon her arm* and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer. . . . Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an *entrancing* scene you will make of the telling. Moreover, the *presence* of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given to them, would preserve the atmosphere of a *passionate and original love story*. The diary broke the story in halves. . . .

(*Conversations*, pp. 253–54; emphasis added)

The “man of letters” in Moore’s little romance of intervention must physically touch the woman writer, must lay his hand upon Anne Brontë and save her from the narrative blunder of allowing her heroine disembodied speech.³⁴ Both Moore and Gérin (and other critics who share Moore’s disapproval of the nested narrative structure) mourn the absence of Helen’s *physical* presence in the central framed portion of the novel (the diary). Just as Moore envisions the man of letters enjoying tactile contact with an inexperienced woman writer, so too must the hero of the novel, according to Moore, remain in physical contact with the heroine for the erotics of the novel to function properly. Gilbert must be able to lay his hands upon Helen for the traditional erotics of a “passionate and original love story”

³⁴ Another clue is Moore’s remark, when complaining of her narrative decisions, that “Anne broke down.” By referring to the novelist by her first name rather than her last, Moore compounds his familiar treatment of Anne Brontë. Further, the phrase “broke down” suggests a physical, or even a neurotic, breakdown.

to be maintained; women's bodies must not be separated from their narrative productions, but must instead be present, tangible, and visible.

But this is not Anne Brontë's intention. To begin with, she did not design the novel as a love story at all—at least not of the type that Moore evidently desires. Rather, the novel explores a sophisticated feminist aesthetic that finds its narrative expression in the profession of the heroine. Helen's social role as aesthetic producer makes it impossible for her to remain an artwork herself, ever-present for Gilbert's (and Moore's) delectation—as an artist, Helen is necessarily separated from her productions during the novel. Moore mourns the distance between Helen and her story, for it is the desire for the embodiment of the female figure, the gendered presence of a visually available woman, that sparks his interest in the novel. Brontë's resistance to embodiment for her heroine ultimately frustrates Moore; he objects to Helen's incarnation as an artist, a creative producer whose artworks (her diary here stands metonymically for her visual art productions) are necessarily separate from her own body.

Helen's artistic production places her outside the traditional aesthetic scenario (male viewer/female object), and in fact provides a sort of screen behind which Helen can hide. Brontë stages this screening at several times within the novel. At one point during her first marriage, for instance, Helen uses a piece of her artist's kit—a palette knife—to protect her virtue from an encroaching admirer (*Tenant*, p. 362). The paraphernalia of the artist works symbolically in this scene to dramatize Helen's self-reliance and autonomy through art. Similarly, when Helen begins to speak for herself in the diary portion of the novel, she once again shifts from artwork (tangible appreciable object) to artistic producer—a position that motivates Moore's complaint about the structure of the novel. By handing Gilbert the diary, Helen seems to be positioning an aesthetic production between her body and her male viewer or reader.

It is significant that Moore can never bring himself to mention that Helen is a visual artist, and many twentieth-century critics of the novel share his refusal to see the tremendous ramifications of the heroine's profession. In *Agnes Grey* the heroine

is a governess—a properly feminine and submissive social position—and so this earlier novel garners nothing but praise from Moore. But Helen Graham in *Tenant* paints for a living, and in doing so she encroaches upon a field of endeavor most dear to Moore, who himself trained as an artist in his youth and continued throughout his career to write art criticism. In a chapter titled “Sex in Art” in *Modern Painting*, his most important work of art criticism, Moore lays out his views on women in art, which can be summarized succinctly in Charles Tansley’s words from Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* (1927): “women can’t paint.”³⁵ Women might be able to write, as *Agnes Grey* demonstrates, but in Moore’s estimation they certainly cannot paint. Moore detested—there is no other word for it—women visual artists, primarily because of the relation he envisioned between sex and art. For Moore “sex” is related to “heat”: in *Modern Painting* he defines “sex” as “that concentrated essence of life which the great artist jealously reserves for his art, and through which it pulsates” (p. 222). Women, in contrast, cannot reserve their sexual desire for their art, but expend it too freely in their daily life: “The natural affections fill a woman’s whole life, and her art is only so much sighing and gossiping about them. . . . In her art woman is always in evening dress: there are flowers in her hair, and her fan waves to and fro, and she wishes to sigh in the ear of him who sits beside her” (*Modern Painting*, p. 223). Moore believes that women are fundamentally incapable of visual invention precisely because of their relation to the erotic³⁶—and here, perhaps, his viewpoint is useful in reading the novel, for in *Tenant* Brontë offers us an exploration of how profoundly erotics gets in the way of female aesthetic production.



Helen Graham arrives on the narrative scene as a fully formed professional painter, defined by her relation to her artistic production. When Gilbert pays his first call

³⁵ See George Moore, *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott, 1893), pp. 220–31. See also Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Susan Dick (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

³⁶ Moore, it must be remembered, is writing during the decade that experienced the emergence of and furor around the New Woman, whose ambivalent sexuality (some

on Helen, he and his sister are shown not into the parlor but into Helen's studio in the extensive but derelict Wildfell Hall:

To our surprise, we were ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter's easel, with a table beside it covered with rolls of canvass, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints, &c. Leaning against the wall were several sketches in various stages of progression, and a few finished paintings—mostly of landscapes and figures. (*Tenant*, p. 42)³⁷

Etiquette dictates that Helen apologize to her guests for not receiving them in the proper space of the sitting room, and her apology sets her priorities on the table. The parlor is out of the question, she explains, because it has no fire; she has chosen instead to heat the studio, a space of work rather than leisure. This is literally a Victorian “drawing room”—rather than a “withdrawing room.” The workspace must make room for guests, although this is difficult: Gilbert reports that Helen must “disengag[e] a couple of chairs from the artistical lumber that usurped them” (p. 42). In Gilbert's reading it is the “artistical lumber” that usurps—that is, physically occupies without sanctioned or appropriate authority—the place of polite company. As the scene progresses, however, it becomes clear that it is society, in the persons of Gilbert and his sister, who are the usurpers in this space. When her guests have been seated, Helen returns to her work:

[She] resumed her place beside the easel—not facing it exactly, but now and then glancing at the picture upon it while she conversed, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to wean her attention entirely from her occupation to fix it upon her guests. (p. 42)

nineteenth-century detractors saw her as oversexed, some as frigid) was a central issue for debate. The *New Woman* raised the specter of female professional identity, of which Moore did not approve.

³⁷ We know that Helen paints in oil because Gilbert notes “bottles of oil” and canvas (rather than paper for watercolors) in her studio, and later in the novel she attacks one of her husband's randy friends with her palette knife. Both of these details suggest the use of oil paints, which need scraping and mixing with a knife, while watercolors were sold in cakes. The fact that Helen paints in oil rather than watercolor or pen and ink further removes her from the typical female artists of her time, who were more likely to use the supposedly more feminine medium of watercolor than smelly, messy, and expensive oil paint.

Gilbert's use here of the term "occupation" should draw our attention, for all of the interconnected connotations of the term—professional occupation, occupation of land or space, and occupation as something that captures the attention—come into play in this scene. Helen has a professional occupation, and she occupies Wildfell Hall, but as a "tenant" rather than as one legally in possession of the space. Further, she is occupied by her painting to the exclusion of her company: the easel remains Helen's focus here, just as the easel was for Gilbert "the first object that met the eye" when he entered her domestic space. This bit of "artistical lumber" stands centrally throughout the narrative, attesting to Helen's authority as artist. The palette knife, as mentioned earlier, distances Helen from one unwelcome lover, while the easel, in this scene with Gilbert, claims the attention that Gilbert feels should be focused upon himself, and therefore forms a physical barrier against his admiring gaze.

Forbidden from staring at Helen by her manner as well as by the intervening easel, Gilbert instead examines the picture of Wildfell Hall that Helen is working on—and in his description the reader discovers several things about Helen's artistic endeavor. First, she is a talented painter, for Gilbert surveys the picture on her easel "with a greater degree of admiration and delight than [he] cared to express" (p. 43). Gilbert's observation of the picture on the easel further reveals that Helen signs her paintings with initials that are not her own, and labels the image of Wildfell Hall with the false name "Fernley Manor, Cumberland." Helen explains that she must engage in this bit of subterfuge because she is trying to remain in hiding, and those from whom she is hiding "might see the picture, and *might possibly recognize the style*" (p. 43; emphasis added). The fact that Helen's paintings have a recognizable style is crucial: if considered along with Gilbert's serious aesthetic commentary on her paintings, it suggests that Brontë has taken considerable pains to show that Helen is a skilled artist. The false initials and the false title, read metaphorically, separate Helen from any personal, emotional involvement with her art: she has entirely severed the affective connection between artist and work and the semiotic/mimetic connection between name and place.

We also learn in this scene that Helen paints for money, which marks her as a professional artist and makes it quite clear that the paintings will leave her physical presence, rather than remain to become conduits through which admiring visitors such as Gilbert might contact her. When Gilbert asks her why she does not intend to keep the picture, Helen replies briefly: "I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement." Her young son then pipes up to tell the company: "Mamma sends all her pictures to London, . . . and somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money" (p. 43). Like many nineteenth-century women painters, Helen does not sell her products directly, but instead requires male intervention in the market. Yet in this scene the male intervention comes in unusual guise. As Gilbert attempts to draw an unwilling Helen into some semblance of friendly banter, a knock at the door causes her to excuse herself abruptly. Gilbert, indulging his curiosity, manages to catch sight of "the skirts of a man's coat" (p. 44) disappearing into the house. This is the "somebody" who carries Helen's artwork off to market; he remains (in this scene at least) unnamed. The reader knows only that a male figure has suddenly intruded, bringing with him the whiff of money.

When we are first introduced to the mature Helen's artworks, Gilbert tells us what he sees: "It was a view of Wildfell Hall, as seen at early morning from the field below, rising in dark relief against a sky of clear silvery blue, with a few red streaks on the horizon" (p. 42). Lest we imagine that these red streaks denote Turner-esque abandon, Gilbert insists that the painting is "faithfully drawn and coloured, and very elegantly and artistically handled" (p. 42). Helen's chosen genre is primarily realist landscape painting, but with a strong tinge of idealism—a hyper-reality that suggests that Brontë may have meant Helen's paintings to be in the manner of John Martin (whose works were a strong influence on all of the Brontës).³⁸ But Gilbert's description of Helen's mature style as characterized by "freshness of colouring and freedom of handling" (*Tenant*, p. 45) and the resolutely *en plein aire* nature of Helen's productions also suggest her alignment with the landscape

³⁸ See Alexander and Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës*, pp. 20–21.

paintings of John Constable, the drawings of William Gilpin, or the works of the early Ruskin.³⁹ Later we see Helen “studying the distinctive characters of the different varieties of trees in their winter nakedness, and copying, with a spirited, though delicate touch, their various ramifications” (*Tenant*, p. 50); obviously the impulse toward naturalism is there, but it is always modified by an independent style: “spirited” and “delicate” rather than mechanical or duplicate.

The “far more careful minuteness of detail” (p. 45) that Gilbert notices in one of Helen’s earlier paintings contrasts with the more original, fresh handling of actual landscapes in her mature art. This contrast mirrors, in part, the sort of art education that young women—like Anne Brontë herself—would have undergone in the early 1800s. The Brontë girls, like other girls of their age and class, were taught to draw by copying engravings—either purchased individually or as part of drawing manuals. The goal was utter accuracy; the engravings copied were generally landscape scenes of sentimental or picturesque style.⁴⁰ But the reader of *Tenant* later learns, in retrospect, that Helen has progressed artistically well beyond such endeavors. Helen’s early picture of the young girl and doves, like her portrait of Arthur Huntingdon, was minutely copied from life in two respects: it represented mimetic precision with respect to the trees and leaves *and* with respect to the artist’s feelings. An older, aesthetically wiser Helen has moved away from such slavish copying—her physical freedom from Arthur Huntingdon, as we later learn, has translated into aesthetic liberty.

Helen’s artistic freedom is further expressed spatially by the crucial fact that she has a studio of her own. During her marriage to Arthur, Helen must paint in the library in order to be effectively hidden from him and his debauched cronies: the library is “a secure retreat at all hours of the day, [for] none of our gentlemen had the smallest pretensions to a literary taste” (*Tenant*, p. 357). When Helen flees Grassdale and arrives at Wildfell Hall, one of her first concerns is to set up her studio,

³⁹ See Peter Bicknell and Jane Munro, *Gilpin to Ruskin: Drawing Masters and Their Manuals, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, [1987]).

⁴⁰ See Alexander and Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës*, pp. 11, 138–39; John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, ed. Bernard Dunstan (London: Herbert Press, 1991), pp. 19, 36–37, 57; and Bicknell and Munro, *Gilpin to Ruskin*, pp. 2–12.

and she is pleased with its “professional, business-like appearance” (p. 376). Both adjectives (“professional” and “business-like”) attest that this space is not a place of amateur amusement or a room allotted for any activity other than painting—and painting for profit, at that. Such use was rare for women in the nineteenth century; only women from artistic families or at the top of their profession might have studio space of their own. Laura Alma-Tadema and E. M. Ward both had studios, but both were the wives of professional painters, and Elizabeth Thompson Butler found a studio for herself only after the phenomenal success of her battle painting, *The Roll Call* (1874).⁴¹ Women who had studios were forced to feminize them: Louise Jopling, who became a well-known painter after her husband’s death, forged for herself a dual identity as elegant hostess and professional artist.⁴² The “Ladies’ Column” of the *Illustrated London News* complimented Jopling’s creation of an elegant salon-type environment: “Her studio parties are always interesting, for she knows so many people who are ‘somebody’ in literature and art.”⁴³ Jopling’s art is not mentioned here; instead, she plays a proper feminine role as hostess.

Women who could not afford or were not permitted studio space of their own were forced to make space for their painting within the domestic sphere. This was not an easy venture. For example, Mary Ellen Best’s *An Artist in Her Painting Room* (1837–39) depicts with quiet irony the place that an artistic woman could command (see Figure 3).⁴⁴ This so-called “painting room” shows abundant evidence of being, in fact, a general sitting-room. There are chairs for many people, and the arrangement suggests that the room is organized for conversation. Family portraits and decorative china give further suggestion of a common room, and the artist looks up from her work as if interrupted by an unwelcome arrival. Finally, the room is spotless—painting accoutrements cover only a very small por-

⁴¹ See Elizabeth Butler, *An Autobiography* (London: Constable and Co., 1922), p. 113.

⁴² See Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life: 1867 to 1887* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Limited, 1925).

⁴³ Florence Fenwick-Miller, “The Ladies’ Column,” *Illustrated London News*, 96 (1890), 476.

⁴⁴ Mary Ellen Best, *An Artist in Her Painting Room*, 1837–39. York Art Gallery. Reprinted with kind permission of the York Museums Trust.



FIGURE 3. Mary Ellen Best, *The Artist in Her Painting Room*, 1837–39. York Art Gallery. Reprinted with kind permission of the York Museums Trust.

tion of the available space. A similar scene appears in Jessica Hayllar's lovely painting *Finishing Touches* (1887), which depicts her sister Edith (also a painter) painting in a corner of what appears to be an entry room or large hall, but is certainly not a studio. An elegant Asian-style screen serves to cut off—or hide—the woman from the rest of the elegant domestic space.⁴⁵

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* these positions are reversed: Helen must unwillingly make space in her studio for the duties of the parlor. Brontë represents Helen not in the feminine role of hostess but in the decidedly unfeminine role of preoccupied and grumpy genius, toiling away at a painting, with no time for

⁴⁵ The whereabouts of Hayllar's painting is, unfortunately, unknown. A photograph of it, reprinted from a photo album, can be found in Cherry, *Painting Women*, Plate 7; see also p. xi. A note on the spelling of the Hayllar family name is necessary: Lionel Lambourne, in his *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), lists the name as "Hallyar" in his text and "Hallyer" in his index (see pp. 35–36, 239). Other sources—*The Grove Dictionary of Art*, The National Museum of Women in the Arts (which holds some of the Hayllar sisters' work), the Nottingham Museum, and various critical works that mention James, Jessica, Kate, Mary, or Edith (all artists)—spell the name "Hayllar." I have adopted "Hayllar" throughout this essay.

society. The entire chapter in which this scene with Gilbert takes place—a chapter called simply and pointedly “The Studio”—forges a radical professional female identity for Helen: she paints for money, has a studio of own and a recognizable style, and evinces a commitment to art rather than to the self. But the scene also articulates—through the shadowy presence of the “someone” who comes to take Helen’s pictures to market—the problems of female professionalism.

In *Tenant* Brontë literalizes a problem that many women had in their painting careers—how to hide from a disapproving husband or from a repressive economic system that discouraged women from publicly selling their wares. Professional women artists faced particular legal complications if they were married, as Helen is. The historical inspiration for Helen’s marital difficulties—at least as regards her rights to her artistic property (and its lucrative proceeds) and to her son—came from the notorious career of Caroline Norton, whose explosive marital battles led to the eventual creation of the Married Women’s Property Acts, first introduced in 1857 and passed in 1870.⁴⁶ Art, for Anne Brontë, serves as *the* representative of “married women’s property.” As she plots to escape her abusive husband, Helen writes in her journal: “The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now” (*Tenant*, p. 356). Yet Helen must struggle to keep control over the fruits of her toil. Though the works might be considered as properly belonging to she who creates them, Brontë shows us in *Tenant* that the law decrees otherwise, and that a woman’s art must be painstakingly wrested out from underneath her husband’s rule.

One scene in *Tenant* dramatizes the incredible power that a husband in this period had over his wife’s property—a scene that culminates in Arthur’s complete control over Helen’s artistic productions. Before Helen can flee from Arthur, he comes upon her one evening as she writes in her journal (the very journal that Gilbert Markham and the reader are reading). Arthur says, “With your leave, my dear, I’ll have a look at this,” but his request for permission is ironic, as he then “forcibly

⁴⁶ For information on Norton and the Married Women’s Property Act, see Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1983).

wrest[s]" the journal from Helen (p. 369). What Arthur reads incites him to investigate his wife's apartments: "I'll trouble you for your keys," he tells her; "the keys of your cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else you possess" (p. 369). Even keys, Brontë seems to say, cannot keep safe anything that a married woman might "possess." Just as Helen's private journal is open to her husband's eyes, so too is her entire material inner life—suggested by the symbolism of the trio of "secret" spaces that Arthur Huntingdon plans to investigate (cabinet, desk, drawers). In her desk he finds the money that she has earned by secretly selling paintings; when he returns the key to her he tells her:

"There! you'll find nothing gone but your money, and the jewels—and a few little trifles I thought it advisable to take into my own possession, lest your mercantile spirit should be tempted to turn them into gold. I've left you a few sovereigns in your purse, which I expect to last you through the month—at all events, when you want more you will be so good as to give me an account of how that's spent. I shall put you upon a small monthly allowance, in future." (p. 351)

If Arthur can take her money, her jewels, and her "trifles," then one wonders what exactly might be left to Helen. The husband's containment of his wife is here explicitly financial: what he wishes to control is her "mercantile spirit" rather than, say, her intellect. Brontë echoes the case of Caroline Norton most powerfully here: Mrs. Norton's punishment for being an independent wife was similarly to be economically constrained.

Arthur winds up his harangue in language that makes the sexual nature of his actions clear, as he gloats: "it's well . . . I wasn't over full [drunk] to-night, now I think of it, or I might have snoosed away and never dreamt of looking what my sweet lady was about—or I might have lacked the sense or the power to carry my point like a man, as I have done" (p. 372). To confiscate one's wife's possessions is to be properly manly, while the "sweet lady" is put in the position of a skulking sneak: the scenario that Arthur envisions pits a plotting, devious wife against a noble, manly seeker after truth. The sexual innuendo of this scene should be noted: rifling Helen's desk can be read as a form of physical or sexual assault upon a woman's "private

spaces”—in fact, in the 1996 British Broadcasting Corporation’s version of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Arthur rapes his wife after he has emptied her desk. Arthur’s boast that his plundering of Helen’s possessions is acting “like a man” further affirms the sexual nature of his abduction of Helen’s material property.⁴⁷

After thus taking possession of her money and jewels, Arthur proceeds to burn all of Helen’s art supplies—canvases, palettes, paint, brushes, everything. This action is also within his rights, for legally he has simply burned his own possessions. We should note that Arthur does not burn the diary—of course, this would be a problem for the narrative, since if he had burned it there would be nothing for Gilbert to read (and Helen would be forced to tell him her tale, just as Moore and Gérin wish). The fact that Arthur leaves the diary alone but burns the artwork and supplies is more, however, than simply a narrative necessity. Arthur’s burning of Helen’s art registers his understanding that her artwork, like her jewels, is a marketable commodity, and hence taints his wife with the color of trade: “And so . . . you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself by the labour of your hands, forsooth?” he asks her after burning her canvases (p. 371). The disgrace of his wife’s becoming an artist seems to outweigh her action of merely running away—Arthur here fixates upon the *physical* marks of such a profession in his concern for Helen’s “hands.” He continues: “And you thought to rob me of my son too, and bring him up to be a dirty Yankee tradesman, or a low, beggarly painter?” (p. 371). Again, it is the physical disgrace of trade, or of art as a profession, that dismays Arthur Huntingdon, rather than the loss of his son.⁴⁸



Much of the power of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* derives from the suppressed rage with which Helen re-

⁴⁷ For further discussion of *Tenant’s* preoccupation with private spaces, see Laura C. Berry, “Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 30 (1996), 32–55.

⁴⁸ Terry Eagleton, in his *Myths of Power*, overlooks the class problematic that Helen’s profession brings to *Tenant*, and, like other critics, he finds the novel weaker than those

ceives Arthur's violent actions. She knows that she has no immediate defense against him; instead, her revenge comes in the form of representation (as did Caroline Norton's)—that is, in the diary that makes his iniquities known. The fact that Helen's rage finds its outlet in narrative form distances Anne Brontë's work from that of her more famous sisters, whose heroines tend to express anger verbally (as in Jane Eyre's wild verbal assaults on her cousin John and her aunt Reed, or Catherine Earnshaw's impassioned speeches in *Wuthering Heights*). Anne Brontë, in contrast, continually removes her heroine's body from the fray, allowing visual images or written text to speak for Helen. Later in the novel, when Helen insists that, since she is still married, Gilbert must never see her again, she attempts to console him: "We shall meet in Heaven. Let us think of that" (p. 409). His response to this sentiment is worldly: "But not as we are now. . . . It gives me little consolation to think I shall next behold you as a disembodied spirit, or an altered being, with a frame perfect and glorious, but not like this!" (p. 409). Helen asks him, "Is your love *all* earthly then?" and delivers an impassioned speech about the delights of disembodied heavenly glory (p. 410). Helen's religious fervor, though it detracts from the romance narrative that readers of Brontë novels tend to expect, serves to emphasize Anne Brontë's argument for the distancing of the female body from male desire.

The numerous scenes of painting in the novel highlight the possibility that the female artist, no matter who watches, might successfully maintain corporeal distance and aesthetic autonomy. Yet while the language of painting allows for an aesthetic of independence, it also provides a way of articulating female desire. The "heat" of the novel thus shifts—that is, the "animal emotion" that Moore so admires in *Tenant* stems from Helen in the central diary portion of the novel, not from Gil-

of the other Brontë sisters (see Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* [London: Macmillan, 1975], pp. 128–36). Part of Eagleton's dismissal of *Tenant* as "slighter" than *Jane Eyre* (1847) or *Wuthering Heights* stems from the lack of distance in the lovers' social positions: Helen and Gilbert are simply not far enough apart in social status for Eagleton to discover a "myth of power" within the narrative of *Tenant*. I would suggest, however, that Eagleton is looking in the wrong place: the novel seethes with power struggles, but they center on the nexus of gender and class rather than social class alone—and issues of gender are strikingly absent in Eagleton's work.

bert. Desire is a product, in *Tenant*, of artistic production: whoever holds the pen or brush generates desire. When, for instance, the various key characters in *Tenant* go together on a picnic excursion to the seashore and Helen tries to slip away to paint, Gilbert cannot help but follow: “I felt myself drawn by an irresistible attraction to that distant point where the fair artist sat and plied her solitary task—and not long did I attempt to resist it” (*Tenant*, p. 62). As he watches her paint, Gilbert easily writes Helen into the position of art object:

[She] sketched away in silence. But I could not help stealing a glance, now and then, from the splendid view at our feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over the paper.

“Now,” thought I, “if I had but a pencil and a morsel of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers, admitting I had the power to delineate faithfully what is before me.” (pp. 64–65)

Art and artist threaten here to merge entirely: the “view at [their] feet” melts into her hand (which becomes an aesthetic extension of the pencil), and her curls, dropping on the paper, seem to flow into the scene she draws. This scene of visual appropriation is quite similar to those scenes in the diary in which Arthur Huntingdon claims visual authority over Helen’s artwork and her self. Brontë shows us that, in Gilbert’s eyes, Helen is a beautiful art object.

This scene neatly encodes the danger for women of what Jonah Siegel in *Desire and Excess* terms the “turn” in nineteenth-century aesthetics from the art object to the artist: the increasing interest in the figure of the artist causes, for women artists, a reabsorption back into the role of art object. This attempted reabsorption, with its attendant focus upon the female artist’s body, was very much a part of the prevailing discourse on women painters in the era. An 1857 article in *Punch* offers a provocative expression of such discourse:

Those who are fond of “the Society of Ladies” will rush to No. 315, Oxford Street, and there enjoy an exhibition that is the result of female handiwork. It is not an exhibition of stitching or embroidery, . . . or anti-macassars, or floral smoking caps, or but-

terfly braces, or sporting slippers with a series of foxes running helter-skelter over the toes. It is not an exhibition of Berlin-wool work, or potichomanie, or any other mania that occasionally seizes hold of young ladies' fingers, and makes them, for the time being, excessively sticky to squeeze. . . . It is not an exhibition of jams, or jellies, or marmalades, or preserves, or much less, pickles. You must not expect you are about to be invited to a choice collection of pies, or tarts, or cakes, or puddings. It is nothing to eat, nothing to play with, nothing to wear, nothing that you can adorn your magnificent person with.⁴⁹

The exhibition to which the predominantly male readership of *Punch* is invited is the first Society for Female Artists (SFA) show, held in London in 1857.⁵⁰ The characteristically flippant tone of the *Punch* review is one possible way to diffuse the threat posed by such a collection of female artistic productivity, but in order fully to restore the normal trajectory of gendered production that the SFA exhibit threatens, the *Punch* reviewer sets to work to ensure that one thing at least can be salvaged from the exhibit for the delectation of the male viewer: the female artists' bodies. As the review continues, it becomes clear that what can be accessed during a visit to the exhibit—and most “enjoyed,” as the opening sentence of the review suggests—is the “Lady” artists themselves, rather than their artistic products.

Like George Moore, with his remark that “Anne broke down,” the *Punch* reviewer assumes an instant familiarity with the female artists. “Away with regrets in the presence of such delightful company!” he exhorts; “You are communing with the works of ANNA, JULIA, KATE, AGNES, FLORENCE, FRANCES, and fifty other pretty names. Not a man's ugly cognomen is to be found in the whole catalogue.” The “pretty names” men-

⁴⁹ “Let Us Join the Ladies,” *Punch*, 33 (1857), 27. All further references are to this page.

⁵⁰ The SFA was founded in 1856 by Harriet Grote, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, and other women artists, and boasted such supporters and members as Eliza Fox, Henrietta Ward, and Anna Jameson. The Society offered struggling women artists a London venue in which to introduce their work and provided many women with a stepping-stone to more prestigious galleries. See Cherry, *Painting Women*, pp. 67–68; Paula Gillett, *Worlds of Art: Painters in Victorian Society* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 134–35, 173–74; and Pamela Gerish Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), pp. 71–88.

tioned are in fact the first names of actual exhibitors in the SFA exhibit: Anna Blunden, Kate Swift, Agnes Bouvier, Florence Claxton, and Frances Stoddart all contributed paintings to this SFA show. The artists rarely, in the course of the review, receive their surnames—for, in the normal course of artistic attribution, a surname would supply an artist with respectable patronymic, a social position irrespective of gender.

By this erasure of surnames the reviewer takes up a remarkably personal stance toward the artists, especially in an era in which the use of a first name carried social meaning (as does using the *tu* form in French, for instance). The reviewer seems to imply by this appellation that these women's last names are, in fact, up for grabs—that all of the artists are young, unmarried women, available to be “enjoyed” in a marriage that would necessarily result in a transference of patronymic. Why should these artists be referred to by their own last names, the reviewer seems to say, when they will all be married soon and change them anyway? The artworks themselves are largely ignored, or indeed looked directly through, by this *Punch* reviewer, who further encourages the male viewer:

Stand with respectful awe before that tender *Brigand*, for who knows, Harriet may one day be your wife? That *Bivouac in the Desert*, which is glowing before you . . . , was encamped originally in the snug parlour of LOUISA—that very same LOUISA, that probably you flirted with last week at a picnic at Birnam Beeches. . . . Be careful of your remarks. Drop not an ugly word, lest you do an injury to the memory of some poetic creature, who at some time or other handed you a cup of tea, or sang you the songs you loved. . . . With GEORGIANA on your right, MARIA on your left; with EMMA gazing from her gorgeous frame right at you, and SOPHIA peeping from behind that clump of moon-silvered trees over your shoulder, be tender, be courteous, be complimentary, be everything that is gentle, and devoted, and kind. (p. 27)

Again, the reviewer refers to actual artists in his romantic scenario: the Emma who gazes “from her gorgeous frame” is Emma Brownlow; the Sophia who “peeps” at the viewer is Sophia Sinnett, whose *Reading the List of Killed and Wounded* garnered special acclaim at the 1857 exhibit. Yet the scene becomes not one of aesthetic judgment or appreciation of the

works of these painters, but rather a romantic scenario of potential erotic attachment and courtship very much like the one that Moore envisions between critic and female writer. In the *Punch* review, artworks serve as conduits back to the physical bodies of their producers, who are firmly positioned back into their “proper” social and erotic functions: wives, dispensers of tea, or coquettish flirts. The reviewer substitutes a traditional courtship narrative—one set in motion by the hint that Harriet “may one day be your wife”—for a narrative of artistic production or aesthetic prowess. Yet the artworks named here—*Brigand* and *Bivouac in the Desert*—intervene momentarily in this imagined courtship of artist and viewer. The fact that the works appear to represent a socially radical figure of erotic fantasy (a bandit) and a foreign military scene suggests that the artworks under scrutiny are not nearly so feminine and innocent as the “gentle, and devoted, and kind” reviewer attempts to be. In order to counter the unfeminine content of these images, the reviewer mimics and then attempts to diffuse the military terminology and to depoliticize the art by refeminizing and domesticating it: *Bivouac in the Desert* “was encamped originally in the snug parlour of LOUISA.”

Brontë shows her awareness of the aesthetic dangers faced by women artists, but she also offers ways out of the bind. Helen, when watched by Gilbert in the scene by the shore, remains steadfastly oblivious to his attempt at visual appropriation. In her first words to him after finishing her sketch, she asks: “Are you still there, Mr. Markham?” (*Tenant*, p. 65). Helen remains, in this scene at least, immune to Gilbert’s aesthetic appropriation, and this concentration on art has profound benefits for her: professionalism allows her to begin short-circuiting the erotic structure of the aesthetic experience, so that the woman-as-object can become the woman-as-subject. Similarly, during a conversation about painting with Gilbert, Helen remarks: “I almost wish I were not a painter. . . . for instead of delivering myself up to the full enjoyment of [the delightful touches of nature] as others do, I am always troubling my head about how I could produce the same effect upon canvass; and as that can never be done, it is mere vanity and vexation of spirit” (p. 83). The phrase “troubling my head” is usually a phrase of conde-

scension spoken to a young girl or woman—as in “don’t trouble your pretty head about it.” Here, instead, Brontë makes it a marker of excess professional thought, an inability to stop the process of aesthetic mediation that in part defines an artist.

But other instances in the novel show that painting is still a dangerously sexy activity and that Helen cannot entirely cloak herself in her professionalism. Brontë insists that the focus upon the artist-figure has inextricably troublesome effects upon women artists, who can never quite avoid being reabsorbed into the earlier historical paradigm of art-for-accomplishment’s-sake. In another scene, as Gilbert watches Helen sketch, his erotic evaluation of her body again overtakes his aesthetic evaluation of her artworks: “I stood and watched the progress of her pencil: it was a pleasure to behold it so dexterously guided by those fair and graceful fingers” (*Tenant*, p. 50). I shall merely point to the possible phallic implications of a woman playing with a pencil and go on to note that Helen, this time, does not find it so easy to ignore Gilbert’s presence: “erelong their [the fingers’] dexterity became impaired, they began to hesitate, to tremble slightly, and make false strokes, and, then, suddenly came to a pause, while their owner laughingly raised her face to mine, and told me that her sketch did not profit by my superintendence” (p. 50). When Helen “raise[s] her face” to Gilbert, one almost expects a kiss to follow, rather than a dismissal. The trembling and hesitation, which ostensibly refer to artistic production, slide easily into an erotic register.

During the course of *Tenant* Helen learns that, for women, painting—because it always seems to require the presence of the female body close to the male viewer—is more dangerous than writing, which can be exercised in private and presented as something apart from the body.⁵¹ Visual art offers Anne Brontë the ultimate test-case for negotiating the trials of female aesthetic production in the public sphere, and thus paint-

⁵¹ Paintings, obviously, can be and were viewed in galleries with the artist someplace else entirely, but in the nineteenth century the presence of the producer was frequently expected—often the sale or viewing of art was done in the artist’s own studio. Similarly, exhibition in a public gallery required the artist to be present at “Varnishing Day” and other public events. For an image of “Varnishing Day,” see Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists*, Plate 19.

ings in *Tenant* are viewed primarily in company, in public displays. Art viewing in the nineteenth-century was a radically public event: visits to the Royal Academy were part of the social rounds, and the opening exhibit of the R.A. each year signaled the official opening of the London social season. On so-called "Studio Sundays" painters' studios were thrown open to upper-class visitors and possible purchasers, and exhibits at galleries such as the Grosvenor Gallery or the Female School of Art were also public events, attended by the rich and famous as well as by the middle classes, and always covered by the press. As Kate Flint writes: "by stressing . . . social gathering rather than the paintings themselves, depictions of art shows, whether in paintings or in periodical publications, ultimately serve to reinforce the point that spectators are participating in social rituals, however much any individual act of spectatorship may involve individualised, subjective apprehension and judgement."⁵²



If we return to Anne Brontë's *Woman gazing* sketch, new interpretations now seem possible. The woman now appears partially framed by the rocks and hence available for the viewer; our eyes are encouraged to rest upon her framed body, particularly because we cannot see her face. Nevertheless, the woman's eyes and her visual activity are foregrounded by her gesture with her right hand: the viewer is forced to realize that the figure is *looking*, that she has positioned herself for a view of the sea and does not seem at all concerned with what is behind her (i.e., the viewer). Maria H. Frawley writes of the sketch: "the subject is so preoccupied with her thoughts as to be oblivious to the gaze of the viewer."⁵³ Brontë critics have argued that the thoughts that preoccupy the figure in the sketch are purely emotional—the longing for a lover, the desire for a wider world experience. Given Anne Brontë's interest in the visual arts, however, we should note another possibility. We should consider first that it is the female figure's line of sight

⁵² Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 176.

⁵³ *Anne Brontë* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 30.

that organizes the painting: she stands slightly to the left of the picture and looks out slightly to the right, and Anne's sketch mimics this angle. If we squelch the desire to read each figure symbolically (the girl is Anne, the sunrise represents future potential, the distance is the wider sphere that Anne wishes to attain), then we can read the sketch as an aesthetic exercise. As a young artist, Anne Brontë is practicing various elements of her art: perspective, shading (the rocks), drapery (the young woman's dress), reflection (the light on the water, the waves), and framing (the way the rocks on the left bind that side of the picture, as do the few rocks and the cloud formation on the right side). We might see the painting as an exercise in *looking*, in planning artistic endeavor rather than in simply dreaming of love and far-off lands. The female figure in the drawing might be longing for something or striving to see a ship in the distance—but the young female artist producing the drawing is simultaneously exercising technical aesthetic skills. The drawing becomes an ideal image not of Anne Brontë's emotional life, but of the tension between erotics and aesthetics that, she recognizes, underlies the experience of the Victorian female artist.

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ABSTRACT

Antonia Losano, "The Professionalization of the Woman Artist in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (pp. 1–41)

Critics of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) have frequently noted the artistic endeavors of the novel's heroine, Helen Graham, yet they have not fully considered the historical and narratological ramifications of Helen's career as a painter. This essay argues that Helen's artworks cannot be considered as mere background to the novel or as simply symbolic reflections of the heroine's (or the author's) emotions. Instead, we must see the scenes of painting in *Tenant* as indicators of the novel's radical view of women's role as creative producers during a particularly complex moment in art history, one in which early-nineteenth-century female amateurism began its gradual transition from amateur "accomplished" woman to the professional female artist—a historical transition that, as is suggested in readings of various nineteenth-century novels, is in its earliest stages at precisely the moment of the writing and publication of *Tenant*. At the narrative level, the novel's many scenes of painting provide its readers with detailed, if oblique, guidelines for interpretation; the novel is formally and ideologically impacted by the presence of its painter-heroine. Most particularly, such a re-evaluation of the role of painting in the novel resolves a central critical debate over the novel's problematic narrative structure.