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“An Oak in a Flower-Pot”: The Brontë Sisters’ Depictions of Female Agency During the Victorian Era

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the most popular novels written by the Brontë sisters – Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – in the context of the overbearing patriarchal culture of the Victorian era, specifically through the characterization of feminine agency displayed in each novel. By engaging with the novels as a trinity, this thesis uniquely reveals the more nuanced aspects of the novels through the sisters' respective depictions of female agency following the lives of their respective protagonists – Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, and Helen Graham. Additionally, this thesis seeks to engage in conversation about the ways in which a patriarchal society indoctrinates women in systematic oppression beginning in early childhood and extending well into their adult lives, sometimes even beyond that. By departing from the traditional narrative of agency as a form of rebellion, I seek to reimagine agency as an empowering tool of escape that manifests itself in many different forms in each novel.

Keywords: Brontë sisters, Victorian era, agency, patriarchy, entrapment, escape.

DEDICATION

To all the women who have walked invisible.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In their respective novels, *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), the Brontë sisters use the experiences of their female protagonists, Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, and Helen Graham, to critique the overbearing patriarchal system that inhibited the ability of women during the Victorian era to exercise their personal autonomy and agency to its full extent. First and foremost, to understand the role that the patriarchy plays in restricting the protagonists' agency, the term patriarchy must be defined. Although there are numerous definitions for the term, I conclude that the most simplified definition applicable to this thesis comes from Sylvia Walby, who defines patriarchy as: "…a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (214). In this thesis, I will explore the many ways in which the Brontë sisters depict female agency as the ability to independently make choices that determine one's fate, as well as how this agency results in a spectrum of outcomes for each novel's respective protagonist, ranging from passive submission to liberation. Additionally, I will argue that agency is never a singular act, but an amalgamation of smaller moments of agency enacted over years of oppression. I have used a quotation from *Wuthering Heights* as the title to my thesis: "He [Edgar] might as well plant an oak in a flower-pot and expect it to thrive, as imagine he can restore her to vigour in the soil of his shallow cares" (E. Brontë 152). Heathcliff speaks this line to Nelly, railing that Catherine is entrapped by her loveless, shallow marriage to Edgar Linton. This metaphor compares Catherine to a mighty oak tree, a tree characterized by its strength, that has been planted into a pot much too small to accommodate its large roots. Heathcliff does not imply that Catherine will break out of this pot, but rather, will wither under such constraint – she will not "thrive." Heathcliff's comment serves as the backbone of the metaphorical conceit structuring the chapters of this thesis; however, I

extend the symbolism of this quote to *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as well to interweave the complexities of each narrative into a unified trinity with distinctive, but similar conceptions of enclosure and escape from the patriarchy.

The Role of Women During the Victorian Era

The Victorian era, which lasted from approximately 1837 to 1901 (the reign of Queen Victoria), is recognized as a period of English history defined by "varied and far reaching" imperialism (Darwin 614), rapid industrialization, and political and social reform; however, in spite of the progress typically associated with the Victorian era, it was also a time defined by its oppressive class system "distinguished by inequalities" and sexist gender ideologies (Cody). While the British Empire was governed under the rule of one of Britain's most famous monarchs, Queen Victoria, British society still subscribed to a rigid patriarchal system that created a gendered hierarchy favoring men. The privileges afforded to men during this time established Victorian women as secondary citizens, specifically in terms of their designated space within Victorian society. While men occupied the public sphere of society, women were generally restricted to the domestic sphere; however, the domestic sphere was reserved for middle and upper-class women, as lower-class women often worked in farms or factories like their male counterparts. Lower class women were subjected to these dangerous, labor intensive jobs because "the only acceptable work for women was domestic, it was to take place in the home and it was a woman's job to oversee the regulation of the household, both morally and economically" (Boardman 150). Thus, the exclusion of lower-class women from the domestic sphere not only signified their perceived inferiority in terms of class identity but also in terms of their sex. Despite this class distinction, the domestic sphere of society was still a realm of female

exploitation and entrapment for upper-class women. Because of this confinement to the domestic sphere, Victorian women were pressured to take on the role as the "angel in the house," a term coined by the English poet, Coventry Patmore, referring to the notion that women were expected to fulfill a certain set of ideals that were not only hypocritical but also strictly enforced in order to sustain an auspicious marriage. This excerpt from Canto IX: *The Wife's Tragedy* in Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* gives a sense of what he thought to be indicative of the ideal Victorian woman:

> Man must be pleased; but him to please
>
> Is woman's pleasure…
>
> ……
>
> While she, too gentle even to force
>
> His penitence by kind replies,
>
> Waits by, expecting his remorse,
>
> With pardon in her pitying eyes;
>
> And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
>
> A comfortable word confers,
>
> She leans and weeps against his breast,
>
> And seems to think the sin was hers;
>
> ……
>
> At any time, she's still his wife,
>
> Dearly devoted to his arms;
>
> She loves with love that cannot tire; (Patmore 74)

From this excerpt, it is made quite obvious that the ideal Victorian woman was seen as one who was selflessly "devoted" and submissive to her husband, pious, and pure – especially considering the language Patmore employs to convey a sense of meekness and emotional vulnerability associated with the ideal Victorian woman.

Many critics have discussed the ways in which Victorian society enforced strict gendered binaries, effectively separating the roles of men and women into oppositional groups. Mary Poovey asserts that this arbitrary division "demonstrates 'the specific ways in which gender was simultaneously constructed, deployed, and contested'" (qtd. in Aiken 192). Essentially, Poovey acknowledges that not only are gendered binaries a social construct created for the benefit of men, but these binaries organize the social hierarchy in a way that stereotypes and stigmatizes female identity. Because of this stigmatization, the rights afforded to men during this time were purposely withheld from women in order to ensure that women maintained their proper [domestic] roles within society. Women were continuously subjected to the authority of male figures in their lives, whether it be their fathers, brothers, or husbands, through the legal doctrine of coverture. Rachel Ablow quotes the definition of coverture from William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1756): "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" (Ablow). Because of this forced dependency, married women were essentially personless, as almost every aspect of their lives was bound to a man.

A Brief Biography: The Brontë Sisters

As female writers during the Victorian era, the Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, were not strangers to the prejudice and inequality women faced in a patriarchal society. The Brontës grew up in Haworth, England, on the Yorkshire moors. They lived in a parsonage, as their father, Patrick Brontë, had been appointed to work as a curate for the church. Although their family was relatively large, it dwindled quickly after the death of their mother, Maria, in 1821, as well as their two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, in the years shortly after. For the majority of their childhood, they lived in the parsonage with their father, their brother Branwell, and their aunt Elizabeth, who had moved into the parsonage during their mother's illness. Isolated and often alone, the sisters turned to writing at a young age and were incredibly imaginative. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne wrote under the androgynous pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, which Phyllis Bentley claims was the sisters' solution in order to prevent "expos[ing] themselves to the prejudice and condescension then often displayed by critics toward women writers, but scrupling to take names positively masculine" (qtd. in Thormählen). Together, they published one volume of poetry in 1846, as well as several other independent novels in addition to their respective novels discussed in this thesis: *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Despite the sisters' publishing success, they did not live long after the publication of their novels. Emily died of tuberculosis in 1848. Only a year later, in 1849, Anne contracted the same fatal disease. Branwell also died in 1848, leaving Charlotte to mourn the loss of her siblings alone with her father. Charlotte died in 1855; however, the cause of her death is still ambiguous. While it is on record that Charlotte died from tuberculosis like her sisters, other afflictions that have been acknowledged as potential causes of

her death include typhoid, pneumonia, and hyperemesis gravidarum, which is more commonly referred to as severe morning sickness.[1]

Plot Summaries of *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights,* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre,* is a bildungsroman that follows the protagonist, Jane, from her early childhood as an orphan to her married life. As a young girl, Jane lives with her hostile Aunt Reed and hateful cousins, John, Eliza, and Georgiana, at Gateshead Manor after both of her parents succumb to typhus. Jane is initially taken in by her Uncle Reed, but when he dies, he employs his wife to look after Jane in his absence. Never taking a liking to Jane, Aunt Reed decides to send her to Lowood, a school for orphaned girls. After a jolting introduction to the strict routines at Lowood, Jane comes to embrace the mundanity and excels as a pupil, eventually becoming a teacher at Lowood herself. After eight years at Lowood, Jane applies for a governess position at Thornfield Hall. Once hired, Jane finds her role as a governess fulfilling, despite her aloof employer, Edward Rochester, the owner of Thornfield. Not long after living at Thornfield, Jane begins to notice strange happenings that begin to occur. She ultimately dismisses her suspicions due to reassurance from Rochester, who she finds herself falling in love with despite their differences in age and social class even though she believes him to be courting Blanche Ingram, who Jane positions as her rival. After Jane professes her love for Rochester, Rochester proposes marriage to Jane, and she eagerly accepts. Their wedding, however, is interrupted by the information that Rochester is still married to his wife, Bertha Antonietta

[1] Contemporary scholars now suggest that it is likely that the main contributor to Charlotte Brontë's death was extreme morning sickness, or hyperemesis gravidarum, rather than tuberculosis like her sisters. See Allison, Simon P., and Dileep N. Lobo. "The Death of Charlotte Brontë from Hyperemesis Gravidarum and Refeeding Syndrome: A New Perspective. *Clinical Nutrition* (Edinburgh, Scotland). Jan. 2020, 39(1):304-305. DOI: 10.1016/j.clnu.2019.01.027.

Mason, referred to as Bertha in the novel, who he keeps locked away in the recesses of Thornfield Hall due to the prolonged effects of her genetic predisposition for madness. Unable to trust Rochester after finding out about Bertha, Jane runs away from Thornfield despite his pleas for her to stay. Battling poverty, starvation, and exposure to the elements, Jane is driven to the brink of death, only to be rescued by strangers that she later learns are her cousins. During this time, Jane receives a grand inheritance from her late uncle in Madeira, as well as a marriage proposal from her cousin, St. John Rivers, in an effort to persuade Jane to join him on his missionary trip to India. Jane rejects St. John's offer and returns to Thornfield in search of Rochester, only to find that it has been burned down in the wake of Bertha's suicide. After some inquiry, Jane reunites with Rochester at his new house, Ferndean Manor, and she happily marries him, forgiving Rochester for his deceit.

Emily Brontë's novel, *Wuthering Heights*, is structured in pairs, consisting of two narrators, Ellen "Nelly" Dean and Mr. Lockwood, following the events of two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons, their respective homes, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, over the span of two generations. The novel begins with Lockwood taking up residence as a tenant at Thrushcross Grange; however, he is forced to spend a night at his brooding landlord Heathcliff's house, Wuthering Heights, due to a heavy snowstorm; there, he encounters the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw. Afterwards, while recovering from illness at Thrushcross Grange, he asks his servant Nelly Dean to inform him of the history behind the families who inhabit Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Nelly, who has worked for the Earnshaws for almost two decades, tells Lockwood that Mr. Earnshaw brought home Heathcliff as a young boy after returning from Liverpool. While the rest of the Earnshaw family resents Heathcliff's presence at Wuthering Heights, Catherine, Mr. Earnshaw's daughter, and Heathcliff are virtually

inseparable as children. When Catherine and Heathcliff are around twelve years old, Catherine is bitten by a dog while they are playing on the moors. She is taken in to be healed by the affluent Linton family at Thrushcross Grange, but Heathcliff is turned away. When Catherine returns from her stay at the Grange after five weeks, she has been transformed into a refined young woman. She grows distant from Heathcliff, and she is courted by Edgar Linton. Heathcliff disappears for several years; during that time, Catherine marries Edgar. Heathcliff returns to Wuthering Heights unexpectedly, and although Nelly is unsure of the details of his three-year absence, she says that he had acquired wealth. Edgar and Heathcliff are not pleased with each other due to Heathcliff's attempt to acquire control of Wuthering Heights as well as his marriage to Edgar's sister, Isabella. In the midst of this, Catherine grows ill and essentially lets herself wither away, but not before giving birth to a daughter named Cathy. After Catherine dies, the rest of the novel focuses on the second generation, the children of these characters, and Heathcliff's revenge; however, for the purpose of this thesis, I will only be focusing on part one of the novel.

Anne Brontë's novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is an epistolary novel, beginning with Gilbert Markham writing a letter to a friend about a mysterious new woman, Helen Graham, who has moved into Wildfell Hall, a dilapidated manor situated near their village, Linden-Car. Gilbert gradually takes an interest in Helen, even abandoning his former courtship with Eliza Millward, despite how secretive Helen is about her past. Jealous of Gilbert's affection towards Helen, Eliza spreads rumors about Helen's romantic affairs to tarnish her reputation; however, Gilbert is quick to shut down these rumors. Once Gilbert gains Helen's trust, she lends him her diary which recounts her life prior to, and reasons for, moving to Wildfell Hall. Helen's diary entries begin years earlier when she is eighteen years old, with a conversation between Helen and her aunt

Maxwell about marriage. Her aunt urges Helen to take marriage seriously; however, Helen thinks it is important to have love in a marriage as well as respect. Helen's aunt urges her to consider the older Mr. Boarham as a suitor, but Helen takes no interest. Soon after, Helen meets Arthur Huntingdon and is thoroughly charmed by his character. When Arthur proposes, Helen's aunt and uncle warn her about marrying a man with no principle; however, they eventually give Helen permission to marry Arthur. The first months of their marriage go on smoothly, but it does not take Arthur long to begin to show his true character – selfish, cruel, and impious. They fight often, and Helen grows increasingly suspicious of the flirtations between Arthur and Annabella Wilmot. During this time, Helen gets pregnant and has their son, Arthur, around Christmas. Arthur wants nothing to do with the child, and grows increasingly intolerant towards Helen, all the while continuing his affair with Annabella. After five years of marriage, Helen plots an escape. After some delay, Helen is able to execute her escape successfully with the help of her brother, Frederick Lawrence, and her servant, Rachel. Helen enjoys the independence she and her son have at Wildfell Hall due to the income she receives from selling her paintings, but when Mr. Huntingdon falls ill, Helen returns to Grassdale Manor to nurse him until he dies. After Arthur's death, Helen goes back to living with her aunt, but Gilbert follows her there to confess his love for her after finishing her diary. At this point, Gilbert is the narrator once again, and by the end of the novel Helen and Gilbert are married.

Overview of Chapters

Because the chapters of this thesis represent the chronology of distinctive moments in which the patriarchy imposes a number of societal customs upon women, each chapter is associated with a different phase in the process of growing a plant. Beginning with the

protagonists' most formative years, I will highlight the ways in which the Brontë sisters expose the patriarchy's grasp on women, present even at the beginning of their lives, metaphorically "planting the seeds" of internalized misogyny through socially prescribed gender roles and standards of beauty, meant to cultivate a lifestyle of dependency and submission. The subsequent phase of life in which these characters progress can be deemed a literal and metaphorical fertilization of these social customs – courtship, marriage, and pregnancy/motherhood. As a result, the characters begin to outgrow the rigid constraints of the patriarchal system that they are confined to, and they are forced to use their agency in order to escape the system that oppresses them. In the final chapter of this thesis, by discussing the unique circumstances and perspective of each protagonist, I will attempt to justify the characters' retreats back into the patriarchal institution of marriage rather than condemn them for their choices.

CHAPTER II: PLANTING THE SEEDS

During the most formative years of the protagonists' lives, they develop an internalized understanding of Victorian gender roles that alters the way they perceive themselves as constituents of a patriarchal society. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which the Brontë sisters portray Jane's, Catherine's, and Helen's childhoods as being permeated by the social constructs surrounding beauty, class, and education through periods of "transformation" which are essentially manifestations of their childhood internalization of gender roles and class consciousness. As they grow up, they are taught that beauty has intrinsic value, and they are constantly exposed to the ways in which the patriarchy establishes this value through the commodification of beauty and objectification. Additionally, it is important to remember that these experiences stratify the class hierarchy of the Victorian era and are felt in varying degrees

as a reflection and consequence of the protagonist's social position. Thus, a woman's value is quantified by patriarchal standards of beauty, class, and education which foster a sense of dependency on and submission to the patriarchy, leading to women being entrapped by a judgmental, restrictive system.

Childhood Internalization of Gender Roles and Class Consciousness

Childhood naturally implies a state of dependency upon others, and while Jane's situation as an orphan augments her need to be provided for, this forced dependency causes Jane to not only feel entrapped by her living arrangements at Gateshead, her aunt's house, but also inspires Jane's desire for escape from an early age. This desire for escape, rooted in Jane's preconceived notions about gender roles and class that she rejects at Gateshead, shows that Jane, as a young girl, has already started to cultivate her agency; however, Jane is still confronted by the rigid constraints of the patriarchy when she is sent to Lowood. There, Jane uses her access to education to her advantage, allowing her to marginally rise in social class.

During Jane's childhood, there is a direct correlation between her social class and the way she is effectively cast out by her family. Brontë introduces Jane to readers at the age of ten – orphaned and living with her aunt and three cousins. When Jane is caught reading one of her cousin John's books, he taunts her by saying, "…you are a dependent, Mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us…" (C. Brontë 11). This interaction raises the idea that because Jane was orphaned and left with no money, she is unworthy of being treated as an equal member of the family. She is constantly reminded of her inferiority by her aunt, cousins, and even the servants – specifically Miss Abbot, who gives Jane advice about staying out of trouble with the Reeds:

> And you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because Missis kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money, and you will have none; it is your place to be humble, and try to make yourself agreeable to them. (C. Brontë 13)

Although Jane is prompted to acknowledge being raised with her high-class cousins as a privilege, she is still regarded as unwelcomed and burdensome, ostracized from everyone at Gateshead. Parama Roy, commenting on the reasons for Jane's marginalization, concludes that "In addition to being dislocated from the great house by her poverty and rank, Jane is distanced from it by being female, and she rejects it as inadequate for her happiness" (714). Roy's argument is half correct – while Jane's social class is an important factor in her marginalization at Gateshead, I would argue that rather than Jane's dislocation being a consequence of her sex, it is actually her lack of conformity to feminine gender roles that subjects her to the scrutiny of everyone at Gateshead.

Jane subverts and deviates from the patriarchy's prescribed displays of femininity, even in childhood. Jane says that Aunt Reed refers to her as "naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking..." (C. Brontë 15). Additionally, when Jane compares her own behavior to her cousins', it only reaffirms the notion that Jane is disliked because of her "inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed" (C. Brontë 7). Eliza, who Jane describes as "headstrong and selfish" was still "respected" (C. Brontë 15); Georgiana, who "had a spoilt temper, a very acrid spite, [and] a captious and insolent carriage" was still "universally indulged" (C. Brontë 15); and John, who Jane describes as a "wicked and cruel boy" was still "her [Mrs. Reed's] own darling" (C. Brontë 10, 15). Jane views her treatment as hypocritical and "unjust" (C. Brontë 15), especially after being blamed for instigating the fight with John when he was actually the one at fault. As a

consequence, Jane is locked away in the red room as punishment for her "shocking conduct…strik[ing] a young gentleman, [her] benefactress's son! [Her] young master" (C. Brontë 12). This blame only reinforces Jane's perceived delinquency not only as an orphan but as a young woman who is thought of as being inferior to her cousin John.

Jane's confinement to the red room, the bedroom of her deceased Uncle Reed, is her punishment for attacking John. Not only does this act of aggression towards John symbolize Jane's discontent and resistance towards patriarchal authority, but the resulting consequence of being locked in the red room symbolizes her patriarchal entrapment due to her inferior social class and unwillingness to conform to the prescribed gender norms forced upon her. Similarly, Joan Anderson notes that "Brontë utilizes the metaphor of houses, rooms, and enclosures throughout the novel to symbolize the patriarchal structures within society that inhibit or negate the possibility of female liberty." Locked in for the night, Jane ponders ways to "…achieve escape from [the] insupportable oppression" she faces at Gateshead, such as "…running away…never eating or drinking anymore, and letting [herself] die" (C. Brontë 15). I would argue that each of these methods are possible avenues for Jane to use her agency in order to escape and, ironically enough, not only does it foreshadow Jane's method of escape from Thornfield later in the novel, but the methods of escape she describes are also used by Catherine and Helen in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I digress, however, to continue discussing Jane's entrapment in the red room. Jane, shaken with terror after hours in the room, says that she was "…oppressed, suffocated…" (C. Brontë 17). Broken down, Jane begs to be let out of the room, and Aunt Reed offers Jane the ultimatum that it is "only on condition of perfect submission and stillness that I shall liberate you then" (C. Brontë 18). Essentially, Aunt Reed gives Jane the choice of being groomed to meet the prescribed patriarchal standards or

continuing to be oppressed; however, Jane understands that there really is no choice when she says she "shall be killed" if she has to endure her entrapment any longer (C. Brontë 18).

Jane's "transforming process" (C. Brontë 84) occurs during her years of schooling at Lowood. While she is granted access to an education, she is simultaneously stripped of her individuality and expected to conform to the strictly disciplined, mundane environment of Lowood where Mr. Brocklehurst's "plan in bringing up [the] girls is not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, and self-denying" (C. Brontë 63). Mr. Brocklehurst, the supervisor of Lowood, expects the girls to be as modest and plain as possible, even erring on the side of androgyny: "A quaint assemblage they appeared, all with plain locks combed from their faces, not a curl visible; in brown dresses" (C. Brontë 46). The Lowood girls are not allowed any form of self-expression, especially in ways that might be considered overtly feminine, such as through their hair styles or clothing. While the strictness of the attire at Lowood is partially due to a lack of funding, it is also a way for Brocklehurst to exercise control over the girls' autonomy. It is interesting that although the girls are expected to achieve a degree of refinement, it seems as though "refinement" is just code for being easily manipulated into submitting to a higher authority – whether it be Mr. Brocklehurst, the patriarchy, or God. Even more susceptible to this control are the lower-class orphan girls that Lowood takes in. Esther Godfrey suggests, "The labor component of *Jane Eyre* stands central to the text's manipulations of sexual identities. Gendered performances become acts that are increasingly tied to material wealth, and the text suggests that only the middle and upper classes can afford the costly performances of gender" (856). Godfrey's argument establishes that Brocklehurst's push for plainness is not, in fact, about selflessness, but rather an effort to maintain the clear distinction between classes. Despite these measures set in place by

Brocklehurst to relegate Jane to a lower class, Jane tenaciously seeks to use her access to education to improve her social position. She says, "I had the means of an excellent education placed within my reach…I availed myself fully of the advantages offered me" (C. Brontë 83). Once Jane reaches the age of eighteen, she has become a more "disciplined and subdued character" during her years at Lowood and is ready for "a new servitude" in which she accepts a job as a governess at Thornfield Hall (C. Brontë 84, 85). At this point in the novel, Jane has advanced from her station as a lowly orphan to a respectable governess; however, it is important to note that while Jane is inching towards a life with more independence, she still considers her role in life as one of "servitude" (C. Brontë 85). While difficult to achieve, Jane has already proven her ability to transgress the boundaries of social class to a certain extent by gaining an education.

In Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw's childhood, unlike Jane's, is more carefree due to growing up in a stable, middle to upper middle-class household. Readers can assume the family's social class when Lockwood inquires about the Earnshaws, asking Nelly if they are "an old family," to which Nelly responds, "Very old, sir…" (E. Brontë 34). It can be inferred from the text that the Earnshaws have at least some social power or presence, as they must have a substantial amount of wealth in order to sustain their family property, as well as employ several servants. Catherine's comfortable upbringing allows her to have a space to grow up without her childhood being corrupted by the same patriarchal oppression that Jane faces at Gateshead and Lowood; however, I would argue that Catherine's freedom as a child, a luxury not afforded to Jane, has severe consequences in terms of her ability to assimilate into the proper, or ideal, woman once she is older. In fact, Ellen Moers suggests that Brontë, in writing *Wuthering Heights*, makes "…a statement of a very serious kind about a girl's

childhood and the adult woman's tragic yearning to return to it" (qtd. in Stoneman 148). I think this claim reinforces the idea that Catherine's desire to return to her childhood freedom is at the heart of all of her decisions after she reaches a certain age, even if she cannot act on them – specifically, she is prompted to make decisions that align with the social expectations of a woman in her position rather than the desires of her inner child.

Similar to Jane, Catherine's behavior as a child displays her nonconformity to prescribed gender roles. Nelly describes Catherine during her childhood as being "mischievous and wayward" and "always at the high-water mark, her tongue always going – singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same" (E. Brontë 38, 42). While Catherine's behavior as a child is uncharacteristic of the Victorian ideal which she is expected to grow into, it does not go unpunished by Mr. Earnshaw, who is described as "an oppressor" (E. Brontë 38) and "strict and grave" (E. Brontë 42) which suggests that Catherine experiences patriarchal oppression by submitting to her father. When Mr. Earnshaw brings home Heathcliff as a young boy, Catherine's immediate response is to "grin[] and spit[] at the stupid little thing, earning from her pains a sound blow from her father to teach her cleaner manners" (E. Brontë 37). This interaction highlights Catherine's deviance as a young girl; however, once she becomes accustomed to Heathcliff's presence at Wuthering Heights, she sees Heathcliff, who Hindley describes as an "imp of Satan" (E. Brontë 39), as a kindred spirit, and Nelly says that Catherine and Heathcliff are "now very thick" (E. Brontë 38), referring to their quick-growing friendship. Catherine is even referred to by Nelly as a "wild, wick[ed] slip" (E. Brontë 42). This wildness that Catherine displays suggests that she needs to be tamed or groomed to fit society's standards of what a respectable Victorian woman was considered to be. For this reason, I argue that Catherine and Heathcliff's bond as children is so strong because they see a likeness in one another, where the

line between masculinity and femininity is blurred. This allows Catherine to exist in a state of child-like androgyny, similar to Jane, that does not conform to gender roles and the social expectations that go along with gender performance.

Catherine's transformation from wild child to proper young lady after returning from her lengthy stay with the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange directly implies her submission to the patriarchal standards of the ideal Victorian woman. Nelly describes the noticeable change in Catherine: "…her manners much improved…so that, instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person" (E. Brontë 53). Catherine is noticeably reformed, and she is pacified by the material culture of "fine clothes and flattery" that the patriarchy instills as a sign of refinement, maturity, and class (E. Brontë 53). She is warned to "not grow wild again" (E. Brontë 53). Unlike Jane, who thinks independently and views these standards as a way to subvert the patriarchy's influence, Catherine submits to the pressure to conform to these social standards of femininity, which only increases her dependency on the patriarchy's assertions of what is deemed improper and proper, childish and mature. Critics often view Catherine's transformation after her stay at Thrushcross Grange as a metaphorical fall, even though the Earnshaws and Lintons treat her transformation as a rise or improvement. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar approach it as a fall from "innocence to experience." Steven Vine also interprets Catherine's transformation as "her 'fall' from female autonomy into conformist femininity and from protest into patriarchy" (346). Not only does this conformity render Catherine dependent upon the need to act out social customs in alignment with the prescribed codes of femininity, but the idea of femininity at the time was inherently subservient to masculinity, rendering her another pawn of the patriarchy.

Unlike *Jane Eyre*'s and *Wuthering Heights'* numerous chapters detailing Jane's and Catherine's childhoods, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is unique among the three novels in that Anne Brontë gives readers virtually no explicit information or background about Helen Graham's childhood. Helen's diary entries begin when she is eighteen years old, which means that in order to extrapolate any evidence of Helen being groomed by the patriarchy like Jane and Catherine, we must read deeper into the little information the text does provide. Similarly to Jane, it can be inferred that Helen was orphaned as a child due to being taken in by her aunt and uncle, but while Jane's family ostracizes her due to her status, Helen seems to be embraced by her aunt and uncle and consequently lives a life of pleasure in which she has time to enjoy activities such as drawing, listening to music, taking walks, and reading books. To further emphasize Helen's privilege and acceptance, her experience with leisure activities is quite different from Jane's. While Helen is likely encouraged to partake in activities such as reading, Jane is chastised by her cousin John when she reads books at Gateshead. We also know about Helen's social class based on interactions between herself and her aunt, who says that when Helen is ready for marriage, she will be able to "boast a good family [and] a pretty considerable fortune and expectations" which suggests Helen's position as being relatively high-born, or at least high-born by association (A. Brontë 131). Alternatively, Jane's social class is not changed despite living with her aunt, and her relationship with Aunt Reed is anything but accepting. In fact, Aunt Reed would prefer not to claim Jane at all; however, "in [Uncle Reed's] last moments he had required a promise of Mrs. Reed that she would rear and maintain [Jane] as one of her own children" (C. Brontë 16). However, Mrs. Reed does not treat Jane "as one of her own children," and instead, sends Jane away to Lowood and does not allow her to return to Gateshead during her school breaks. Through this comparison, we can see that despite Helen's and Jane's

similar circumstances of being orphaned and living with an aunt, Helen is afforded the privilege of adoption which provides her with a nurturing, stable environment growing up.

Helen's thoughts about gender roles in relation to how she was raised can be made clearer by exploring Helen's attraction towards Arthur Huntingdon. When Helen meets Arthur, her aunt describes him as "a bit wildish" (A. Brontë 135). While meant to deter Helen's interest, her aunt's comment only intrigues her further. Helen protests her aunt's warning: "I cannot believe there is any harm in those laughing blue eyes" (A. Brontë 136). Helen's attraction to Arthur suggests that she is enticed by his wildness, and I argue that this is due to Helen's comparatively sheltered lifestyle. She has internalized feminine restraint in ways that Arthur has not had to because not only does he come from a family with less money, but he also has the privilege of being a man, thus her attraction to Arthur is rooted in her desire to tame him: "Thanks to you, aunt, I have been well brought up, and had good examples always before me, which he, most likely, has not…my sense and my principle are at his service" (A. Brontë 149). This quotation reinforces Helen's view of marital duty – one in which she justifies her complicit submission to the patriarchy; however, Helen is not rewarded for this compliance. Between herself, Jane, and Catherine, Helen ends up in the worse marriage.

Objectification and the Commodification of Beauty

Beginning in childhood and permeating their young adult life, Jane, Catherine, and Helen each experience the patriarchy's grasp on their lives through the commodification of beauty, as well as the simultaneous objectification of their bodies, which functions as a tool to render them objects of desire and property of the patriarchy. As standards of beauty evolve over time, it is important to note that the Victorians' conception of aesthetics was highly influential in

determining a woman's beauty and its commodifiable worth, which Kirby-Jane Hallum points out in her argument that "women who celebrated the culture of beauty associated with the aesthetic movement consciously fashioned themselves [as aesthetic commodities]" (2). While the aesthetic movement took place decades after the publication of these novels, the Brontës' inadvertent critiques of objective desire rooted in the male gaze not only appears via the characters' own internalization of beauty ideals, but also through the ways that they are commodified and objectified by men. By connecting the Brontë's critiques of physical beauty to the later development of aestheticism as a cultural movement, we can question the ways in which the protagonists of their novels play a role in perpetuating these cultural norms that seem to transcend the paradigms of beauty recreated in the Brontës' novels.

Jane's physical appearance is unremarkable compared to the physical beauty of Catherine and Helen. Sandra Gilbert describes Jane as "the smallest, weakest, and plainest child in the house…embark[ing] on her pilgrim's progress as a sullen Cinderella, an angry Ugly Duckling, immorally rebellious against the hierarchy that oppresses her" (783). Growing up, Jane describes situations in which she is treated harshly, deprived of affection as a consequence of her lack of physical beauty: "I know that had I been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child – though equally dependent and friendless, Mrs. Reed would have endured my presence more complacently" (C. Brontë 16). This quote highlights not only Aunt Reed's view of Jane, but also Jane's view of herself. When Jane is locked in the red room, she looks in the mirror, and refers to her reflection as a "strange little figure…half fairy, half imp," but includes that "all looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality" (C. Brontë 14). Jane's perception of herself suggests that what she and others see is not a strong indication of her true character, causing her to lament on her family's aversion to her: "Why was I always suffering,

always browbeaten, always accused, forever condemned? Why could I never please?" (C. Brontë 15). Jane unconsciously marginalizes herself by seeing herself as an outcast. Additionally, once she is let out of the red room after being thoroughly frightened to the point of illness, she overhears the maidservants Bessie and Miss Abbot say "…if she were a nice, pretty child, one might be compassionate for her forlornness…" and that "…a beauty like Miss Georgiana [Jane's cousin] would be more moving in the same condition" (C. Brontë 26). This not only reiterates that Jane's physical appearance is a direct indication of her value, according to her family and servants, but it also suggests that the possession of physical beauty gives some women a natural advantage.

Jane is sent to Lowood before she can fully internalize any self-hatred about her plain looks. There, beauty ideals and material desires are condemned by Mr. Brocklehurst as being excessive and sinful, insisting that the girls should be rendered "hardy, patient, [and] self-denying," even to the extent of cutting their hair to be "arranged closely, modestly, [and] plainly" (C. Brontë 63, 64). However, this idea only seems to be applied to the poor orphan girls at Lowood, as Brocklehurst's own wife and daughters are endowed with flagrant material possessions, being "splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs…" (C. Brontë 64). This scene portrays another moment in which Jane begins to understand that women's experiences, while always maintaining a certain degree of oppression, can also differ due to micro-escapes through social elevation. Jane's experience is just made increasingly difficult by her lack of physical beauty in addition to her station as an orphan, though I would argue that Jane is not interested in physical beauty or material possessions, which is made clear by her sarcastic remarks about the wardrobe Brocklehurst's wife and daughters are wearing: "They ought to have come a little sooner to have heard his lecture on dress" (C. Brontë 64). Jane acknowledges Brocklehurst's

hypocritical, class-centered perspective of female dress, but she is ultimately unbothered as she takes no interest in flagrant displays of femininity.

Jane's physical appearance continues to be an issue for her at Thornfield, but Rochester's degradation of Jane manifests itself as objectification. Once Jane secures a job as a governess, her employer, Mr. Rochester, is quite rude: "You are dumb, Miss Eyre" (C. Brontë 132). After a period of strange hostility, Rochester begins to warm up to Jane, and eventually places her on a pedestal, although this pedestal could be eerily similar to the "pedestal of infamy" (C. Brontë 67) that Jane is forced to stand on at Lowood as punishment for lying. Through this parallel in the novel, I would argue that despite Rochester's intentions, his affirmations are still rooted in patriarchal objectification and commodification. When Jane formally meets Mr. Rochester, she is instructed by Mrs. Fairfax to change out of her frock and into "one of black silk – the best and only additional one [she] had" (C. Brontë 119). The act of changing clothes signifies Jane's unconscious acknowledgement and submission to the male gaze, not only to render Jane more distinguished and pleasing to look at, but also to acknowledge Rochester's authority at Thornfield.

Following Rochester's proposal to Jane much later in the novel, he attempts to transform Jane into a more refined, embellished version of her current self with expensive jewelry and fine materials, declaring "I will myself put the diamond chain around your neck…I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings…" (C. Brontë 256). This quotation is important because it highlights the way in which all of the material assets Rochester attempts to use to pacify Jane only weigh her down, which prompts her to reject his offers of decorum: "Oh, sir! Never mind jewels. I don't like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange – I would rather not have them" (C. Brontë 256).

Additionally, Rochester attempts to establish his patriarchal hold over her by treating her as an attainable object, or his "prize" to be won: "…when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just – figuratively speaking – attach you to a chain like this…I'll wear you in my bosom, lest my jewel I should tyne" (C. Brontë 275, 268). The language, while objectifying, simultaneously places Jane on a pedestal as a "jewel," which unironically is an object of great value he has already tried to decorate her body with.

Unlike Jane, Catherine is not lacking in physical beauty; she is described by Nelly as having "…the bonniest eye, and sweetest smile, and the lightest foot in the parish" (E. Brontë 42). Catherine's beauty often allows her unruly behavior to be overlooked as childhood mischievousness. It is important to point out that Catherine's behavior as a child is arguably worse than Jane's, yet Jane is punished more harshly for her disobedience. Like that of Jane's cousins Eliza and Georgiana, Catherine's bad behavior is redeemed due to her charming physical appearance. As Catherine gets older, her natural beauty is only augmented after her stay at Thrushcross Grange. Hindley and his wife, Frances, acknowledge Catherine's "natural advantages" by exclaiming, "Why, Cathy, you are quite a beauty!" (E. Brontë 53). By allowing this transformation to take place, Catherine is actively participating in and accepting the notion that this transformation is symbolic of the aesthetic commodification of her body, which circles back to Hallum's point about preparing Victorian women for the marriage market where they are "bought and sold as cultural capital" (Hallum 2). This point by Hallum sets up my next argument about both Heathcliff's and Edgar's objectification and commodification of Catherine's body.

Once Catherine goes through her transformation from a wild juvenile to a refined woman, she is scorned by Heathcliff for seemingly abandoning him for a life based on class-consciousness. Ironically though, I argue that Heathcliff views Catherine as an immortal trophy,

established by the fact that Heathcliff begs to be haunted after her death. “I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad!” (E. Brontë 211). Even after her physical presence has left the earth, Catherine is still considered obtainable by Heathcliff. Daniela Garofalo asserts that “Heathcliff’s form of love is not a romantic opposition to a capitalist culture” (Garofalo 824). I agree with Garofalo, but I would also suggest that because the role of women during this time was to be subservient to men, Heathcliff naturally views Catherine as a possession rather than a partner, even going as far as digging up her dead body to ensure that he is buried next to her instead of Edgar: “I got the sexton, who was digging Linton’s grave, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it…I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I’m laid there…” (E. Brontë 288). Not only does Heathcliff disrespect Catherine by digging up and exposing her lifeless corpse, but he also bribes the sexton for access to Catherine once he himself has died.

While the conversation of Catherine as a commodity typically revolves around her relationship to Heathcliff, I would also argue that Edgar takes a passive role in perpetuating the patriarchal notion that Catherine is more or less a body to be used for marital duties such as producing offspring. During Catherine’s prolonged illness, Edgar becomes extremely attentive to Catherine and her needs, and Nelly acknowledges this attentiveness by pointing out that “No mother could have nursed an only child more devotedly than Edgar tended her…when Catherine’s life was declared out of danger…he would sit beside her, tracing the gradual return to bodily heath” (E. Brontë 134). Nelly suggests that Edgar’s kindness towards Catherine is selfishly motivated, as Catherine’s recovery would ensure that “his lands [would be] secured from a stranger’s gripe, by the birth of an heir” (E. Brontë 135). This quotation seems to emphasize Edgar’s selfishness in that his real concern is of whether or not Catherine will be able

to survive long enough to produce an heir rather than simply for the sake of her health. The fact that Edgar is concerned with matters of his estate, specifically in terms of its preservation through the production of offspring, shows the ways in which Edgar views Catherine's body as a repository of his own capitalist desires. Steven Vince also recognizes Edgar's concealment of his desires in terms of the capitalist culture in contrast to the way that Heathcliff seems to revel in it: "Heathcliff wields economic power explicitly where Edgar Linton disguises it with civility" (342). Through Vine's noting of the differences between Heathcliff's and Edgar's displays of economic power, I argue that these displays directly translate to the ways in which they both commodify Catherine – explicitly and disguised by civility.

Even for a woman like Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* who seems to possess all of the internal and external traits that make a woman a desirable spousal candidate, the idea of beauty becomes a signifier of the toxic perspective of the male gaze, especially when it is internalized by women. When Helen first arrives at Wildfell Hall, her mysterious presence is a popular topic amongst other women. Gilbert's sister, Rose, refers to Helen as being "excessively pretty – handsome rather…a perfect beauty" (A. Brontë 16). It is also Helen's beauty that first intrigues Gilbert, as he admires her from a distance during a church service. Because Helen has assumingly always been beautiful, as well as having been brought up in a family with a substantial amount of wealth, she has always had the advantage of being sought after or provided with numerous opportunities for courtship in her past. However, I would argue that Helen, while aware of her physical beauty because of the affirmations of others, has little use for it herself. If anything, for Helen her beauty is burdensome in that it attracts female jealousy and the lustful male gaze, creating distractions and welcoming unwanted attention. Helen's aunt says that "beauty is that quality which, next to money, is generally the most attractive to the

worst kinds of men" (A. Brontë 131), meaning that Helen's beauty entices men who look upon feminine physicality as a sexual, reproductive, or domestic commodity.

Not only is Helen objectified in the novel, but she is objectified by numerous men. Before Helen and Arthur are married, he says that he would be a "presumptuous dog to dream of possessing such a treasure; but, nevertheless, [he] would sooner die than relinquish her in favor of the best man that ever went to heaven (A. Brontë 169). In this passage, Arthur calls Helen a treasure, similar to the way Rochester refers to Jane as his jewel; however, he also claims that he would rather die than let another man take her from him. This quotation highlights Arthur's selfish, possessive nature before they are even married, and the issue with him equating Helen to treasure is the fact that once they are married, it seems as though her value to him has exponentially decreased – as if she is only truly desirable when she is less attainable. Once Helen and Arthur are married, she joins him on a trip to London. Helen says that "he seemed bent upon displaying me to his friends and acquaintances in particular…it was something to feel that he considered me a worthy object of pride, but I paid dear for the gratification" (A. Brontë 217). Arthur's objectification of Helen extends even outside of the domestic sphere, where he showcases Helen as though she is his prized possession. I would argue that Helen, while partial to Arthur's unsolicited attention, feels this way only because she has been deprived of attention and affirmation from Arthur since the beginning of their marriage. Interestingly enough, Helen shares with Jane similar sentiments about extravagant clothing and jewelry. Helen says that because Arthur made it a point to put her on display, she was forced to:

> …violate [her] cherished predilections…in favour of a plain, dark, sober style of dress; [she] was forced to sparkle in costly jewels. And deck [her]self out like a painted butterfly, just as [she] had, long since, determined [she] would never do. (A. Brontë 217)

Unlike Jane, who refuses to commodify her plain body for the sake of societal beauty, Helen gives in to Arthur's desires in order to please him, showing exactly how Helen's submission has been cultivated by the patriarchy – rooted so deeply that she is willing to stray from her own principles.

Gilbert sees himself as somewhat of a protector for Helen; however, despite his intentions, I would argue that Gilbert still views Helen from the voyeuristic perspective of the male gaze. Edward Snow defines the male gaze as placing "the woman as the object of male pleasure…Masculine vision is almost invariably characterized as patriarchal, ideological, and phallocentric. Whatever in the gaze and its constructions escapes this definition is usually assimilated to issues of female spectatorship" (30). In applying Snow's definition to Gilbert's actions, there are multiple instances that arise in the text that highlight Gilbert's objectification of Helen. There are numerous instances in which Gilbert watches Helen, making internal comments on her appearance, but the first time he sees her during a church service, he provides a lengthy description of Helen's physical features, and he says to himself that he would "rather admire [her] from this distance…than be the partner of [her] home" but quickly snaps out of his "gaze" as he realizes his thoughts were "very improper thoughts for a place of worship" (A. Brontë 17). Gilbert's voyeuristic gaze inherently objectifies Helen as a sexualized body that he is comfortable thinking about but would not necessarily deem proper to marry.

Additionally, reading Helen's diary is a metaphorical act of voyeurism because the diary itself is an extension of Helen. Although Helen voluntarily gives Gilbert the diary, this act of openness and vulnerability suggests Helen's submission to the patriarchy on her own terms. Acknowledging his achievement, Gilbert says, "I opened up my prize and delivered myself up to its perusal," suggesting not only though his language that it is something he has won, but it could

also be read as a thinly disguised sexual innuendo, specifically in terms of his use of the phrase "delivered myself" (A. Brontë 129). Alternatively, it could also be argued that Gilbert's transcription of Helen's diary in a letter to his friend might also represent the ways in which men narrate the lives of women through their own perspectives; however, N.M. Jacobs argues that "The central premise – that Gilbert Markham is willing to write letters compromising several hundreds pages and to copy out a journal of equal length – is of course implausible, and the two narratives do seem discontinuous" (208). Jacobs goes on to argue that the displacement of the diary within the structure of the novel is essentially the point – it highlights the gendered perspectives of society. I would agree with this argument, but I would also add that even though the diary is written by Helen, the fact that Gilbert is the one relaying it to the readers reinforces the idea that Helen's voice is reduced to an object – her diary.

These male-conceptualized ideas of femininity manifest themselves in a multitude of ways throughout each novel. Firstly, it is important that these ideals are internalized by the characters at a young age in order for them to passively adopt these patriarchal lines of thinking for themselves; however, social class is another important factor in determining the level of femininity that is displayed through the characters. It is also social class that determines a large part of the character's ability to understand femininity through a means of transgressing these boundaries. Finally, the novels touch on the idea of beauty as yet another way for the patriarchy to maintain its hold over women – through the commodification of their bodies or physical appearance.

CHAPTER III: ROOTED IN THE PATRIARCHY

For Victorian women, courtship and marriage was one of the most important aspects of life, as it allowed many women the opportunity to climb the social ladder of Victorian society and live a comfortable life with a sense of security. Because of the lack of rights that women held in comparison to men, marriage was essentially one of the only ways that a woman could solidify her position in society. In each Brontë novel, the female protagonists are not only given a "rival" that makes the courtship process even more difficult and isolates them from the friendship and community of other women, but they are often forced to choose between suitors, marrying for love or marrying for financial stability and social mobility. Because of this, the Brontës create a myriad of entanglements, or love triangles, in their novels that portray the ways in which Victorian women were often forced to choose their partners as a vehicle for social mobility rather than for love, as well as highlighting the ways in which women were pinned against each other, only further emphasizing the notion of internalized oppression amongst women. Additionally, I will discuss pregnancy and motherhood as a literal and metaphorical way in which women were trapped in their marriages, and in a way, in their own bodies. While Victorian literature is notorious for skipping the graphic details of pregnancy, the Brontës do portray clear depictions of each character's experience with motherhood after the child has been born. In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which the patriarchal influences from the protagonists' formative years are "fertilized" or cultivated through the social customs of courtship, marriage, and motherhood, as well as how these customs act as "traps" that reinforce the patriarchal oppression that lead to the protagonists' desires for escape.

Rivalries

For Victorian women, the process of courtship was vital to securing a husband; however, men would often entertain numerous women at once in order to secure their best match. In the Brontë sisters' novels, each female protagonist has a "rival" that often serves a dual purpose: first, the rivals create a barrier between the protagonist and their desired suitor, inviting feelings of jealousy or disdain typically shared by both women. Secondly, the rival often serves to substantiate the standard or ideal Victorian woman that the protagonists typically deviate from. The protagonists even find themselves faltering in their own confidence in comparing their attributes to those of their rivals. Both purposes ultimately highlight the ways in which the patriarchy uses women as scapegoats for their beliefs by having them internalize that it is another woman's fault for having similar needs and desires that take away from their own opportunities. Thus, the patriarchy pits women against each other so that they lose out on female friendship or commiseration.

Jane's rival is Blanche Ingram, an eligible bachelorette from a neighboring family whom Rochester begins to court. Jane's relationship to Blanche is far from friendly, and she goes back and forth between viewing herself as inferior or superior to Blanche. Mrs. Fairfax describes the Ingram girls as "most beautiful women," especially Blanche who she describes as a "belle" and a "queen" (C. Brontë 157). From the onset of Blanche's arrival at Thornfield, it is rumored that Rochester plans on proposing to her, as her family's respectable status, along with her beauty, makes Blanche an ideal partner for Rochester by Victorian standards. Jane is jealous of Rochester's courtship with Blanche; however, she understands that she is of a lower social class, and her chances of marrying Rochester are slim compared to the prospects of Blanche. I have previously discussed the ways in which Jane is aware of her plainness, and at this point in the

novel, Jane seems to lose confidence after coming to terms with the fact that she can never have Rochester, forcing herself to paint portraits of both herself and Blanche. In her own portrait, Jane forces herself to draw an honest depiction of herself, "without softening one defect…omit[ting] no harsh line, smooth[ing] away no displeasing irregularity," which she titles "'Portrait of a governess, disconnected, poor and plain'" (C. Brontë 159). Alternatively, she commissions herself to paint a portrait of Blanche as well; however, Blanche's portrait must be painted in the "softest shades and sweetest hues" and titled, "'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank'" (C. Brontë 159). Jane uses chalk for her own portrait but for Blanche's she uses her "freshest, finest, clearest tints" (C. Brontë 159). This comparison Jane makes between herself and Blanche could be read as Jane's internalization that noble women, such as Blanche, are metaphorically painted to be better suitors by patriarchal standards.

Jane paints the portrait of Blanche based on Mrs. Fairfax's description of her; however, once Jane spends time in the presence of Blanche, she is disillusioned by Blanche's true nature. Jane claims not to be jealous of Blanche, but in fact, superior to her in terms of character:

> But I was not jealous…Miss ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling. Pardon the seeming paradox: I mean to say. She was very showy, but she was not genuine. She had a fine person, many brilliant attainments, but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature…she was not good; she was not original…she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. (C. Bronte 183)

Though Blanche's presence might seem as though Brontë is trying to diminish Jane's character by the constant comparisons to Blanche, symbolizing the way the patriarchy pins women against each other, this rivalry actually only motivates Jane to further progress her relationship with Rochester because she realizes that Blanche has no hold over Rochester: "*she could not charm*

him…if she had managed victory at once…I should have covered my face, turned to the wall, and (figuratively) have died to them" (C. Brontë 184). Jane would have readily accepted her defeat; however, in seeing Blanche's failure to capture Rochester's heart, she becomes even surer of her ability to win it:

> Arrows that continually glanced off from Mr. Rochester's breast and fell harmless at his feet, might, I knew, if shot by a surer hand, have quivered keen in his proud heart – have called love into his stern eye…or, better still, without weapons a silent conquest might have been won. (C. Brontë 184)

It is interesting that Jane uses language that suggests the war-like nature of their rivalry; however, Jane reminds readers of her passive nature and asserts that Blanche's aggression towards her is ultimately the reason for her projected victory.

The rivalry between Jane and Blanche is mutual, as Blanche also sees Jane as a rival. Blanche makes it a point to passively belittle or dehumanize Jane because of her social class: Blanche "turned to me [Jane] as I drew near, and looked at me haughtily: her eyes seemed to demand, 'what can the creeping creature want now…'" (C. Brontë 220). Blanche views Jane as below her, and rarely speaks directly to her. I would argue that Blanche's hostility towards Jane is a direct projection of her own insecurities. To Blanche, Jane's presence only serves as a reminder of the conditional nature of her own social status. Mrs. Fairfax speculates that Blanche needs to secure a marriage to Rochester because "neither she nor her sisters have very large fortunes" due to her father's estates going directly to Blanche's eldest brother (C. Brontë 158), meaning that Blanche's state of dependency from father to potential husband renders her a victim of the patriarchy as well. For Blanche, there is a lot more on the line in negotiating a marriage to Rochester than she leads on. According to Alexandra Valint, Blanche is not only threatened by

Jane, but she is also threatened by Adèle, Jane's pupil: "In expressing her desire for an ugly husband who will not 'rival' her beauty, Blanche also reveals her underlying reason for wanting Adèle gone: 'I will suffer no competitor near the throne; I shall exact an undivided homage'" (211). Blanche expects Rochester's complete attention and respect, so she wants Rochester to send Adèle off to school. Blanche gives him an ultimatum in which he must choose between marrying her or fostering Adèle and consequently employing Jane. I agree with Valint, but I would also like to add that Blanche's "rivalry" with Adèle stems from her direct rivalry with Jane. If she can get rid of Adèle, Rochester would have no reason to continue employing Jane. Rochester breaks the news to Jane of his engagement to Blanche, a lie to gauge Jane's true feelings, by telling Jane, "Adèle must go to school – and you, Miss Eyre, must get a new situation" (C. Brontë 248). Unfortunately for Blanche, her suspicions about the bond between Rochester and Jane are validated when Jane and Rochester become engaged. Jane, however, shows slight commiseration for Blanche when she asks Rochester, "Do you think Miss Ingram will not suffer from your dishonest coquetry? Won't she feel forsaken and deserted?" (C. Brontë 260). Although this concern shows Jane's strength of character, I have a hard time believing that Blanche would have cared about Jane's feelings had the situation been reversed given Blanche's insensitive treatment of Jane at Thornfield.

In *Wuthering Heights,* Catherine, who is already married to Edgar, finds a rival in Isabella Linton, who is also her sister-in-law. Catherine positions Isabella as her rival once Heathcliff shows an interest in marrying her; however, the rivalry, according to Catherine, has more to do with Isabella's feelings towards Catherine rather than the other way around. Catherine claims that she "never feel[s] hurt at the brightness of Isabella's yellow hair, and the whiteness of her sin; at her dainty elegance, and the fondness all the family exhibit for her" (E.

Brontë 98). In this passage, it becomes apparent that Brontë uses Isabella to symbolize the ideal Victorian woman, or the "angel in the house." Catherine attempts to appear unbothered by the ways in which Isabella exemplifies these ideals; however, Catherine's jealousy manifests as the need to control Isabella's relationship with Heathcliff. In addition, I would argue that Catherine is not aware of the root of her jealousy, which causes her to inadvertently sabotage their relationship by warning Isabella of Heathcliff's character. According to Catherine, Heathcliff wants to marry Isabella because of what she can offer him; she tells Isabella that Heathcliff would be "… quite capable of marrying [her] fortune, and expectations" (E. Brontë 103). While Catherine's warnings may be true to some degree, it is ultimately a projection of Catherine's fear of Heathcliff choosing Isabella over her because she knows Isabella is an ideal suitor for Heathcliff because of her family's wealth. Catherine even said to Nelly that if she and Heathcliff were to marry, "[they] should be beggars" (E. Brontë 82).

Like Jane and Blanche's rivalry, Catherine and Isabella's is mutual. Of Isabella, Catherine says to Heathcliff: "I was informed that if I would but have the manners to stand aside, my rival, as she would have herself to be, would shoot a shaft into your soul that would fix you forever, and sent my image into eternal oblivion!" (E. Brontë 105). Through her language, we can see that Catherine understands that Isabella also views Catherine as a rival and wants to rid Heathcliff of his love for her. Even though Catherine may be motivated by jealousy, she was not wrong in warning Isabella about Heathcliff's intentions. Catherine is already married to Edgar at this point in the novel, so this rivalry is unique because for Catherine, being with Heathcliff is no longer an option; and yet, unlike the other rivalries that are seemingly in competition to win a man's affection, the rivalry between Catherine and Isabella arises out of a lack of trust between the two women. Had they not resorted to "quarreling like cats" (E. Brontë 105) as sisters-in law,

they might have been able to forge a stronger friendship and connection through their shared experiences of loving Heathcliff. Additionally, had Isabella listened to Catherine's advice, Isabella might not have had to endure a "transformation from a 'petted' darling to a married woman," a process that Catherine had already undergone, potentially saving her from a disastrous marriage (Pike 349).

Helen also has rivals for Arthur's and Gilbert's attentions, and this prevents her from forming friendships with those women. The novel introduces Eliza Millward as Gilbert's love interest before Helen arrives at Wildfell Hall. Gilbert says, "Well, I can imagine many faces more beautiful than Eliza's, though not more charming. I allow she has small claims to perfection; but then, I maintain that, if she were more perfect, she would be less interesting" (A. Brontë 16). Though Eliza's features are acceptably pretty, Gilbert insists that she has a particular charm that draws him to her; however, Gilbert's mother believes that there are more suitable women for Gilbert, especially since "…in addition to her numerous other disqualifications, [Eliza] had not twenty pounds to call her own" (A. Brontë 18). These lines suggest that Eliza would not be considered a rival in terms of social class, but simply because Gilbert favors her demeanor. After visiting with Eliza, Gilbert's feelings for her are even stronger, as he says he "went home very happy, with a heart brimful of complacency for myself, and overflowing with love for Eliza" (A. Brontë 27). As Gilbert's interest in Helen begins to consume him, naturally his feelings for Eliza begin to fade; however, Eliza senses Gilbert's attraction to Helen and immediately attempts to undermine Helen's character, which she describes as" scarcely respectable" (A. Brontë 80) in an attempt to win Gilbert back: "…for, though she no longer hoped to win me to herself, she still hated her rival" (A. Brontë 112). Gilbert also briefly warns Helen that Eliza's friend, Jane Wilson, an ambitious, beautiful, and high-class woman, "has

possibly taken a prejudice against [Helen]…regard[ing] [her] in the light of a rival" (A. Brontë 86). Not only is Helen viewed as a romantic rival, but she is also perceived as a rival to women like Jane who seem to epitomize Victorian ideals, and it is interesting that they view her as such. When Helen moves to Wildfell Hall, she disguises herself as a widow. Because of her living situation, along with her natural beauty, I would argue that Eliza and Jane are jealous of the freedom that they assume Helen has, which causes them to resort to spreading rumors about Helen's sexual promiscuity in order to damage her reputation.

Once Gilbert reads Helen's journal entries, he learns that Helen is not a stranger to female rivalry in the process of courtship. In fact, Helen's husband, Arthur, carries out an affair with Annabella Wilmot, Mr. Wilmot's niece. Like Eliza, Annabella is no more of a proper woman than Helen; however, this rivalry is unique because it arises out of an adulterous affair. During a dinner party before Helen and Arthur are married, Helen unknowingly foreshadows the affair between Annabella and Arthur by pointing out his attraction to her: "It is quite possible [Arthur] might have chosen Miss Wilmot; for she seemed bent upon engrossing his attention to herself, and he seemed nothing loath to pay the homage she demanded" (A. Brontë 144). This quotation points out the early warning signs of Arthur and Annabella's heightened interests in one another. Once Helen and Arthur have been married for a few years, Helen's suspicions are proven correct, and she takes it upon herself to confront Annabella. Annabella positions herself as Helen's rival; however, she does so in a way that acknowledges her debt to Helen, as Helen has the power to destroy Annabella's marriage and reputation by informing her husband, Lord Lowborough. Annabella pleads: "here am I – your rival – ready to acknowledge myself your debtor for an act of the most noble forbearance." Helen agrees to withhold the information from Lord Lowborough, having "no wish to publish [Annabella's] shame" (A. Brontë 311). Helen's

compassion is interestingly anti-patriarchal because although women are primed to see their rivals as competition, Helen does Annabella a favor by preserving her marriage despite the fact that she selfishly ruined Helen's. Like Jane shows compassion for Blanche, Helen spares Annabella's reputation, but she makes it a point to acknowledge their lack of friendship when she says, "I am too well acquainted with your character and conduct to feel any real friendship for you" (A. Brontë 310). This shows that despite Helen's attempts to find friendship in Annabella the way she has with her cousin, Millicent Hargrave, Annabella has chosen to lose out on a genuine friendship and pursue a man who is already taken.

Marriage

Each Brontë novel contains one or more love triangles that complicate the protagonist's decision regarding who they will marry. Jane, Catherine, and Helen are all presented with choices in suitors who represent and offer differing marital ideals – marrying for love versus marrying for practicality. The Brontës frame these marital arrangements as choices in which the protagonists are at liberty to choose, but their decisions are almost always influenced by cultural and social prescriptions of an ideal marriage. Essentially, the women are more or less deceived by the illusion of choice offered to them, resulting in marriages that operate as entrapping systems that further perpetuate a patriarchal hold over women.

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane does have a choice between suitors; however, unlike Catherine and Helen, who are forced to make this choice early on in their respective novels, Jane's decision about who she will marry comes towards the end of the novel. For now, I will talk about Jane's engagement to Rochester as an entrapping patriarchal mechanism rather than her choice in marriage, and I will revisit Jane's marriage in the final chapter of this thesis since her escape

comes before she is officially married. Additionally, I will address the ways in which Rochester abuses his authority as a patriarchal figure by knowingly breaking the law in a bigamous attempt to take Jane as a second wife. Unlike Jane, Catherine, and Helen, who, as women, are forced to choose between suitors, Rochester abuses his privilege by believing that he should not have to choose.

Rochester proposes to Jane with the knowledge of his existing marriage to Bertha, his wife that he keeps under lock and key in the recesses of Thornfield due to her madness. While other servants at Thornfield are aware of Bertha's presence, Rochester purposefully keeps Jane in the dark about Bertha: "…there was a mystery at Thornfield, and that from participation in that mystery I was purposely excluded" (C. Brontë 163). Rochester's intentional deceit sets the groundwork for the bigamous trap he lures Jane into – this "trap" being his proposal and subsequent plan to illegitimately marry Jane. As I had mentioned in the previous chapter, it is after Rochester's proposal to Jane when he begins trying to alter Jane's physical appearance with ornate jewelry and clothing. I asserted that Rochester does this in an attempt to view Jane as a prize, but now I would also like to suggest that Rochester tries to change Jane because he wants her to fit into the stereotypical mold of the ideal Victorian woman. Jane, however, is content with her plainness and rejects Rochester's attempts to force her into this mold. Molding Jane could be seen, not only as the first sign that a marriage to Rochester would inevitably be entrapping, forcing Jane to comply with Victorian standards of beauty, but it could be seen as a sign of Jane's agency and her ability to fight against these patriarchal norms being imposed upon her.

Rochester admits that it had been his "plan" all along to take two wives, Bertha and Jane (C. Brontë 289). Interestingly enough, Rochester considers himself a victim of the patriarchy as well, claiming that he was "cheated into espousing" Bertha as a means of securing their family's

wealth since his own father's estate went entirely to Rochester's older brother. Because of Rochester's victim complex, he disregards Jane's position in the situation, who would have technically become his mistress if the wedding had gone on. Rochester attempts to convince Jane that she would not be considered his mistress, a role in which Rochester views as being "by nature, and always by position, inferior, and…degrading" (C. Brontë 309). Nancy Pell argues that "…Rochester's own sense of degradation is inevitably projected onto the women with whom he lives intimately" (409). Pell's argument also reinforces the notion that Rochester views intimacy as a trap. Despite his attempt to persuade Jane of his intentions with her, I would argue that Jane believes that Rochester is capable of treating her the same way he treats Bertha. Rochester even asks Jane: "If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?" to which she replies, "I do indeed, sir" (C. Brontë 298). Not only is Rochester's deception a form of patriarchal manipulation, but it is also completely selfish.

In *Wuthering Heights,* Catherine must decide between marrying her wealthy neighbor Edgar Linton or her childhood companion Heathcliff. This choice manifests itself most clearly as a love triangle in that Edgar and Heathcliff both acknowledge the others' pursuance of Catherine. For Catherine, the choice comes down to marrying for social elevation and financial security or marrying for love despite the potential consequence of living in abject poverty. Edgar, who offers Catherine the former, is "handsome, and young, and cheerful, and rich, and loves [Catherine]" but is as different from Catherine as "a moonbeam from lightening, or frost from fire" (E. Brontë 79, 81). On the other hand, Catherine describes her relationship with Heathcliff as being a deep, soul connection: "He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (E. Brontë 81). This likeness that Catherine feels to Heathcliff is the same likeness that Jane and Rochester feel for one another, but it is interesting that Catherine is

the one acknowledging the likeness. I would argue that having Catherine acknowledge it instead of Heathcliff gives Catherine the power in the dynamic, flipping the script of the patriarchy. Heathcliff cannot provide the same resources to Catherine that Edgar can, so Catherine resolves to say that "it would degrade her to marry him" (E. Brontë 81). That is, until Heathcliff returns from his absence.

Catherine's illusion of choice comes from the false dichotomy of marrying for love versus marrying for money, in which the only viable choice she has at this time is marrying Edgar to secure her station in life. Additionally, I would argue that setting up Catherine's decision as being her choice places all the blame on her, rendering her a scapegoat of the patriarchy, seen as the villain rather than a victim. Ewha Chung describes Catherine as one of the three women in *Wuthering Heights* that "initially begin as independent women who become victims within a patriarchal legal system, by suffering in loveless, tragic marriages. To escape poverty and aid the man she loves, Catherine Earnshaw sells herself in marriage to Edgar Linton" (104). While I agree with Chung's statement that Catherine marries Edgar to escape poverty, I would hardly agree that Catherine was independent before her marriage – perhaps in spirit, but not in reality. For Catherine, marriage is an unavoidable fact of life; it is a necessity to ensure that she and her family's station remains preserved, if not elevated. This is substantiated by Arnold Shapiro's claim that in depicting "Catherine's failure to accept the challenge of Heathcliff's love…[Brontë] calls for a revolution – the reversal of the old ways of thinking and behaving. She wants society to live by the values which it has always mouthed but never yet really tried" (285). We know that Catherine is not satisfied by her marriage with Edgar, but I would disagree with Shapiro for the simple fact that we do not know whether Catherine's

marriage to Heathcliff would have provided her any more of a chance at happiness and independence.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* eighteen-year-old Helen must choose between marrying Mr. Boarham, a suitor arranged for her by her aunt and uncle, and Arthur Huntingdon, who she is advised against to marry but irresistibly drawn to. Boarham, who Helen jokingly refers to as "Bore'em" is described by Helen as being "old…ugly and disagreeable" (A. Brontë 134). Helen is pressured into accepting his proposal by her aunt and uncle for the fact that they think him to be the perfect suitor for Helen, describing him as "upright, honourable, sensible, sober, and respectable" (A. Brontë 138). Regardless of these attributes, Helen remains steadfast in her objection to marrying Mr. Boarham, repeatedly assuring him that they are not "made for each other" (A. Brontë 140). Helen's reasoning for her outright rejection implies that she is looking for a suitor whom she loves. In spite of the goal for Victorian women being, regardless of their rank in social class, to marry up the hierarchical chain, Helen's rank and supportive family allows her the opportunity to marry not for wealth or social gain, but to be satisfied in a marriage to a good man. Helen even claims that her aunt's beliefs are quite progressive: "It is not money my aunt thinks about. She knows better than to value worldly wealth above its price...she wishes me to - to marry none but a really good man" (A. Brontë 174). With this in mind, Helen finds herself drawn instead to Arthur Huntingdon, the son of her uncle's old friend, who Helen describes as being "a very lively and entertaining companion" (A. Brontë 135). When Arthur proposes to Helen, her aunt and uncle actually advise against it, due to Arthur's assumed ill-intentions:

> ...and because she has amused him with some rodomontade about despising rank and wealth in matters of love and marriage, he flatters himself that she's devotedly attached

> to him; that she will not refuse him for his poverty, and does not court him for his rank, but loves him for himself alone...But is not *he* courting *her* for her fortune? (A. Brontë 186-187)

Their suspicions inevitably turn out to be true ass Helen's marriage to Arthur becomes abusive shortly after they are wed. I would argue that this shift in Arthur's character is meant to represent the ways in which the patriarchy entices women with the counterfeit idea of marriage as a bond of love, which Helen naïvely walks into.

Pregnancy and Motherhood

Each protagonist in her respective novel experiences pregnancy and motherhood in different ways depending on their situation and environment; however, in each novel, the acts of sexual reproduction and the following pregnancy are concealed due to Victorian standards of modesty; however, as readers, we know that the months of physical change to a woman's body during pregnancy can, at times, be brutal. Pamela Gilbert says that "Pregnancy, if unproblematic, rarely surfaces in Victorian novels except in oblique references: babies often just appear, and the reader is expected to extrapolate the logical prologue" (3). While Victorian literature is notorious for skipping over the months of bodily transformation that the women endure, the concealment of pregnant bodies not only represents the way in which women are silently trapped by the patriarchy, but also asserts the idea that a woman's body can be turned into a literal prison in which she must give up her autonomy to ensure the birth of a safe and healthy child. Thus, the patriarchy uses the role of motherhood as a mechanism to further entrap and oppress women through the natural process of carrying a child and subsequently devoting their life to caring for it.

While there is little information in the novel about Jane's biological children, critics have suggested that Jane's occupation as Adèle's governess positions her as a "pseudo parent[]" to Adèle (Lemaster 1), a relationship that fosters her maternal instincts, but also confines her to a position in which she must put the needs of a child above her own. Alexandra Valint describes Jane's relationship with Adèle as adoptive, in that "Adèle's story is ultimately a successful adoption plot in contrast to Jane's unsuccessful one" (218). I agree with Valint's assertion, and I think that because Jane was orphaned just as Adèle was, she sees a likeness between them that allows her to assume the role as a mother-figure to Adèle. Jane describes her role as Adèle's governess as being "The promise of a smooth career, which my first calm introduction to Thornfield Hall seemed to pledge, was not belied on a longer acquaintance with the place and its inmates…My pupil was a lively child…entirely committed to my care" (C. Brontë 107-108). Tracy Lemaster uses this quote to suggest that by "…intermixing themes of occupation ("career… pledge"), parentage ("child…entirely to my care"), and imprisonment ("inmates…committed"), Bronte introduces these three issues that will combine into the social role of motherhood" (11). While I agree that Jane's role as Adèle's governess is partially responsible for her confinement to Thornfield, I would also argue that because Jane is not physically altered by her "pseudo-motherhood," she has the unique ability to retain her independence whenever deemed necessary. When Jane decides to leave Thornfield after the botched marriage ceremony, however, she still worries about Adèle's reaction to her absence: "'Farewell, my darling Adèle!'…No thought could be admitted of entering to embrace her" (C. Brontë 317). Despite Jane's fondness for Adèle, she still decides to relinquish this role, thus providing herself with a momentary release from the patriarchy's grasp.

Although Catherine's pregnant body is never explicitly described in *Wuthering Heights*, there is one instance in which Nelly informs Lockwood of Catherine's pregnancy. After it seems as though Catherine is recovering from her self-induced illness, Nelly says that there is "…double cause to desire it, for on her existence depended that of another…Mr. Linton's heart would be gladdened, and his lands secured from a stranger's gripe, by the birth of an heir" (Brontë 135). While Catherine's health is still a concern to those taking care of her, it becomes apparent that the concern has less to do with her own physical well-being and more to do with the health and safe delivery of the child she is carrying because, as Livia Arndal Woods explains, "Nelly frames Cathy's physical and mental suffering during her pregnancy as punishment" (39). Woods' assertion promotes the idea that Nelly's reveal of Catherine's pregnancy is a punishment for her self-destructive actions. At this point, it seems that Catherine is only alive because she is being forced to carry a child, despite her previous intention of letting herself wither away. Catherine never experiences motherhood because she dies from childbirth, and I argue that after Catherine is relieved of the use of her body as an incubator, she has no desire to live or care for a child. Nelly describes Catherine's death after the birth of her daughter: "About twelve o'clock that night, was born the Catherine you saw at Wuthering Heights, a puny, seven months' child; and two hours after the mother died, having never recovered sufficient consciousness…" (E. Brontë 166). Catherine temporarily relinquishes her bodily autonomy to pregnancy for the birth of her child but does not even carry the child full term; however, she seems to ultimately reject the role of motherhood through her death.

Because of her death, Catherine can be described as what Ruth Anolik calls the "missing mother" within the Gothic genre, "identify[ing] the absent mother as an emblem for the inability of women to create and to sustain a female tradition within the patriarchy…" (30). Not only is

Catherine's own mother already dead, but Edgar's mother dies in the novel, as does Isabella while her son Linton is still a child. Catherine's death, however, unlike the women listed, was brought on due to the prolonged effects of her illness, which she purposely exacerbated. Because of this, Catherine's self-destructive actions could be deemed abortive, as she purposely risks the health and safety of her unborn child to accelerate her death since the alternative would be what Judith Wilt describes as "death by immersion in unchosen maternity – of patriarchally-constructed 'destiny as a woman'" (99). By avoiding her responsibilities as a mother through death, Catherine absolves herself of any guilt she might acquire in raising a child out of patriarchal duty rather than genuine desire for motherhood.

Quite the opposite of Catherine, Helen views motherhood as her primary role in life; however, she makes it her goal to not only raise her son, Arthur, to be respectful and kind despite her husband's attempts to corrupt Arthur's character: "My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was my son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire – in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements…" (A. Brontë 350). As a devout mother, Helen attempts to raise Arthur in a manner in which the ideas of toxic masculinity perpetuated by his father do not corrupt Arthur's character. Even once Helen escapes Arthur, her parenting is questioned by Gilbert's mother, who suggests that treating Arthur "like a girl [will] spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him" (A. Brontë 33). Helen views motherhood not as a mechanism for patriarchal oppression, but rather, a way to foster a healthy environment for her son to grow up in in order to put an end to the generational teachings that males are inherently dominant and unfeeling. In tandem with this idea about Helen's motherly characteristics, Laura C. Berry suggests that:

> In sentimentalizing motherhood, and thereby bolstering domesticity as a category both spatially and ideologically separate from the world of politics and labor, the custody debates exchange a "legal" and implicitly male model for selfhood – a man whose authority rests in status and property – for a "feeling" child whose significance lies in the fact that he or she is not fully independent of the social structures that surround him or her. (Berry 33)

Essentially, Berry implies that Helen's methods of parenting put an emphasis on domesticity, which only reinforces Arthur's dependency on the social structures surrounding him. I agree with Berry, but I also think it is important to remember that as a young boy, male self-hood will be ingrained in him regardless of Helen's efforts to keep it at bay.

CHAPTER IV: OUTGROWING THE PATRIARCHY

In each respective Brontë novel, many of the female characters find themselves entrapped by marriages or engagements that hinder their autonomy. By writing about women who experience limitations on their free will, the Brontë sisters are able to depict the ways in which women during the Victorian era were forced to silently participate and prescribe to the rules of a rigid patriarchal system. In this chapter, I will focus on Jane, Catherine, and Helen, as well as introduce a new character to the mix: Bertha Mason. I will call attention to the similarities and differences in these women's social positions and resources, specifically in terms of how they are able to enforce their own agency through different methods of escape, whether it be through madness/suicide, illness, or essential resources. Additionally, I will focus on deconstructing the argument of escape as a form of rebellion, as it only perpetuates the patriarchal notion that defiant women should be punished for not being submissive to their husbands. Thus, "rebellious"

women are only further demonized and marginalized by their agency rather than being perceived as tenacious and resilient. Instead, I offer the idea that these characters are not focused on rebellion, but rather, independence and relief from their suffering. Finally, this chapter will introduce the idea that the women have varying degrees of assistance in their escape, whether it be through their lower-class female caretakers, Grace Poole, Nelly Dean, and Rachel, or through their fraternal relationships with Richard Mason, Hindley Earnshaw, and Frederick Lawrence; however, not all of these relationships enable a productive escape. In fact, some of these relationships act as boundaries which further inhibit the women from being able to completely utilize their agency.

Jane's Escape

Jane escapes before she is entrapped in a marriage with Rochester; however, when her plan of escape goes awry, Jane realizes she must use her agency in order to stay alive. After Jane is confronted with the knowledge of Rochester's existing marriage, she concludes that the only viable option is to leave Thornfield despite Rochester's pleas for her to stay. In his attempt to keep Jane at Thornfield, Rochester asserts his patriarchal dominance and presents himself as a threat to Jane's independence by suggesting that if he wanted to, he would have the power to force himself on her:

> …consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage…whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it – the savage, beautiful creature! If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose. Conqueror I might be of the house, but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself

> possessor of its clay dwelling place…seized against your will, you will elude the grasp like an essence – (C. Brontë 315)

This quotation employs language useful for a rich analysis of Jane's entrapment. Rochester views Jane's body as a cage that is protecting her soul (the bird), which is what he truly desires – accessibility to Jane. First, Rochester uses language such as "prison," "captive," and "inmate," which all suggest Rochester's patriarchal "grasp" on her, especially because he threatens to entrap her with his physical body. I would argue that Rochester's acknowledgement of Jane's defiance as being "more than courage" suggests agency. While courage alludes to Jane's tenacious spirit, her agency is a step above courage – it is what truly enables her to pursue her freedom. After Jane retires to her room for the night, she says "[She] dreamt [she] lay in the red room at Gateshead" (C. Brontë 316). I would argue that this dream reinforces the notion that Jane feels trapped at Thornfield, as she unconsciously relates her experience at Thornfield to a traumatic moment of entrapment during her childhood.

Jane's decision to leave Thornfield sets the chain of events which lead to her liberation in motion. Rachel Rackham says that "…had Jane not learned of his marriage, all efforts on her part to break free from her cage would have been pointless, for she would have entered into a situation that was not fully liberating" (89). I agree with Rackham's claim, especially given that Rochester had no intention of revealing Bertha to Jane; however, I would argue that Jane's marriage to Rochester, had everything gone according to his plan, would not have been liberating at all – in fact, I would say that it would have been even more entrapping because Jane's reputation would have been ruined having been tied to a married man, and she also would have

been completely financially dependent on Rochester because at this point in the novel, Jane had not received an inheritance yet and had no knowledge that she would even be bestowed one.

Similarly to Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell* Hall, Jane has resources at the onset of her escape, despite them being minimal. Before she leaves Thornfield, she packs her purse "containing twenty shillings (it was all [she] had)" (C. Brontë 317). This small sum of money that Jane had earned from her job as a governess would have been enough to provide her transportation for her escape; however, once the coach takes Jane as far as twenty shillings will buy, she is dropped off at the nearest town. Jane forgets her parcel in the coach, leaving her "absolutely destitute" (C. Brontë 319). This destitution leads to Jane's unfortunate, but not unfamiliar battle with poverty, homelessness, and starvation:

> Tonight, at least, I would be her [Mother Nature's] guest – as I was her child – my mother would lodge me without money and without price. I had one morsel of bread yet: the remnant of a roll I had bought in a town we passed through at noon with a stray penny – my last coin…My hunger, sharp before, was, if not satisfied, appeased by this hermit's meal. (C. Brontë 320-321)

Not only is this experience vaguely reminiscent of Jane's early years at Lowood, but it also harkens back to Jane's childhood vow mentioned in chapter two – escaping "insupportable oppression – as running away, or if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting [herself] die" (C. Brontë 15). Jane's lack of money leaves her with no way to eat, travel, or find shelter. "I stood in the position of one without a resource: without a friend, without a coin. I must do something" (C. Brontë 323). Jane still has a will to survive, even to the point of employing her agency by degrading herself as a beggar, asking for any food she might come

across, such as a "piece of bread" or a "mess of cold porridge [being thrown] into a pig trough" (C. Brontë 325, 326). Jane is rewarded for her necessary, yet demeaning, acts of agency when she crawls up to the doorstep of the town clergyman, who takes her in to recover from her impoverished wanderings, symbolizing "the nameless, placeless and contingent status of women in a patriarchal society" that Gilbert and Gubar assert as way of displaying Jane's agency (qtd. in Andersson 12). St. John sets Jane up with a position as a schoolteacher, and after she receives her inheritance money, Jane has all the resources necessary to live her life as an independent woman – wealth and education.

Bertha's Escape

In Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is the first wife of Edward Rochester, who he locks away in a secluded section of Thornfield Hall after she begins to display "mad" tendencies. When Bertha's brother, Richard, objects to a marriage between Rochester and Jane on the grounds of bigamy, Rochester concedes that Bertha is still in fact alive and attempts to explain his reasoning for keeping Bertha hidden away from society. Not only is Bertha herself deemed mad, but Rochester explains that Bertha's madness is genetic and runs in her family when he says, "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came from a mad family – idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard…" (C. Brontë 289). Rochester claims that he was "cheated into espousing" Bertha to ensure that his family's fortune remain preserved, even though his father knew that Bertha had a predisposition for madness (C. Brontë 289). By the end of the novel, Bertha takes her own life by jumping from the top of Thornfield Hall after setting it on fire. A local innkeeper later explains the event to Jane:

> She was on the roof, where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out until they could hear her a mile off…We saw him approach her – and then, ma'am, she yelled, and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement. (C. Brontë 424)

As Rochester approaches Bertha and calls out to her for the last time, it seems as though *his* agency in trying to save her from herself is the final straw for Bertha; she perceives Rochester's call as an act of aggression rather than an act of care. As soon as Rochester advances towards Bertha, she decidedly ends her life. We can see through the language that Brontë uses in describing Bertha's death that it was intentional. Specifically, the connotation of the word "spring" implies that Bertha jumped intentionally and with force, perhaps even with tinged with excitement (C. Bronte 424). For Bertha, taking her own life is the ultimate form of escape, both literally and metaphorically. Literally speaking, Bertha is no longer confined to her small room shut away in the recesses of Thornfield. Metaphorically, Bertha is released from the patriarchal grasp that Rochester has on her through their marriage, as well as being released from the conscious suffering from her madness. She is no longer a hostage of her marriage to Rochester, nor a hostage of her own mind, and therefore seems to effectively use her agency to put an end to her suffering; however, reading Bertha's suicide as an act of rebellion, or "the madness-as-feminist-rebellion metaphor" that Elizabeth J. Donaldson posits, might be considered stigmatizing, as it "diminishes the lived experience of many people disabled by mental illness" (102). For this reason, I prefer to read Bertha's suicide as a direct manifestation of her agency rather than a consequence of her mental illness.

I regress from Bertha's suicide, however, to talk about Bertha's smaller moments of escape throughout the novel. While Bertha never actually leaves the grounds of Thornfield, she

is able to sneak out at night once Grace Poole, whom Rochester hires as Bertha's caretaker, is too intoxicated to watch her. During her excursions to the rest of Thornfield, Bertha resorts to violence to send warnings to both Rochester and Jane. The first instance of Bertha making her presence known happens soon after Jane first arrives at Thornfield. Bertha sneaks out of her room and lights Rochester's bed on fire in the middle of the night while he is sleeping. Jane describes the scene: "Tongues of flame darted round the bed: the curtains were on fire. In the midst of blaze and vapour, Mr. Rochester lay stretched motionless, in deep sleep" (C. Bronte 147). When Jane asks Rochester if she should call anyone else for help, Rochester is hesitant to do so. This is because, unbeknownst to the reader, Rochester is aware that Bertha is responsible for the fire. Rochester's knowledge is only confirmed by Jane's previous experience, in which she heard a "demonic laugh" outside her room just before the fire started. In this scene, Bertha, who the reader has not become aware of at this point in the novel, is already being painted as a villain, or a madwoman. I believe, however, that while Bertha lit Rochester's bed on fire to act as a warning to remind him of her presence, it is important to note that Bertha does not use the chaos of the fire to act as a distraction so that she can escape Thornfield; in fact, she does the opposite – she goes back upstairs to her room. Why, then, does Bertha stay at Thornfield when she could have easily slipped out without anyone realizing? The answer to this question lies in the issue of resources. Had Bertha been able to escape Thornfield, she would have had inadequate resources to survive on her own- i.e., money, food, shelter – and she would have ended up in the same predicament as Jane, only amplified due to her madness. If Bertha's only goal is to end her life, why would she not be satisfied with escaping and letting herself wither away at the expense of the elements? I would theorize that to Bertha, it might not have been enough to die due to exposure or lack of nutrients. In order to maximize her agency, Bertha

would need to take her own life; however, at this point in the novel, Bertha might have lacked the courage to do so. Because of her temporary resistance to taking her own life, I think the fire acts as a metaphor for her agency being heightened or starting to heat up. It also acts as a foreshadowing for later in the novel when Bertha goes through with taking her own life after setting Thornfield on fire, only for it to be burnt to the ground.

Another instance where Bertha shows agency through a smaller moment of escape is before Rochester and Jane's wedding. It is important to note that at this point in the novel, Jane is still unaware of Bertha's presence at Thornfield, and has been chalking up the mysterious happenings around Thornfield as the work of Grace Poole; however, this encounter excludes even Grace as a potential suspect: "Mr. Rochester, this was not Sophie, it was not Leah, it was not Mrs. Fairfax…it was not even that strange woman, Grace Poole" (C. Brontë 280). While Jane is asleep, Bertha sneaks into Jane's room and rips her wedding veil in half: "Sir, it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them" (C. Bronte 281). While this scene from the novel might be read as Bertha's way of metaphorically destroying the institution of marriage, I believe that the entire excursion was simply a way for Bertha to briefly satisfy her urge to escape, while simultaneously giving Jane a warning about marrying Rochester, for the fact that Jane might potentially end up in the same situation as Bertha since Bertha would not perceive Rochester as a loving husband the way in which Jane might.

Arguments about Bertha's sense of agency have also been discussed in relation to Bertha's ambiguous relationship with Jane. Many scholars argue that Bertha is not Jane's rival but actually a more primal reflection of Jane herself, or as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it, Jane is the "sane version of Bertha" (Kindle location 6967). Allison Lizotte, siding with Gilbert

and Gubar, also reads Bertha as "the physical embodiment of Jane's double consciousness" suggesting that "[w]hile Jane must adhere to certain societal constraints, Rochester's wife is free to take action and physically express Jane's aforementioned, repressed anger" (17). Although this is a traditional interpretation of the dynamic between Jane and Bertha, I much prefer to read Bertha as her own character with motivations for her actions that have nothing to do with Jane. In an article about the representations of madness within *Jane Eyre*, Valerie Beattie explains that the traditional view of Bertha as Jane's metaphorical rival in the novel "[denies] her any agency as an active subject within the narrative" (495). To view Bertha's character as a metaphorical figure that hinders Jane's progress in the novel rather than being an agent of action in her own life would be to assume that Bertha's life revolves around Jane, which it does not. Bertha would have deeper motivations for her actions, regardless of whether or not Jane had been at Thornfield to inspire them. This argument can be substantiated by the fact that Bertha commits suicide two months after Jane runs away from Thornfield; however, it is questionable as to whether or not Bertha was aware of Jane's absence. When Jane returns to Thornfield towards the end of the novel, she speaks to the host of the inn to inquire about Rochester. The host informs her that Thornfield was burnt to the ground by Rochester's "lunatic" wife (C. Brontë 422), who had intentionally visited the old governess' room, in which it was thought that she had lit the bed on fire as if she "had a spite" with Jane (C. Brontë 423). This reading has merit, but it invalidates my claim that Bertha's destruction of Thornfield and eventual suicide had less to do with being jealous of Jane and more to do with Bertha being an agent of action in her own life. Instead, I offer another reading: that Bertha went to Jane's room to warn her about the fire and give her time to escape but realized she had already left Thornfield. By interpreting the text this way, it not only allows space for Bertha and Jane to have a kinship through their shared desire to escape

Thornfield, but it also makes it possible for Bertha to continue on with her plan of escape, regardless of Jane's presence at Thornfield.

The popular conception of Bertha as a madwoman with no agency only reinforces the fact that the ideologies surrounding free will during the Victorian era were purposefully structured to silence and further oppress women who suffered from mental illness. This narrative silence is achieved by filtering the story through Jane's point of view, leaving Bertha with no voice in the narrative; however, it is not that Jane purposely disregards anything Bertha might say, but rather that Bertha does not speak any intelligible words throughout the entirety of the novel – in fact, she is only described as "growl[ing] like some strange wild animal" (C. Brontë 290). Brontë reinforces the patriarchal notion of silencing those who choose to rebel; however, it is problematic to think that Bertha uses her agency to end her life as an act of rebellion against the patriarchy. In fact, Brontë seems to use Bertha's suicide as a way to pacify Victorian audiences with the death of the madwoman rather than have Bertha act out against the patriarchy's social customs by having a voice in the narrative. By killing off Bertha, Brontë not only avoids having to deal with the complications of Bertha's side of the story, but she protects her protagonist's moral character by legally relinquishing Rochester of his marital ties to Bertha since Jane emphasized her unwillingness to become Rochester's mistress when Bertha's existence was first revealed to her. Although Rochester claims to have no interest in taking Jane as a mistress, Jane questions his sincerity from her "inference that if [she] were so far to forget [herself] and the teaching that had ever been instilled into [her]…to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard [her] with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory" (C. Brontë 309). Regardless of her feelings for Rochester, Jane is unwilling to renounce her self-respect, for it would go against her own morals and devastate her

reputation. Thus, she believes that Rochester would inevitably view her the same way he views Betha and his previous mistress.

Catherine's Escape

In Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw escapes the patriarchal constraints of her marriage to Edgar, exhibiting mad tendencies as her body begins to gradually deteriorate due to her refusal to take care of herself, which eventually results in her death. Catherine's death, like Bertha's, could be argued as a form of passive suicide because she purposely lets herself wither away; however, it is also important to understand Catherine's motives in letting herself fall ill in the first place. Catherine's refusal to eat begins as a response to Edgar's ultimatum in which she must choose between himself or Heathcliff; however, after Edgar does not fold to Catherine's stubbornness, she becomes distraught over her declining health:

> I couldn't explain to Edgar how certain I felt of having a fit, or going raging mad, if he persisted in teasing me! I had no command of tongue, or brain, and he did not guess my agony, perhaps; it barely left me sense to try to escape from him and his voice. (E. Brontë 125)

In this passage, Catherine is aware that Edgars persistent taunting would drive her to the brink of madness, and I find it interesting that Catherine feels the need to "escape" him. Unlike Bertha who is genetically predisposed to madness, Catherine had not displayed any signs of madness prior to her argument with Edgar, nor did it run in the Earnshaw family as it did the Mason's in *Jane Eyre*. After Catherine fell ill, it was even thought that her mental state was the product of being sick, or "…produced by her own perilous illness, as she was never subject to depression of

spirits before" (E. Brontë 93). Catherine's symptoms gradually worsen, which Nelly describes as transitioning from "feverish bewilderment to madness" (E. Brontë 122). At the peak of her madness, Catherine is plagued by delusion, in which she can't recognize her own face in the mirror: "'It *does* appear odd – I see a face in it!' […] 'There's nobody here!' [Nelly] insisted. 'It was yourself, Mrs. Linton; you knew it a while since'" (E. Brontë 123). After this episode, Nelly says that after two months, Catherine has seemingly overcome the worst of her "brain fever" (E. Brontë 134); however, the intense labor and exhaustion from childbirth effectively kills Catherine, who "never recovered sufficient consciousness to miss Heathcliff, or know Edgar" (E. Brontë 166).

In *Wuthering Heights*, we primarily read Catherine's reluctance to get better as a form of agency because she feels as though she has no other way to take control of her life. In an article about illness in *Wuthering Heights,* Susan Gorsky says, "She tries to use her illness to order the world, but finally her illness and her world destroy her. Unable to control her love or her lover, her world or herself, she brings ruin upon herself and others" (177). If this is the case, then Catherine's death could not be considered suicide because it was not intentional, but instead, it would only be considered a consequence of her actions. Catherine would also then not be considered rebellious, but careless and selfish. Catherine's agency only extends to the point in which she was unable to recover from her illness because after she reached a certain point in her illness, there was no going back. While Catherine had not planned to die due to her illness, she did enable it through her obstinacy. This realization becomes evident to Catherine when Heathcliff says to her, "I have not one word of comfort – you deserve this. You have killed yourself…I love my murderer – but yours! How can I?" (E. Brontë 162-163). In this line, Heathcliff is telling Catherine that even though she is not explicitly committing suicide by

"throwing herself down stairs, or out of the window" (E. Brontë 88), she is compliant with the slow degeneration of her bodily functions until she withers away, rendering herself dead in a set of circumstances in which she had the power to keep at bay.

I also want to use this space to point out the substantial parallels between the set of circumstances in which Bertha and Catherine find themselves – confined to a single room for an extended period of time, contributing to the degree of madness that is characteristic of their respective deaths. The difference between the two women's circumstances, however, is that Bertha is confined to her room in Thornfield not only for her supposed safety and the safety of others living in the hall, but also without the option of leaving, rendering her ultimately powerless in her situation. Thus, Bertha's agency is used in way in which she is able to potentially manipulate a situation to give her the best possible chances of escape. Catherine, on the other hand, uses the room as a form of escape because she wants to isolate herself from Edgar, hoping that her stubbornness will force him to pity her, making him submissive to her will. Nelly even says that after an argument, Catherine refuses to talk to her: "…for several months, she ceased to hold any communication with me, save in the relation of a mere servant" (E. Bronte 88). Catherine's motives for keeping herself isolated and confined to her room are also more spiteful towards Edgar and Heathcliff, and by letting her physical and mental health gradually decline, her use of the room does the opposite of what Bertha is trying to achieve by escaping any chance she gets.

Helen's Escape

Unlike *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, Anne Brontë provides readers with a different approach to escaping the rigid structure of the patriarchal system. While women like Bertha and

Catherine feel so entrapped to the point where death seems to be the only viable option in terms of gaining their freedom, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* provides readers with a much more optimistic view about overcoming situations in which one might be more susceptible to the encroachment of mental illness. Helen Graham finds herself in an abusive marriage with Arthur Huntington after the initial charm of his courtship faded away with the comfort and security of Victorian marriage. It is Arthur's constant abuse, absence, and disdain for their child, Arthur, which prompts Helen to want to leave her home at Grassdale Manor and flee to refuge at Wildfell Hall.

Like Bertha, Helen was also the scapegoat in a poorly matched union. The difference between Helen and these other characters, however, is that she used her agency in a way that sees escaping not as a means to a permanent end, like death, but as a way to prolong her life rather than seeing death as her only option. As Arthur becomes increasingly abusive, Helen's desire to escape is only strengthened; however, it is important to note that unlike Bertha and Catherine, Helen had the resources to execute an escape – an option not afforded to many women during this time. For Helen, escaping Grassdale is the start of a more fulfilling life for Arthur and herself, but for Bertha, escaping Thornfield and leaving behind destruction in her wake is the end of a battle not only with her mental health, but with the imposition of patriarchal customs over her own bodily autonomy. Helen's character is unique because she seems to be the most self-aware in terms of processing her emotions. While Bertha had a genetic predisposition for mental illness, Catherine's "depression of the spirits" was only enhanced by the illness which she brought on herself. Helen, however, made it clear that she would not let her husband's abuse drive her to the brink of insanity: "I can't stand such a mania as this; it would kill me!" (A. Brontë 425). This self-awareness is what enables Helen to make decisions that propel her out of

her dire position; however, it is important to note that while Helen's agency is the motivating force in her escape, it might not have been possible, or at least as "easy" for her to escape had she not had the means to do so.

Helen's agency, while being a positive influence in terms of her outlook on her life, is only afforded through her situation; however, this is not to say that Helen does not face her own set of obstacles in her attempt to escape Grassdale Manor. When Arthur finds out by reading her diary that she is planning to flee Grassdale with their son, he punishes Helen by having a "confiscation of property" (A. Brontë 365) – burning all of her art supplies which might inspire her to "run away and [turn] artist" and taking away her money and jewels, which he would replace with a "small monthly allowance" with a breakdown as to how it had all been spent (A. Brontë 366). After this incident, Helen's plans are set back, and she becomes almost complicit with her situation for the time being, as she has not had time to rethink her plan of escape. When Arthur leaves again for work, Helen had "felt [her] vital energy return; not with the hope of escape – he [had] taken care to leave [her] no visible chance of that – but with a determination to make the best of existing circumstances" (A. Brontë 369). This hopefulness is what allows Helen to keep pursuing her escape, even if she knows it might be delayed. If anything, this delay in her escape only strengthens her desire to escape after Arthur grows increasingly violent and intolerable.

Finally, Helen's escape is enabled by her talents as an artist, which she uses to sell her paintings as a means to acquire money to afford some level of comfort at Wildfell Hall. Helen tells Gilbert that she "cannot afford to paint for [her] own amusement" (A. Brontë 47). This transition from painting for leisure and enjoyment to painting for resources suggests that Helen must use her agency in ways that she is not used to. In resorting to painting as a way to earn

money, Helen's talents as an artist are siphoned to produce an income necessary for her survival. Antonia Losano asserts that "The novel is in part a *Kunstlerroman,* 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 (17). Essentially, Helen's artistic professionalization is a necessity in enabling her escape. Unlike Bertha and Catherine who have no formal education or professional training to fall back on, similarities between Helen and Jane can be drawn through their professions, which enable them to take control of their own financial situations once they escape. Jane's previous teaching positions qualify her to take on another role as a schoolteacher at a charity school in Morton, providing her with a small income and a place to live. Likewise, for Helen, her previous experience with and talent for painting provides her with a means to earn an income by selling her paintings. Through these comparisons, it is made clear just how invaluable these resources are in aiding Helen and Jane's escapes.

Assistance in Escape – Caretakers and Brothers

In noting particular similarities between Bertha, Catherine, and Helen, it cannot be ignored that they are all usually accompanied by their female caretakers/servants. It is also important to note that not only are the women being taken care of by other lower class, "othered" women. In this section, I would like to focus on the ways in which the female caretakers in each novel can all be placed on a spectrum of enabling each characters' agency, whether it be through creating additional barriers in which the women must cross, the alternative of being a completely helpful resource, or somewhere ambiguously in the middle. Nelly works for the Earnshaw family and has cared for Catherine since she was born – increasingly so once Catherine falls gravely ill.

Grace Poole acts not only as a caretaker, but a guard to keep Bertha from escaping into the rest of Thornfield. Helen is typically in the presence of her servant, Rachel; however, their relationship is more like the dynamic between Catherine and Nelly because Rachel has been with Helen since her own birth. Rachel even accompanies Helen in her escape to act as a companion and servant to Helen once they arrive at Wildfell Hall. This observation could either be interpreted as some kind of solidarity between women in these unfortunate situations, or it could be interpreted as just another boundary which the women have to get through in order to truly escape. This idea of the caretakers as boundaries then suggests that these women are not only being oppressed by standards of the patriarchy, but also by the internalized misogyny that is common amongst female thinking during the Victorian era – the caretakers, then, would just be physical manifestations of this toxic ideology.

On the more rigid end of the spectrum, Grace Poole acts as a barrier between Bertha and her freedom. I am suggesting, however, that Bertha sees Grace as less of an obstruction to her freedom and more so as a kind of patriarchal martyr since it is Rochester who employs her. I would even argue that Bertha is aware of Grace Poole's lack of concern for her confinement, as she is regularly inebriated. According to Jane, Grace's nightly routine includes indulging herself with a "moderate pipe" and a "pot of porter" (C. Bronte 162). Additionally, I would like to draw attention to Grace's name and what it might symbolize in terms of her relationship to Bertha. I am suggesting that even though Grace Poole fulfills her job requirement as Bertha's keeper, she offers Bertha "grace" in ways that no one else does – by granting her small moments of freedom. Most critics view Grace's inebriation as acts of drunken carelessness: "Bertha has once again escaped from her cell on the third floor while Grace Poole sleeps off her gin" (Pell 411). While Grace's actions allow Bertha these micro escapes throughout the novel, I would argue that

Grace's carelessness is intentional because she is the only person who spends time with Bertha every day, and it is important to note that Bertha never harms Grace.

Wuthering Heights' Nelly Dean is just as complicated a figure as Grace Poole. While Nelly's role in the novel is crucial as a narrator, I would also argue that her passivity and suspected unreliability also plays a role in perpetuating the patriarchal culture that leads to Catherine's demise. Critics such as Margaret Homan suggest "maintain[ing] a constant skepticism about the alterations Nelly must have made in the remembered speeches of her characters…" (qtd. in Goldfarb 53). Not only is Nelly read as unreliable, but in some cases, she is even characterized as a "villain" (Hafley 199). Hafley asserts Nelly's villainy through moments of cruelty towards Catherine throughout her life, most poignantly after Catherine returns from her stay at Thrushcross Grange. While everyone else, besides Heathcliff, fawns over Catherine's transformation, Nelly constantly attempts to "bring down her [Catherine's] arrogance" (E. Brontë 66). Nelly's loyalty does not reside solely with Catherine, and Nelly is even forthright with Lockwood about her feelings towards Catherine: "I've said I did not love her; and rather relished mortifying her vanity, now and then; besides, she hurt me extremely…" (E. Brontë 71). It is true that Nelly is loyal to her employers, who are always men. Nelly is not partial to Catherine and typically does not sympathize with her. Even when Catherine is at the peak of her illness, Nelly would not describe herself as being a "gentle nurse" (E. Bronte 88). Despite Nelly's role as a housekeeper, she is not Catherine's keeper in the way that Grace Poole is for Bertha – Nelly is practical and loyal to her employers. With that being said, I would argue that fundamentally, Nelly neither helps nor inhibits Catherine's escape; she is neither the villain nor the hero.

In terms of escape, the caregiver who facilitates their protagonist's escape the most is Helen's servant, Rachel, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Not only has Rachel been with Helen since living with her aunt and uncle, but Rachel also accompanies Helen to Grassdale Manor once she marries Arthur. In many ways, Rachel is more of a companion to Helen than Arthur is, and Rachel even helps Helen in her plot to escape, as well as accompanying her to Wildfell Hall:

> I soon acquainted Rachel with my design, confiding all my motives and intentions to her ear…she applauded my resolution and consented to aid me with all her might…with touching generosity, she modestly offered to aid me with her little hoard of savings… (A. Brontë 362)

Helen does not need Rachel's assistance because she has her own money saved; however, Rachel does more than just offer Helen monetary support – her aid comes in the form of friendship, which is a relationship that none of the other protagonists share with their caregivers. Because of this, Helen is supported the most in her escape, allowing her an easier transition from her life at Grassdale to her life at Wildfell Hall.

Because of the women's relationships to other women in terms of their aiding/preventing their escape, I think it would also be interesting to consider the relationships that the women have with each of their respective brothers, and how their brothers use their advantaged position as a man in Victorian society to provide their sisters with helpful resources aside from their individual agency. Like the female caretakers in the novels, the brothers also provide a spectrum of support, ranging from damaging hostility and rejection to facilitating escape through resources such as shelter and concealment. Additionally, it is worth briefly mentioning that Jane does not have a brother, which might be an indication of why her escape attempt is so disastrous;

however, Jane does have other male family members, namely St. John and her uncle in Madeira, who provide her with resources that are important to her achievement of independence.

Richard Mason, Bertha's brother, extends his agency to Bertha in the form of occasional check-ins; however, the text suggests that Mason, as well as Bertha, suffers from similar effects of their family's genetic predisposition for madness, which limits his ability to rescue Bertha from her entrapment at Thornfield. Rochester even says that it is it is not just Bertha and her mother who are afflicted by this illness, but also "a younger brother too; a complete dumb idiot" (C. Brontë 303). The first time the reader is introduced to Richard Mason is when he arrives at Thornfield to check in on Bertha's well-being; however, Bertha violently attacks Mason, leaving him severely injured. Bertha's aggressive state worries Mason about the level of care Rochester provides for her, but ultimately leaves those decisions to Rochester. Jane wonders why Mason so passively "submit[s] to the concealment Mr. Rochester enforced" despite the severity of and ambiguous circumstances regarding his injury. The dominant/submissive dynamic between Rochester and Richard Mason has been suggested to be an "… impli[cation of] the perversity of Richard's effeminate masculinity, which Rochester disavows" (Thomas 6). While I see the merit in reading Mason's degradation as perceived femininity, I would go even further as to insinuate that Rochester's perturbance towards Mason's performance of femininity is unconsciously rooted in Rochester's association of madness as a feminine trait. Later in the novel, when Rochester and Jane are about to be married, Mason intervenes on the grounds that Rochester is already married to his sister, Bertha Mason. This intervention serves to remind Rochester that he is still duty-bound to Bertha as his wife, which Rochester despises him for. I think it is possible that in periodically ensuring that his sister is still being cared for by Rochester, Mason is using the full extent of his agency to help make the best of her mental illness.

Catherine's brother, Hindley Earnshaw, while providing no legitimate help to Catherine with the money or property inherited after their parents' deaths, does ironically serve as a partial, and even unconscious motivator for Catherine's need to escape. Hindley is an abusive alcoholic – an overbearing, selfish reflection of the patriarchy during his adult years, described by Nelly as "tyrannical and evil," having "plenty of wickedness," and even "possessed of something diabolical" (E. Brontë 66). After Mr. Earnshaw dies, Hindley takes over control of Wuthering Heights, forcing Heathcliff from his position amidst the Earnshaws to the ranks of the servants: "He drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead, compelling him to do so, as hard as any other lad on the farm" (E. Brontë 46). It is this degradation that is directly linked to Catherine being unable to choose Heathcliff as a viable marriage option, which results in dramatic chain of events which follow – Heathcliff's abandonment, Catherine's marriage to Edgar, Heathcliff's return, and Catherine's cries for attention which inevitably result in her death. In this way, Hindley hinders Catherine's escape by forcing Catherine into an entrapping marriage for the sake of their family's financial security. Additionally, had Hindley treated Heathcliff better in the first place, I argue that Catherine might have been able to marry for love and would not have felt the need to escape.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Helen's brother and landlord of Wildfell Hall, Frederick Lawrence, is of much use to Helen in her escape from her marriage – in fact, it could be argued that Helen's escape would not have been possible at all had it not been for her brother. While Arthur is away on one of his trips, Helen invites Frederick to come and stay so she can present her plan of escape in which she is hoping to obtain Frederick's "consent and assistance" with no "doubt of its success" (A. Brontë 370). During his stay, she informs him of the state of

her marriage. After being presented with this information, Frederick agrees to fix up a few rooms in Wildfell Hall for Helen and her son to stay in should she decide she need them. Frederick's moralism and compassion prompts Helen with the opportunity to not only reach out and ask for help, which is the most difficult step, but he also looks after her after she has settled in to Wildfell Hall.

In noting the different degrees to which the protagonists are aided in their escapes, this section highlights the fact that agency is not always completely enacted by the protagonists – sometimes it is through the help of others in which they are able to execute their escape. This is not to say that the protagonists would not be capable of achieving escape without the help of others – in fact, I would argue that it only further emphasizes the ways in which some of the protagonists, specifically Helen, utilize this assistance to its maximum potential. Helen has the most successful escape because she has access to every resource necessary: a profession that generates income, a caring female companion, and a helpful brother. Despite Helen's success, it is worth noting that obtaining all of these resources is incredibly difficult and for some of the protagonists, impossible.

CHAPTER V: REJOINING THE PATRIARCHY?

The novels do not end abruptly after each protagonist's escape – there is always more to the story; however, life after escape looks different for each character. In this chapter, I will address what happens to each character after they have escaped and how their agency has affected their lives, as well as suggesting what that could mean in terms of their rejoining of the patriarchy.

At the end of *Jane Eyre,* Jane is presented with the choice between marrying her cousin St. John Rivers and marrying Rochester. Like Helen and Catherine, she has the choice between two suitors. St. John sees Jane as a potential partner to join him on his missionary trip to India; however, the offer contains one caveat – Jane must go with St. John to India as his wife: "God and Nature intended you for a missionary's wife…a missionary's wife you must – shall be" (C. Brontë 398). St. John calls on higher authorities to persuade Jane that this is the path she is meant to take; however, his language suggests that she has no real choice, as the matter has already been divinely determined. Jane offers to go as his sister because she cannot fathom marrying a man she does not love, saying "we did not love each other as man and wife should, and therefore it inferred we ought not to marry" (C. Brontë 401) but St. John refuses to accept Jane's alternative. Instead, he emphasizes the permanence and possessive nature of marriage in relation to the freedom of a fraternal or sororal relationship:

> To do so, you must have a coadjutor – not a brother – that is a loose tie – but a husband. I, too, do not want a sister: a sister might any day be taken from me. I want a wife: the sole helpmate I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely until death. (C. Brontë 402)

Referring to Jane's alternative as a "loose tie," St. John's language suggests that his offer would tie Jane to him for life, entrapping her in a loveless marriage, as well as confining her to a life of submission to her husband. It is also important to highlight that St. John, unlike Rochester, frames a marriage with Jane in terms of a woman's subservience to her husband, imagining a passive figure whom he can "influence" or alter to fit ideal Victorian standards, as well as "retain" or possess.

Because of Jane's refusal to commit herself to a restraining and "unendurable" (C. Brontë 403) marriage, she is prompted to go back to Thornfield because she wants to marry for love rather than out of morality or pious duty. Additionally, Rochester and Jane refer to each other as equals despite their difference in gender, age, and class. Jane asserts their equality during the proposal scene: "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are!" (C. Brontë 251). Rochester agrees with her assessment, echoing "As we are!" Rochester goes even further, calling Jane his "likeness" in addition to his "equal": "My bride is here…because my equal is here, and my likeness" (C. Brontë 252). We can see that Jane is drawn to the idea of marriage with Rochester because he has voiced many times that he views her as an equal, which pacifies Jane's previous fears of entrapment. Additionally, once Jane returns to Rochester, she realizes that he is not only physically altered (blinded and mutilated by the fire) but he is in disbelief that she should have come back to him. Jane chooses to nurse Rochester back to health – to "rehumanize" him (C. Brontë 432) – for the fact that she can no longer be entrapped because she is independent and rich; she is her "own mistress" (C. Brontë 430).

Even though has everything she needs to live her life as an independent woman (i.e., a large inheritance, an education, a teaching position) she still chooses to go back to Rochester, and despite the love that they may share, she is still giving up her autonomy as a woman in the eyes of the law. Because of this, critics often view Jane's decision to be less empowering than we are initially led to believe. Jean Wyatt says that:

> Because romantic love fantasies exert a pull toward traditional feminine passivity and dependence by promising happiness to her who sits and waits for the right man to sweep

her away to the heights of passion, they arouse the scorn and anger of feminist dedicated to ideals of female autonomy and self-realization. (Wyatt 201)

Wyatt's claim asserts that in returning to Rochester and subsequently marrying him, Jane is giving up her autonomy. While I can see why the ending of *Jane Eyre* might be considered problematic from a feminist standpoint, there is also no justification in arguing that all marriages are entrapping mechanisms of the patriarchy. Jane's situation is much different from the first time she was engaged to Rochester – now, she has her own money, other marriage offers, and a stable occupation as a schoolteacher, although she leaves her occupation once she returns to Rochester. Richard Chase concludes that "The happy marriages at the end of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* represent the ostensible triumph of the secular, moderate-liberal, sentimental point of view over the mythical, tragic point of view" (qtd. in Shapiro 285). Jane seems to be content in her marriage to Rochester, saying "I have now been married ten years…I hold myself supremely blessed" (C. Brontë 447); therefore, she can be deemed complicit in ultimately subscribing to the patriarchy's view of women's roles within the domestic sphere. Of course, this is not necessarily a regressive act on Jane's part. I would even argue that in choosing to marry despite her newfound freedom, Jane places love and happiness over complete patriarchal abandonment. To further my argument, patterns in Jane's narrative seem to reveal her desire to redefine entrapment on her own terms: "Repeatedly, Jane inhabits a literal or metaphorical structure…and flees it. Yet she does not abandon it entirely, for despite the initial rejection or escape she eventually returns…to transform the inadequate structure into a freshly hypothesized, revisionary one" (Gilead 304-305). Gilead's argument is convincing – not only does Jane abandon her botched relationship with Rochester when she realizes it is no longer conducive to her happiness, but she reinvents herself in her absence from Thornfield and returns to Rochester

ready to reestablish and work on their relationship without the intention of being married. Because of her choice to return to Rochester, Jane is rendered a paradigmatic figure of Victorian social customs, all the while preserving the idea that a marriage rooted in love can be as liberating as escape.

Catherine's final act of rejoining the patriarchy is very different from Jane and Helen's in that her submission can be deemed eternal. While Jane and Helen are both married at the end of their respective novels, Catherine dies halfway through *Wuthering Heights.* What is unique about *Wuthering Heights'* ending is that Catherine's spirit still lingers as a ghost, harkening back to Heathcliff's pleas for Catherine to haunt him after her death. Catherine's ghost also makes an appearance at the beginning of the novel in an encounter with Lockwood, whom she begs to "let [her] in!" (E. Brontë 25). When Heathcliff dies, Nelly says that people have seen their ghosts roaming the moors together: "But the country folks, if you asked them, would swear on their Bible that he *walks*…Yet that old man by the kitchen fire affirms he has seen two on 'em, looking out of his chamber window, on every rainy night, since his death…" (E. Brontë 336). Not only is Catherine's immortal soul tied to Heathcliff after her death, condemning her to eternal submission to the patriarchy which seems to transgress the boundaries of life and death, but her physical body is buried between both Heathcliff and Edgar, which Nelly confirms as she passes "the three head-stones on the slope next the moor" (E. Brontë 337). For Catherine, her confinement to the "quiet earth" after her death suggests that she might not have had a choice. The presence of her spirit lingering around Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange might imply eternal punishment for deviating from patriarchal standards while she was alive.

Alternatively, Catherine's ghostly afterlife might also suggest that her bond with Heathcliff was so strong that it relies on the existence of free-will in the afterlife to flourish, as

the constraints of the patriarchal social customs made it impossible for them to be together while they were alive. Ingrid Geerken asserts the idea of mortal regret in *Wuthering Heights,* or the need to correct past wrongs, as being "generated out of a complex of remorse, grief, and resistance that testifies to the persistence of life in the face of loss" (374). With the limitations of mortality out of the way, Catherine and Heathcliff are able to reunite as lovers without the consequences of social constructs to prevent their union; it would no longer degrade her to be with Heathcliff because wealth and social status no longer matter. Between the two interpretations of Catherine's ambiguous ghostly entrapment, I prefer the latter. Perhaps it is important to note that only Catherine's and Heathcliff's ghosts continue on after death, and I would like to think that Catherine, through her own autonomy rather than by patriarchal force, waits on Heathcliff in the afterlife as a way to acknowledge their love that was not attainable in life.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* after Arthur dies, Helen is legally freed from her marriage. She has the opportunity to live independently but accepts Gilbert's marriage proposal. Like Jane, Helen is presented with the opportunity of independence, a rare occurrence for Victorian women, but relinquishes the opportunity and enters another marriage. Helen asserts that the love that she shares with Gilbert has nothing to do with "…the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune" but rather, is "dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls" (A. Brontë 485). Despite her profession of love, it is still interesting that she chooses this avenue instead of relishing in her freedom, especially since she fought so hard to acquire it in the first place. Nicole Diederich offers an answer to this question:

> The need to repair and to restructure a fractured domestic sphere…is the paramount objective of remarriage – not love. Remarriage emphasizes the loss of the previous wedded and domestic state, making manifest the limits to this domestic ideal: it can be undermined by death, so it is not as absolute as it may seem. Nevertheless, remarriage attempts to reconstruct the domestic sphere and its responsibilities. (30)

Diederich's point effectively accentuates my previous claim Helen's remarriage, and offers a more logical answer to her marriage to Gilbert. While Helen is fully capable of raising her son by herself, she instead opts to raise him in a more traditional family setting, allowing Arthur to grow up with both maternal and paternal figures.

While it seems as though Helen is content in her marriage, it is important to note that at the end of the novel, Helen's diary entries end, and the point of view shifts back to Gilbert. Helen's lack of voice in the last portion of the novel leaves readers with an ambiguous understanding of how she feels about her marriage because it is being filtered through Gilbert's perspective, and of course he is going to think that their marriage is wonderful because he had been pining over her the entire duration of the novel. Gilbert closes the novel by commenting that he does not need to dote on how happily he and Helen have "lived and loved together, and how blessed [they] still are in each other's society" (A. Brontë 488). With this information, readers are left to conclude that Helen is content with her decision to marry Gilbert, despite the lack of explicit affirmation on Helen's part. Unlike Jane, who narrates her own story, Helen's lack of voice, unfiltered by Gilbert's point of view, suggests a patriarchal stifling. Additionally, this shift back to Gilbert's point of view, in giving his narration the power of the final word, might indicate Brontë's way of concluding that the separate spheres of society are firmly determined, regardless of who Helen is married to. Rachel Carnell suggests that "By the end of

the novel it is clear that Brontë does not envision a world in which the gendered norms of the separate spheres are radically altered" (Carnell 17). I agree with Carnell in that Helen's remarriage does not signify a shift in ideology about the separation of spheres – if anything, it only perpetuates the idea of patriarchal entrapment further as it essentially relegates her to the domestic sphere which she had previously escaped.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis has been to put the novels of Brontë sisters together to create a more nuanced, complex understanding of the novels as individual works, but also as a collection of Brontë novels with the same central theme: female agency. In this thesis, I have covered a multitude of ways in which the Brontë sisters depict female agency during the Victorian era through their stories that follow the experiences of their protagonists. Essentially, every aspect of a woman's life could potentially be used as a tool of oppression by the patriarchy; however, despite the many barriers that the patriarchy establishes as a means of exploiting and oppressing women, the Brontë sisters use their protagonists to represent Victorian women and promote the idea that women can and should be an agent of action in their own life regardless of gender, class, age, or ability.

I must admit that while each of these novels offers a unique depiction of female agency, it is hardly enough to say that this thesis covers every aspect in which the Brontës' protagonists assert their selfhood and agency as women. There are many more parallels in the novels which have yet to be uncovered. There are issues of religion and gender within the novels that require more attention, and there is much to be said about the ways in which religion influences the characters' sense of agency. Additionally, there are many connections to be made between the

Brontë's and their respective characters, as it has been suggested that many aspects of these novels are based on similar experiences in which the Brontë sisters faced themselves. Overall, I hope that my efforts in writing this thesis, in conversation with other scholars, helps to create a more well-rounded, nuanced understanding of female agency during the Victorian era, and I should hope that this thesis uncovers many of the overlooked parallels between the Brontë sisters' works, not only as sisters, but as equal counterparts in substantially contributing to the corpus of influential Victorian novels.

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