

MONSTROUS MARRIAGE: RE-EVALUATING CONSENT, COVERTURE, AND
DIVORCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S GOTHIC FICTION

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Introduction

This project, “Monstrous Marriage: Re-Evaluating Consent, Coverture, and Divorce in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Gothic Fiction,” shows how nineteenth-century women’s Gothic novels engage with period laws and beliefs about a wife’s marital rights. I specifically focus on the law of coverture, which states that, “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” (Blackstone 441). Concentrating on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I argue that these authors participate in the evolving views of women’s right to leave their marriage, especially after being manipulated and misled by their fiancés or after living with abusive husbands. Using their texts as a way to bear witness to acts that were unspeakable in polite society, these authors challenge the ingrained beliefs that marriage is a binding contract in which women lose their legal status. I argue that women’s Gothic literature provides nineteenth-century readers with a way to discuss scenarios that would challenge marital laws and that invite a larger audience into social discourse on this subject.

My legal approach to these texts offers a comprehensive understanding of their reflection of the society in which they were written and their participation in the discussions that expanded and advanced cultural attitudes and beliefs about women’s need to maintain their legal status in marriage. While feminist interpretations of the female characters are extensive and insightful, an examination of the laws that enforced these limitations has been overlooked. Without an analysis of nineteenth-century marital laws, the cultural implications of these novels have only been partially explored. Reform begins with an audience that is aware of the impact of social institutions on the individual. Through these texts, readers learn

that women must be socially and legally valued as human beings and that marriage should not condemn women to a lifetime with a monster.

Among recent scholars of Gothic literature, Fred Botting and E. J. Clery align the Gothic with social critique. Building on their ideas, I show how literature by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and the Bronte sisters addresses the conditions of matrimony as a political and social issue. Botting writes that the fear in Gothic novels expresses the consequences of not complying with social guidelines, that the Gothic conveys “social and domestic fears” associated with transgression of laws and boundaries, and that in the plot’s resolution, the authors reassert the audience’s identity and sense “of justice, morality and social order” regarding their “values [on] society, virtue and property” (7). I agree that the Gothic gives authors a way to discuss social anxieties, but I revise Botting’s claim that the plot’s resolution reasserts accepted social values. While the Brontes’ novels conclude with seemingly happy marriages, securing it as a valuable social institution, these are new versions of matrimony. As an institution, moreover, marriage remains threatening to women because only the individual attitude toward marriage has changed, while the laws have not.

Women’s social issues are a primary concern in much of the research on women’s Gothic fiction where historic, biographic, cultural and literary scholarship centers on the discussion of women’s limited lives. Clery’s work on women’s Gothic fiction explores why women wrote Gothic fiction and why women were compelled to compete with male authors by pursuing writing as a career. She uses a biographical methodology, exploring what led Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Joanna Baille, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Shelley to write, what their particular influences were, and how their novels were received. Clery argues that female novelists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were actively using Gothic novels to increase awareness of social issues. This aspect of Gothic conventions’ function informs my study, which examines later Gothic novelists and includes a closer reading and

analysis of the novels themselves in connection to awareness about the need to reform the law of coverture.

Continuing the scholarly tradition of feminist interpretations of Gothic fiction, Diane Long Hoeveler examines the purpose of women's victimization in Gothic novels from 1780 through 1853. I extend her idea that Gothic novels could act as guidebooks that subvert social expectations of women's conduct by reading them not as guidebooks for individuals, but as cultural guidebooks that address larger social issues. Hoeveler takes a psychological approach to women's Gothic fiction, using Luce Irigaray's idea of the "feminine feminine," Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, and Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to examine the female characters in these novels. Contemporary French feminism informs her claim that Gothic novels are behavioral guides or conduct books for middle-class women, and she reads women's victimization as a form of subversive rebellion. Focusing on Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë's novels, Hoeveler argues that these authors write themselves into their fiction, not as heroines, but as victims in order to cater to an audience that is influenced by a patriarchal ideal. She examines characters who walk the line between social revolt and passive compliance with feminine guidelines to demonstrate how subversive actions can actually push the boundaries until women can gain more self-sovereignty while maintaining the illusion that they never challenged social gender codes.

Like Hoeveler, many scholars of Gothic literature examine female characters through a psychoanalytic lens. Diana Wallace's interests lie in motherhood and maternal influence in female Gothic novels where she reads motherhood, domestic spaces, and women's expectations as metaphors for nineteenth-century women's lives. In Wallace's argument, Gothic conventions such as women's imprisonment, live burial, and hauntings are metaphors for women's psyche. She uses prominent feminist writers—Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia

Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler among them—to examine how Gothic metaphors reflect nineteenth-century women’s psychological repression. Similarly, Deborah D. Rogers investigates how “matrophobia problematizes feminism” in Gothic fiction by examining the culture of motherhood, the mother as a repressed figure, and the absence of the mother in Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe’s novels (1). She explores how women relate to each other in a patriarchal society in order to “[r]econcile[] feminism and motherhood,” and she uses a biographical methodology to categorize types of mothers and motherhood in these novels (11). In another psychoanalysis-driven study, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar focus on feminist readings to explore nineteenth-century women writers. They concentrate on women’s struggles with their identities, using mirrors and doubles as symbols of a fragmented human psyche. Most importantly for my purposes, they demonstrate how the female protagonists in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* can reconnect their fragmented selves. Gilbert and Gubar show how female authors used their writings to comment on women’s social position, specifically confinement in a patriarchal society. The scholarly texts that interpret women’s domestic spaces as metaphors for women’s confined lives inform my own analysis insofar as I interpret the domestic spaces as metaphors for women’s lives and literature as a way to engage in and offer a solution to women’s social issues. My focus, though, is not on the generalized discussion about the patriarchal society and values oppressing women. I concentrate instead on the specific marital laws that literally imprison women.

In the past twenty years, scholarship on women’s Gothic has undergone a shift from psychological readings to cultural, social, and political analysis, and in the past ten years, the kinds of cultural approaches to women’s Gothic have become more varied. One such variance shows how the Gothic deals with gender relations. This is a conversation in which I participate, especially as it applies to marriage. My study expands Donna Heiland’s approach

to Gothic fiction's cultural relevance for gender relationships. Heiland examines why Gothic literature has remained popular for centuries, especially because Gothic texts are "highly formulaic and therefore highly predictable" (2). By exploring their "cultural function," focusing on British Gothic between 1750 and 1850, Heiland questions the purpose behind traditional Gothic conventions, why the Gothic was "popular and what cultural function" it served (2). She examines how the Gothic "shape[d] gender relations" (2) and combines historical analysis with Freudian theory to study the characters' transgression of "patriarchal structures" (5).

This study is influenced most directly by Ian Ward's legal approach to the Bronte sisters' novels. In his study *Law and the Bronte's*, Ward examines different legal issues within each novel: child custody in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, inheritance laws in *Wuthering Heights*, and insanity laws in *Jane Eyre*. This approach to the concrete laws that guided and controlled women's lives inspired me to refine my own study to include consideration of how specific laws governed the treatment of women within marriage. My approach differs from that of Ward because I take the consent and coverture laws that dictate the treatment of the women as a common thread in all these novels, though they approach the laws in different ways. I argue that Mary Shelly and the Bronte sisters specifically address the romanticized ideals of marriage that are taught to women and use the marriages in their novels not only to dismantle these ideals but to reveal the possibility that matrimony is a dangerous and imprisoning institution. They also warn women that, while the law of coverture is still in place, there is potential for the imbalance of power within marriage to become abusive.

Earlier authors of Gothic Romances like Ann Radcliffe reinforce marriage as an ideal condition and as women's ultimate goal. Focusing on how courtship and marriage function in these novels will show how they promote the recognition of women's limited legal status

once they married. I analyze these texts in the context of nineteenth-century discussions about marriage laws in England, specifically discussion concerning the law of coverture and women's right to divorce. I draw on scholarship of nineteenth-century women's matrimonial rights—specifically on the work of Ian Ward, Kristin Kalsem, Martin Wiener, Mary Shanley, Mary Poovey, Joan Perkin, Allen Horstman, Maeve E. Doggett, Karen Chase, and Michael Levenson—to show how Gothic texts interacted with, challenged, and question nineteenth-century cultural attitudes toward women in marriage. Historical and cultural-based research such as examinations of the laws and of traditional gender expectations inform my consideration of the ways in which Victorian families' private lives came under public scrutiny, with a particular focus on marriage, spousal abuse, coverture, and divorce.

Nineteenth-century readers were so familiar with the conventions of Gothic novels that they could predict the plot devices, the plots twists, and the happy endings. This familiarity with the standard plot allowed for entertainment while maintaining a sense of security. Although Radcliffe's early Gothic romances address underlying political and social critiques, these are secondary to their plot and purpose, which was taking the audience on an emotional journey fueled by suspense. According to Michael Gamer, nineteenth-century reviewers undermined the Gothic romance's value as social critique by reducing it to mere entertainment rather than portraying it as sophisticated literature, a characterization that simultaneously disparaged Gothic romance readers as frivolous rather than sophisticated and politically aware. Despite this perception, large audiences still gravitated to Gothic fiction, including people who might not actively involve themselves in politics but who could, as readers of the literature, learn to think in new ways about coverture and a wife's right to leave an abusive marriage. The Gothic authors in my study reject the label of "Gothic" as insignificant and participate in elevating the genre's function by increasingly politicizing their Gothic texts. They use aesthetics of fear, dread, and anxiety as a way to discuss

nineteenth-century women's concerns about entering marriage, thus losing their legal rights. I chose these particular novels because they all center on courtship and consent and the dark side of marriage and coverture.

Sometimes cultural attitudes evolve before laws are amended to reflect that evolution, and sometimes the law evolves before cultural attitudes are ready to embrace progress. Nevertheless, progress occurs. The issues Shelley and the Brontes raise about women's lack of legal rights in marriage are best handled in Gothic texts because Gothic conventions give authors more freedom to explore darker social issues. The nature of Gothic literature is to be extreme and to frighten and disturb its readers. Challenging a society's view on disbanding coverture would likely require arguments that include extreme scenarios to convince those who resist change. While people like Caroline Norton went to court in order to amend the law, fiction could also illuminate extreme situations like those of Elizabeth Frankenstein, Isabella Heathcliff, Jane Eyre, and Helen Huntingdon. These fictional characters and scenarios also challenge ingrained cultural beliefs about marriage. Gothic extremes are sometimes aesthetically helpful in challenging traditional views of matrimony, specifically to challenge the idea that it is both socially unacceptable and illegal for a wife to leave her husband.

Sustaining the focus on Gothic extremes, my study largely focuses on the scenes that dismantle women's perceived notions about marriage and scenes in which women's gendered expectations that they must be submissive and self-sacrificing place them in scenarios where they are vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. I discuss the heroines to show how their husbands embody women's deepest fears about matrimony. I also explore why Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and the Brontes do not use the supernatural as a stand in for social institutions or for the villains; they use Gothic realism. In these novels, the heroines are not pursued by demons or ghosts; the villains are men, the heroines' love interests, and husbands

who go to extremes to pursue, manipulate, and terrorize their fiancés and wives. The extremes in these Gothic romances promote discussion of marriage laws and provide new ways to think about them. These authors challenge readers to question and rethink the validity of cultural expectations about matrimony that would force women to endure such horrors because raising awareness is a step toward social advancement. Social change is effected most often not by means of revolutionary upheaval but through a slow and sometimes erratic process.

An analysis of Gothic novels written between 1790 and 1850 reveals an evolution of the genre that becomes more darkly realistic after the 1792 publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Ann Radcliffe's early Gothic romances maintain the social status quo of marriage as an institution that saves women, and her novels do little to address the dangers women may face once they marry. Radcliffe's heroines are in danger before, not after their nuptial ceremony. However, Wollstonecraft seems to have shifted the trajectory of Gothic romance, resulting in Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Bronte rewriting Gothic romance as a darker and more realistically dangerous genre. An investigation into the ways that these authors depict marriage demonstrates how the institution can, in fact, be a prison for women. Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* breaks the pattern in the Gothic romance of women's salvation through marriage. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft initiates a new path for Gothic texts and women's social issues. Women are advised to marry, even if the husband's morality and character do not match those of his wife's because social guidelines advise that an unhappily married woman is more successful and secure than a single woman. Wollstonecraft sarcastically consoles her readers, assuring them that "his character may be a trial, but not an impediment to virtue" (142). This cultural belief is challenged in *Jane Eyre*, where, by Victorian standards, Rochester's lack of virtue will ruin Jane, and in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where through

Helen's marriage to Arthur, we witness the dire consequences of women following this advice.

Although *Vindication* is obviously not a novel, Wollstonecraft uses Gothic language and tone to suggest that women are not invariably saved by marriage but are often destroyed by it. When discussing the power dynamic between genders, giving men so much authority over women she uses Gothic phrases such as "irrational monster" (Wollstonecraft 156), "domestic brutes" (127), and man as "a ferocious beast" (179). Gothic novels after Wollstonecraft continue this pattern. Beginning with *Frankenstein* and continuing through to *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, marriage becomes dangerous for the female characters; their husbands and fiancés are violent, manipulative, and often portrayed as the novel's villains. These later Gothic novels also focus on the lives of women after their nuptial ceremony or after they endure tragic romantic experiences, while earlier Gothic romance novels conclude in marital bliss. Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë's works delve into a deeper level of social consciousness with some relationships ending in tragedy rather than in romance. They thus question the validity of the marriage plot. And, in fact, in the novels in which the heroines marry into a partnership of equals, an equality is granted by the husband, not by the law.

Because Gothic fiction was so popular, authors who wanted their critique of political and religious institutions to reach an expansive audience had only to include Gothic aesthetics. The Gothic novel was also a seemingly non-threatening form offered to an apparently nonthreatening audience: middle-class women. These female Gothic novelists were nonetheless interested in social change, and they deliberately chose the novel as a form and Gothic devices as conventions that could help them gain a wide audience; in this way, they could advance one of the most important functions of the novel, social awareness. The novels act as a call for readers to expand their social consciousness about the ways in which

marriage has injudiciously confined women's lives. Wollstonecraft uses logic, and Shelley and the Brontes use readers as witnesses to discussions about traditional gender expectations and the realities of marriage under the law of coverture. By these means, they reveal the immorality of social expectations for wives and of laws that infringe on nineteenth-century women's legal ability to protect themselves, even from their husbands. In addition to understanding women's experience, this dissertation examines the role of husbands and fiancés in nineteenth-century women's Gothic fiction. Because these male characters are created by women, the way the authors construct the men reveals women's fears of and hopes for marriage. The heroines' relationships with these sometimes monstrous men explore women's lack of power within the institution, and their inability to escape abusive marriages. The male characters can be read as representations of women's deepest nightmares about marriage, a legal contract that imprisons them. Through the male characters, these authors suggest that matrimony can endanger women and that matrimonial laws must be re-evaluated.

I argue that Mary Shelley, and the Bronte sisters use Gothic literature as an instrument to raise awareness about the tragedy of married women's lives in a patriarchal society and about laws that are specifically in place to objectify and reduce women to a slave-like position in marriage. These novels move the reader from a state of innocence about women's lives in marriage into a state of experience, an acknowledgement that the culture of capitalism and religious and political institutions trap women in emotionally, intellectually, and socioeconomically impoverished lives. One of the few powers women had over their lives was their ability to accept or decline offers of marriage; these novels examine the implications of what can happen when women are denied this power. They offer scenarios that question what the consequences should be when men omit information that would inform women's decision to marry, as some of the heroines in these novels awaken to find

themselves legally chained to a monster. The love interests in women's Gothic fiction are not idealized versions of men; instead, they range from monstrous and cruel to controlling and condescending. Because these male characters provide insight into women's fears about engagement and married life, their relationship to the female characters needs new examination in light of nineteenth-century reform of existing marriage law, specifically coverture.

In chapter one, "From Metaphor to Reality: Consent and Coverture in *Frankenstein*," I examine how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) marks the emergence of a new kind of Gothic fiction that reveals marriage as a dangerous institution for women. Shelley challenges the cultural belief that marriage is a haven for women and that self-sacrifice and submission are women's most valued attributes. In *Frankenstein*, the very attributes that reward women with husbands in Gothic Romances endanger and make women vulnerable to monstrous men. Using Victor and the creature's interactions with Elizabeth and the monstrous "Eve," as well as Safie's narrative, Shelley illustrates the dangers women face when they do not have any true sense of voluntary consent. Victor withholds vital information when he proposes, and because of his dishonesty, Elizabeth makes an uninformed decision, one which, based on nineteenth-century consent laws, she would be unable to reverse once they were married because she would have no legal rights as a wife. Victor's treatment of Elizabeth reveals an oversight in divorce laws and underscores women's vulnerability in marriage. I also examine the monstrous "Eve" who is denied consent and who is victim to the most brutal violence of any of the women in this study.

One way to read *Frankenstein* is as Shelley's demonstration of women's social worth according to nineteenth-century matrimonial laws. Married women's loss of legal status becomes a kind of life-in-death; Shelley turns that metaphoric death into a literal one to expose the extent of women's limited lives. An application of nineteenth-century marriage

laws is necessary for a more complete understanding of women's position in marriage. Between Caroline, Elizabeth, and Eve, only Caroline survives for years as a married woman. Elizabeth lives for one day, and Eve is killed before the wedding "ceremony" can take place. And the greater the level of indebtedness to the husband, the more quickly the woman is killed after the wedding ceremony, and in Eve's example, before the ceremony. There is a direct tie in this novel between these women's level of consent and the timing of their deaths in connection to their marriages, their coverture, and their loss of legal identity. One way to read their deaths is as Shelley's demonstration of women's lack of social worth under nineteenth-century matrimonial laws. Using Victor and the creature's interactions with Elizabeth and the man-made "Eve," Shelley uses *Frankenstein* as a Gothic tale, warning women of the potential dangers they face when they marry.

In chapter two, "*Wuthering Heights*: Isabella's Imprisonment and Escape from Domestic Ruin," I argue that Emily Brontë's 1847 novel details the dire consequences that follow when women receive training in submission. Brontë exposes what occurs when women's ignorance about the actual conditions of marriage places them under the rule of coverture. Heathcliff brutalizes the naïve Isabella, and through their interactions, it is clear that Brontë understands and challenges the misconceptions about matrimony and the laws about coverture and spousal violence. Heathcliff's behavior toward Isabella, both when she lives with him and after she leaves him, exposes the consequences of women's choices in husband, what can occur when women are entrapped by marriage, and how coverture haunts women even if they escape. Brontë details Isabella's deterioration as a result of her marriage and the abuse she endures from Heathcliff.

I examine Heathcliff and Isabella's marriage as exposing the effects of nineteenth-century coverture and as revealing how consent and divorce *a mensa et thoro* needed revision. I also argue that Brontë re-appropriates Gothic conventions to discuss these issues

and to expose the dangers of and the potential horrors of marriage under coverture. The novel's Gothic conventions are important because Bronte specifically uses them in scenes in which she condemns the Victorian domestic ideal of marriage and coverture. In *Wuthering Heights*, Bronte enters into social discussions about marital reform to challenge coverture and to expose it as destroying rather than protecting domestic bliss.

In chapter three, "Coverture, Abuse, and Imprisonment in *Jane Eyre*," I examine how nineteenth-century British law did not provide specific instances in which divorce should be an option, and argue that, in *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Bronte reframes marriage as an imprisoning institution for both genders. I concentrate on Bronte's uses of Gothic devices to expose the consequences of coverture, to expose marriage as an institution that fosters and perpetuates abuse, and to expose the devastating consequences of marriage on both husband and wife when divorce is legally difficult or impossible. Rochester's marriage to Bertha becomes a compelling argument against coverture, specifically for instances when spouses should be allowed to escape the confines of the institution. In *Jane Eyre*, I suggest, Bronte creates scenarios that complicate the false narrative of the ideal marriage, that depict women's vulnerability in social training in submission, and that speak to the need for just divorce laws. By grounding this study in nineteenth-century legal definitions of marriage, I demonstrate that the novel takes a position with respect to the doctrine of coverture. Specifically, it suggests that Jane's desire to have independence and equality as a married woman cannot be achieved while coverture remains in place.

In chapter four, "Revising Gender Expectations and Defining Abuse in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (1848) I show how Anne Bronte demonstrates the need to reconsider marriage's finality in instances when a spouse fails to fulfil these behavioural expectations and when women's gender expectations prepare them to be vulnerable. Bronte shows that the culture's ideals of marital domestic bliss mislead and entrap women and fail to protect

wives from abusive husbands. Bronte addresses the flawed and idealistic social ideals in contrast to the realities of the law of coverture by expanding what constitutes abuse. Bronte uses the novel, I argue here, to expose the conflicts between the social ideal and the reality of married life, with the goal of reevaluating women's roles within marriage and reconsidering the ethics of coverture.

Chapter One

From Metaphor to Reality:

Consent and Coverture in *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* marks the emergence of a new kind of Gothic fiction. While the novel has Gothic roots, Shelley deviates from the Gothic Romance plot and the traditional Gothic excess of Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin. Hers is a more realistic Gothic sensibility that does not rely on the supernatural. Its use of scientific advances often prompts the generic label of science fiction.¹ Conceived as a ghost story, it retains a sense of Gothic horror. Nora Crook writes, "Generically, *Frankenstein* is clearly a tale of terror," but it is also "a hybrid, and one to which every Gothic story that Mary Shelley is known to have read prior to 1817 made some perceptible contribution" (58). Shelley was surrounded by people who influenced her writing in ways that reflect her interest in the world around her and her interest in social reform. Through Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin's political publications and her friendship with Caroline Norton, who fought to reform child custody laws, Shelley witnessed the need for the voiceless to speak and recognized that literature could be a catalyst for social change. *Frankenstein's* "Godwinian lineage," Crook writes, "gives it not only a political context but also a conceptual framework, which makes it one of the most philosophic of all Gothic novels" (61). Shelley, like her parents, fuses social critique and fiction, transforming the Gothic novel into a genre that examines cultural philosophies, politics, scientific technologies, and gender and class issues.

Because the novel is so versatile, it can be interpreted through a variety of lenses: feminist, imperialist, psychological, and even as a commentary on parenthood and the educational system, all of which are all important to the scholarship of the novel.² Scholars have noted Mary Shelley's interest in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century philosophies,

politics and the sciences, even labeling her a “cultural critic [for] not only contributing to culture at large through production, but actively participating in a debate that was key to discussions about society and politics in the nineteenth century” (Morton 259). Therefore, it is important to examine the social issues in *Frankenstein* concerning women and marriage, especially the noticeable deaths and absence of women in the novel.

Feminist readings attribute the death of most of the female characters to the male desire to completely eliminate the need for women. In this vein, Anne Mellor writes “From a feminist viewpoint, *Frankenstein* is a book about what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman” (*Mary Shelley* 40). But this interpretation assumes that women’s primary value is reproduction. Mellor argues, “By stealing the female’s control over reproduction, Frankenstein has eliminated the female’s primary biological function and source of cultural power. Indeed, for the simple purpose of human survival, Frankenstein has eliminated the necessity to have females at all” (220). Implicit in this need to take over women’s reproductive power is a fear of women’s sexuality. Like the scholarship on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, much of the scholarship on *Frankenstein* concentrates on parenthood, specifically a focus on the parent/child relationship between Victor and the creature. Mellor interprets this parental focus as “articulat[ing], perhaps for the first time in Western literature, the most powerfully felt anxieties of pregnancy” (*Mary Shelley* 41). Her approach concentrates on male characters speaking for female characters. Even Fred Botting notes that critics have not thoroughly examined the women in the novel, “presumably, [because critics] takes such representations of women for granted as [they] proceed[] to read the novel in terms of an egotistical individual whose ambition destroys the family” (*Making Monstrous* 100).

The stereotype of submissive women has restricted feminist scholarship on the novel. The critical discussions deal with women’s absence from the text, by replacing an

examination of the female characters with an examination of male characters in female roles. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the novel as “a fictionalized rendition of the meaning of *Paradise Lost* to women” (*Madwoman* 221). They read the creature as being in the position of a woman and receiving a traditional women’s education (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 213-47). However, the novel includes female characters who have their own stories to tell about women’s position in a patriarchal society, and they deserve to be heard.

Scholars who focus on the women in *Frankenstein* tend to accept the women’s submissive role as natural. Vanessa Dickerson writes that the novel “is a complex ghost story, the specters of which are the female characters whose spiritual and often passive role in the novel is such that the women are suspended in a shadow realm of powerlessness and potential power that ultimately skews their identity” (80). She argues that “Mary Shelley was able to explore safely the implications of what it meant to be essentially silent, the ghost of a self” (80). This ghost-like existence and eventual death can also be attributed to women’s legal worth in a patriarchal society.

An examination of the effects of marital laws in the novel and the gender expectations that contribute to the women’s deaths is absent from scholarship on the novel. Shelley challenges the cultural belief that marriage is a haven for women and that self-sacrifice and submission are women’s most valued attributes. In *Frankenstein*, the very attributes that reward women with husbands in Gothic Romances endanger and make woman vulnerable to monstrous men. Fred Botting writes: “The treatment of women in *Frankenstein* thus comes to question the authority of the institutions, social, economic, domestic, in which woman has her being and is given meaning. It is not a question of the adequacy or sufficiency of women themselves but more a question of the institutional power relations which determine what a woman can be” (*Making Monstrous* 102). But Botting speaks of society in generic terms, not

the specific laws that contribute to perpetuating women's enslavement in marriage. An application of nineteenth-century marriage laws is necessary for a more complete understanding of women's position in marriage.

Under coverture, wives lose their legal status; Shelley converts that metaphoric death into a literal death to expose the extent of women's limited lives. Among Caroline, Elizabeth, and Eve, only Caroline survives for years as a married woman. Elizabeth lives for one day, and Eve is killed before the "wedding ceremony" can take place. I argue that one way to read the women's deaths in *Frankenstein* is as Shelley's demonstration of women's lack of social worth as under nineteenth-century marriage laws. Using Victor and the creature's interactions with Elizabeth and the man-made "Eve," Shelley writes *Frankenstein* as a Gothic tale, warning women of the potential dangers they face when they marry.

I

The validity of a woman's marital consent is undermined as early as her childhood, when she is initiated into a life-long education in submission and self-sacrifice. Mary Shelley imagines scenarios in which the women are, by varying degrees, indebted to their future husbands and in-laws, where the women's consent is heavily influenced by these relationships. She provides multiple examples of scenarios when the oversimplified rule of consent should be re-evaluated. This re-evaluation is necessary because a woman's consent manacles her in a institution from which she cannot legally escape. Three of the four women I examine in *Frankenstein* appear to give voluntary consent, but circumstances such as age, financial destitution, and dependence upon their future husbands heavily influence their choices. Their consent is not completely voluntary because they have no other viable option for survival than to marry. Even an institution that is advertised to women as a haven is

diseased because it resides within a patriarchal society. For Shelley, the Frankenstein family's history of adopting and marrying vulnerable young women, addresses the larger issues of a patriarchal society.³ These patriarchal laws, including marriage laws, placed women in scenarios that made them vulnerable to men. Even marriage was detrimental to women despite women having the ability to consent and despite husbands having the expectation to protect and cover their wives.⁴

In the context of marriage, the women in this novel live on the line between compulsory and voluntary consent. A provision in nineteenth-century marriage law protects women between the ages of twelve and twenty-one from consenting to a marriage before they are fully able to understand the consequences of their actions. The laws states, "Where either of the parties is a minor, i.e. above the age of matrimonial consent and under twenty-one, the consent of parents or guardians is required by the Marriage Act, 1823" (Campbell 55). This provision, however, does not apply to Caroline, Elizabeth, or the monstrous Eve. There is no provision to protect women who have no parent or guardian or who, from a young age, are conditioned to be a specific man's future wife. Shelley provides examples of when just such a provision is necessary, demonstrating that the consent laws do not address girls who, because of financial dependence, must marry to avoid destitution. These women are technically of age when they wed; but the pressure to marry begins well before the designated legal age of twenty-one, and because their consent is legally valid, their marriage is binding.

In *Frankenstein*, Caroline Beaufort's history reveals issues with women's protection under the consent law, and the consequences of limiting women's primary value to being a self-sacrificing wife and mother. Caroline's self-sacrifice and submission are celebrated virtues in the nineteenth century, but they are virtues that further expose an already vulnerable population, and this population is manipulated and put at a disadvantage by the laws of consent and women's lack of any real understanding about coverture because

marriage is their only possibility for financial stability and respectability. Caroline's back story reflects the financial circumstances that women in the lower and middle classes might have faced, circumstances that contaminate women's consent. She is poor and alone, the sole caregiver of an ailing father, but she does not abandon him to save herself. She cares for "him with the greatest tenderness" but realizes "with despair that their little fund [is] rapidly decreasing, and that there [is] no other prospect of support" (18). Caroline's actions prepare her to be a heroine; she is courageous and generous, but these same attributes also prepare her for a life of self-sacrifice, and they demonstrate the desperation of her situation. In this period she would have had few solutions, especially because it is clear that she has no family who can offer financial assistance. She must be independently industrious, and Shelley endows Caroline with "a mind of an uncommon mould; [whose] courage rose to support her in her adversity. She procured plain work; she plaited straw; and by various means contrived to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life (18).

Caroline has found a way to survive, but she lives in a society that denies women the opportunity to earn a living wage or to advance to a higher economic class through a profession, as men could. The only real option Caroline has to avoid a lifetime of destitution is marriage, and her limited choice is to either accept or decline a man who proposes to her. Even that choice, however, is tainted because of her financial situation. Caroline has found a way to provide food for her father and herself, but the limitations of her gender threaten to push them into destitution. When "[h]er father grew worse; her time was more entirely occupied in attending him; her means of subsistence decreased; and in the tenth month her father died in her arms, leaving her an orphan and a beggar" (18). She is valued for this self-sacrifice, but it is one that renders her vulnerable. This exceptional mind is reduced to only one choice: to accept or decline M. Frankenstein's offer of marriage. Clearly, working-class

women in these situations are influenced by their financial need. Therefore, in situations like these, the consent laws are not adequate.

The relationship between M. Frankenstein and Caroline is one of unbalanced power, one that cannot be addressed by the oversimplified consent laws. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, English law defined marriage as “the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others” (Campbell 55). The specification of voluntary is significant because it both forbids and fails to acknowledge a marriage where one spouse is, by circumstance, forced into the union. For Shelley, the voluntary aspect of consent is more complicated than a dichotomous voluntary or involuntary. The validity of consent, she suggests, is one aspect of marriage law that needs to be more closely examined.

The consent law is particularly important because of the situation to which women are giving consent. When women married, coverture technically unites husband and wife into one entity, with the wife being absorbed into the husband (Blackstone 443). It is an institution in which women lose themselves. The events leading to Caroline’s consent illustrate her vulnerability. When Caroline’s father dies, she is alone and destitute. “This last blow overcame her; and she knelt by Beaufort’s coffin, weeping bitterly, when [M. Frankenstein] entered the chamber. He came like a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care, and after the interment of his friend he conducted her to Geneva, and placed her under the protection of a relation. Two years after this event Caroline became his wife” (18-19). Their relationship is not that of two adults falling in love and marrying; they are of a dependent and a provider. Shelley offers no details of any courtship, but the circumstances suggest that she is placed with a relative of M. Frankenstein until she comes of age.

Caroline’s options are grim. Her choices are poverty, prostitution, or marriage to the wealthy family friend who is responsible for saving her. If Caroline does not marry M.

Frankenstein, she would risk being cast out without his financial support. It is a situation that taints the legitimacy of her consent and sends the message that women owe their lives to the men who save them from poverty. But Caroline's self-sacrifice rewards her with a kind and wealthy husband. There is no sense, in the novel, that M. Frankenstein was ever cruel or abusive to Caroline or to his children, and, in fact, Caroline seems the most comfortable with her position as a self-sacrificing married woman. At least, she is the only woman in the novel who does not question this role. She also survives the longest as a married woman, suggesting that the role suits some women. Her marriage is one of the few in this study where the wife is not abused, but she is denied the opportunity to use her intellect and talents and is reduced to viewing her self-sacrifice as her greatest possible contribution to the world. It is a position that eventually costs her her life.

One could argue that Caroline is abused, not by M. Frankenstein, but by the patriarchal society that demands a woman's self-negation in service to her family. Caroline sacrificed her livelihood to look after her father; but once she is married, she continues to sacrifice herself to the comfort of her family. When Caroline hears that Elizabeth is recovering from scarlet fever, "she could no longer debar herself from her society, and entered her chamber long before the danger of infection was past" (24). Caroline risks her life to tend to Elizabeth, while Victor and M. Frankenstein stay away to save themselves. She has been trained to sacrifice herself in this way. The first time she did so she was rewarded with marriage; the second time, she offers Elizabeth as human sacrifice in marriage to Victor. As she lies on her death-bed after contracting scarlet fever, she tells Elizabeth and Victor, "'Alas! I regret that I am taken from you; and, happy and beloved as I have been, is it not hard to quit you all? But these are not thoughts befitting me; I will endeavor to resign myself cheerfully to death, and will indulge a hope of meeting you in another world'" (24-25). Her role as a wife and mother is to comfort the family and to suffer in silence, but this

extreme example is an unrealistic expectation of any human. Yet to maintain her good standing as a model wife, she must be cheerful as she dies so she does not upset her family, and Caroline sustains a model that Elizabeth has been trained to follow. It is also important to note that the only way readers know that Caroline is happy is through the account given by her son. She does not speak for herself in the novel the way we hear Jane Eyre speak. One might even think that an intelligent but repressed woman rushed into the sick room as a way to escape her life. Her “eagerness” to attend Elizabeth could be seen as a death wish.

Elizabeth’s plight also reflects the problems with English consent laws and in determining women’s most valued traits: domestic submission and self-sacrifice. Shelley creates in Elizabeth “the pattern domestic heroine” (Richardson 208). Like Caroline’s situation, Elizabeth’s demonstrates the inadequacies in consent laws to protect women who follow the nineteenth-century definition of an ideal woman. But unlike Caroline, Elizabeth is not as comfortable in this submissive, self-sacrificing role. Because Elizabeth fulfills her social expectations, she endures hardship and suffering, and the sympathy she evokes as a helpless victim challenged readers of the day to rethink marriage laws and social expectations for women. According to the law, the “capacity of contracting a valid marriage . . . depends on (1) the capacity of consent (Campbell 55). Voluntary consent and the capacity to consent is specified, yet the law is gender-biased in its determination of who is capable of giving consent. For males, “The English law, following the canon law, has fixed the age of matrimonial consent at fourteen . . . and twelve in the female” (Campbell 55). This discrepancy puts girls at a disadvantage because they are not yet mature enough to fully understand the legal consequences of their consent. According to the law, a girl under twelve cannot legally consent to marriage, but “the attempt to celebrate a marriage between persons either of whom is below that age is now, however, in this country so rare that it is not surprising that doubts should exist upon the effect of such a proceeding” (Campbell 55). It is

clear that the courts did not take into account that any one below twelve would be in the position to consent, that women's consent is not an issue that needs to be addressed, but Shelley proves that it does need to be considered.

Elizabeth's future is determined by Caroline, who perpetuates the cycle of denying women legal consent. Like Caroline, Elizabeth is financially dependent on the Frankenstein. While Caroline is a dependent for two years before she marries M. Frankenstein, Elizabeth is dependent on the Frankenstein from infancy. She is so bound to them that her consent is hardly her own. She is raised and conditioned to be Victor's wife, and it is her guardians who repeatedly insist upon the union. Because Caroline sacrificed her life for Elizabeth, Elizabeth likely feels indebted to her. I do not suggest that M. Frankenstein or Caroline maliciously enslave Elizabeth. But their authority to mold Victor's future wife to his needs puts Elizabeth at a disadvantage for the rest of her life because Victor's life and needs have continually been prioritized over hers.

Elizabeth's family situation also challenges the credibility of her consent. From infancy, Elizabeth is unwanted and unloved by her father who writes to M. Frankenstein asking him

to take charge of the infant Elizabeth, the only child of his deceased sister. 'It is my wish,' he said, 'that you should consider her as your own daughter, and educate her thus. Her mother's fortune is secured to her, the documents of which I will commit to your keeping. Reflect upon this proposition; and decide whether you would prefer educating your niece yourself to her being brought up by a stepmother.' (19)

In the 1818 version of the novel, Elizabeth is a blood relative, Victor's first cousin, and has a small fortune of her own, so she is not financially dependent, but she is still bound to them because they are her only family once her father disowns her. The Frankenstein are the only

people who are willing to adopt her, and it is unlikely that she would reject them when doing so would mean deserting her whole world and the only family she has ever known. The absence of any relationship with her father and his side of the family increases Elizabeth's dependence on the Frankensteins. Even as she matures and reaches adulthood, her biological father's lack of presence in her life or at her wedding illustrates the extent of her isolation. They are her only family. She has been rejected and abandoned once, and she cannot afford to reject those who took her in at her most vulnerable, especially when Victor's "father did not hesitate, and immediately went to Italy that he might accompany the little Elizabeth to her future home" (19). M. Frankenstein's motives appear innocent, and it is Caroline who later determines Elizabeth's future role as Victor's wife. But it is important to note that this is the second time that M. Frankenstein has saved an alienated and vulnerable girl who then marries into the family.

Like Caroline's qualities, Elizabeth's feminine virtues are those that are most valued in nineteenth-century women and are the same qualities that lead to her demise. Caroline immediately cultivates submission and self-sacrifice in Elizabeth, so she can be Victor's ideal companion and future wife. Even as an infant, Elizabeth "shewed signs . . . of a gentle and affectionate disposition. These indications, and a desire to bind as closely as possible the ties of domestic love, determined [Caroline] to consider Elizabeth as [Victor's] future wife" (19). Elizabeth's gentleness and affection impress Caroline because they are qualities of a good wife who will not challenge their family's desire for her to marry the man of their choice, Victor. The focus in this scene is on Caroline's decision for Elizabeth to marry Victor, not on Elizabeth and Victor's relationship. In a telling addition, Victor points out that it was "a design which she never found reason to repent" (19). Again, the emphasis is on Caroline never regretting her desire to see Victor and Elizabeth marry. But she dies before she can witness the event, and she is not the one who can legally consent to the marriage. It is

another instance when women place other women in vulnerable scenarios, as Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* does to Isabella. This sort of predetermined arrangement by a parent or guardian is seen later in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and in *Jane Eyre*, but in only one of those scenarios does the marriage eventually succeed after overcoming turmoil. This commonality in predetermined consent suggests that this kind of arrangement was not uncommon in the nineteenth century and would have affected all classes of women. What makes Elizabeth all the more vulnerable is that she has no extended family or friends who could assist her if she does not want to marry Victor; she has no choice but to marry him.

Many women in the period were instructed in how to be the ideal, angelic wife, an instruction that makes them vulnerable to and dependent on their future husband. Elizabeth is even more vulnerable and controlled because she is specifically trained to be Victor's wife, and Victor, from childhood, knows that she will be his. This situation reinforces the view of women as property. Elizabeth exists only for his pleasure. One could argue that theirs is a kind of arranged marriage that also denies Victor's consent. However, while Victor is encouraged to attend university and pursue his dreams, Elizabeth is constantly reminded of her dependence on the Frankensteins and her ultimate purpose to be Victor's future wife. He can reject her as a potential spouse, and she could continue to live as his cousin, but she cannot reject him without also rejecting the rest of the family. She has nowhere else to go because there is no sense that she could live with her birth father in Italy who has already rejected and abandoned her. While Elizabeth is not created for Victor as the monstrous Eve is created for the creature, she is still victim to a system that allows her to be socially conditioned from infancy to be Victor's wife.

Interestingly, Blackstone believed that English laws favored women. In *Commentaries*, he writes that "during the coverture, . . . even the disabilities which the wife lies under are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit: so great a favourite is

the female sex of the laws of England” (Blackstone 444). His belief that English marriage laws demonstrate “a partiality to the female sex” seems to focus on instances where husbands must pay off wife’s debts and financially support them so long as they remain faithful (Blackstone 444). But the idea of consent and women’s indebtedness to men, this novel suggests, is more complicated than that. Elizabeth is fully aware of her future role as Victor’s wife, and in an act that perpetuates the circumstances that oppress women and deny their true consent, Caroline performs a kind of marriage ceremony between Elizabeth and Victor. On her death-bed Caroline “joined the hands of Elizabeth and myself: ‘My children,’ she said, ‘my firmest hopes of future happiness were placed on the prospect of your union. This expectation will now be the consolation of your father’” (24-25). This emotional union ties Elizabeth to Victor, and he remains confident that Elizabeth is his. She has no real consent, even if the law grants it to her, because she has been emotionally bound to him. Elizabeth’s situation is another example of a complication in the law of consent. Caroline and M. Frankenstein care for both children, but Victor is their son and heir; therefore, Elizabeth has no guardian to act solely in her best interests. The Frankensteins have predetermined her life for her, circumstances that complicate her voluntary consent, and thus the validity of her marriage.

Shelley’s portrayal of Elizabeth and Victor’s relationship exposes women’s position in the social hierarchy and reflects their social conditioning to live in service to their husbands. Even in childhood, Victor repeatedly describes Elizabeth in terms that illustrate how easy is it to dominate her and that value her for her willingness to sacrifice her needs for his. Elizabeth is “docile and good tempered,” she is “gay and playful,” “lively and animated,” “and her disposition uncommonly affectionate” (20). Her role is to be his companion, and she plays it well. Victor also values her ability to “enjoy liberty, yet . . . submit with . . . grace . . . to constraint and caprice Her figure was light and airy; and,

though capable of enduring great fatigue, she appeared the most fragile creature in the world (20). Elizabeth enjoys liberty, which speaks to her true self, and the truth about any human being, but Victor's emphasis on her willingness to submit exposes women's reality. Her ability to withstand pain and to submit, to suffer in silence are also valued, but they are traits that make women vulnerable to abuse. Victor emphasizes Elizabeth's passivity and how she adapts herself to be a pleasing companion to him, qualities of a good wife. In the nineteenth century, it was expected that wives submitted to their husbands' tastes and values, and throughout Elizabeth's upbringing, she has been conditioned to be Victor's ideal wife. She has no other identity; she has no other purpose or role in life. She has been reduced to representing the sole value women were perceived to have—as their husband's property and child bearer. Shelley's stark presentation of women's role also reveals the truth about nineteenth-century women's lives. They are conditioned solely for marriage.

Shelley also uses Elizabeth to undermine self-sacrifice as woman's most valuable trait. Like Caroline, Elizabeth is most celebrated when she suffers for those whom she loves, and for Elizabeth, this is Victor. On her deathbed, Caroline dictates Elizabeth's duty to take of the family. She tells Elizabeth, "My love, you must supply my place to your younger cousins" (24-25). Caroline does not give Victor the same advice, nor does she even ask that he protect Elizabeth or treat her with respect. All the responsibility for the care of the family falls to Elizabeth, who exists for others and has no identity or purpose beyond caregiver. Her life is perilously close to a form of slavery. She repeatedly sacrifices her own comfort to provide comfort for the family, as when Victor goes to university and after Caroline, William, Justine, and Henry die. Each time, Victor heralds "the heroic and suffering Elizabeth, whom [he] tenderly loved, and whose existence was bound up in [his]" (60).

Victor's language here underscores Elizabeth's situation. Her life's purpose is in service to him. Her situation represents the underlying problem with marriage laws,

specifically coverture, into which all women entered when they consented to marry. In a parasitic relationship, Victor seems to thrive on Elizabeth's self-sacrifice. Their intertwined lives consume and destroy Elizabeth while they strengthen Victor. When Victor prepares to go to Ingolstadt to college,

Elizabeth endeavoured to renew the spirit of cheerfulness in our little society. Since the death of her aunt, her mind had acquired new firmness and vigour. She determined to fulfill her duties with the greatest exactness; and she felt that that most imperious duty, of rendering her uncle and cousins happy, had devolved upon her. She consoled me, amused her uncle, instructed my brothers, and I never beheld her so enchanting as at this time, when she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself (25).

It is not when Elizabeth pursues her own intellectual interests that Victor is impressed with and attracted to her. He only values her when she sacrifices her own needs to help others to the point of neglecting herself. It is a quality that reduces women to a ghost of their true selves. Self-sacrifice makes her vulnerable to a man who will have legal control over her when they marry. As Vanessa Dickerson aptly writes, the "Frankenstein women do not fully realize their roles as keepers, are never acknowledged in time as substantial or significant beings with whom the restless men can identify and thus share their secrets" (Dickerson 87). She places emphasis on the belief in women's limitations, however, not on the laws that deprive them of identity or agency.

Elizabeth discloses that she has desires beyond what the Frankenstein's have allowed her only when Victor plans his trip with Henry, delaying the wedding for two more years. She tells Victor that she "only regretted that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience, and cultivating her understanding" (106). But she does nothing further to

pursue these desires. Even though Victor is aware of them, moreover, he makes no effort to help her fulfill them while he is gone nor does he offer to support her on this intellectual journey once he has returned. Elizabeth and Victor's relationship thus already mirrors one of a wife bound by coverture. She has no legal or social standing to question or to challenge Victor when he abandons her for two years while he travels. Victor essentially keeps her prisoner while he creates a female creature, a crime he conceals from Elizabeth. Botting argues that the women in the novel "are destroyed by their own obedience to their prescribed roles . . . There is precious little felicity for women who remain true and diligent in the pursuance of their allotted duties" (*Making Monstrous* 101). He continues, "The women in *Frankenstein* rarely speak out in voices of discontent and certainly do not clamour for better treatment or equal status" (100). But their silence is more than obedience to social roles. The law of coverture denies them a complete legal identity and reduces them to property; therefore, it is not shocking that they cannot defy the law. Their social position prevents them from taking any action to save themselves.

In addition to questioning the morality of women's code of submission, Shelley also challenges the idea that wives should be expected to reform their husbands, and she reveals the consequences of women's suffering to change others. This suffering manifests itself in Elizabeth's physical appearance, an appearance that will be paralleled by that of the other heroines in this study, Helen Huntingdon, Isabella Heathcliff and Jane Eyre. Victor's abuse is subversive: he is not physically violent with Elizabeth; instead, he is emotionally brutal. He repeatedly reinforces Elizabeth's lack of significance and position in his life, a treatment that is particularly cruel considering she has been abandoned by her father. After William and Justine die,

Elizabeth was sad and desponding; she no longer took delight in her ordinary occupations; all pleasure seemed to her sacrilege toward the dead; eternal woe

and tears she then thought was the just tribute she should pay to innocence so blasted and destroyed. She was no longer that happy creature, who in earlier youth wandered with me on the banks of the lake, and talked with ecstasy of our future prospects. She had become grave, and often conversed of the inconstancy of fortune, and the instability of human life (60-61).

Victor reminds her that she is unwanted and unimportant. He torments her psychologically by isolating her, lying to her, and vicariously killing her friends and family. He is slowly ruining her life. Because of him, Elizabeth begins to deteriorate, and Victor knows he is the cause of this transformation, but he keeps this from her. It is a form of psychological abuse; she just does not yet realize that Victor is the abuser.

Shelley's description of Elizabeth's transformation as the wedding day approaches captures the innate fear women should have when consenting to legally enter coverture and reinforces marriage as a destructive institution. Jane Eyre and Helen Huntingdon both experience this fear as their day of matrimony nears as well. Elizabeth "was thinner, and had lost much of that heavenly vivacity that had before charmed me; but her gentleness, and soft looks of compassion, made her a more fit companion for one blasted and miserable as I was" (132). Elizabeth becomes increasingly melancholy as her wedding day approaches, and Victor welcomes her despair. Rather than releasing her from her consent, he is satisfied with her misery because it benefits him. His words recall a line from Christopher Marlow's *Doctor Faustus*. In the play, Mephistopheles tells Faustus that Satan wants more souls with him in hell because "Misery loves company." This, too, is Victor's motivation. For Victor, misery loves company, so he and Elizabeth will be miserable together. Here again, wives are expected to conform to their husbands' tastes even if those tastes, as with Victor, are detrimental to the wife.

Elizabeth's attempts to fulfill her role, the one Caroline and society have assigned to her, transform her into a victim and Victor into a vampire who slowly drains her life from her. Even when Elizabeth succeeds in comforting Victor, the emotional and physical toll is destroying her. Victor recalls, "Elizabeth alone has the power to draw me from these fits; her gentle voice would soothe me when transported by passion, and inspire me with human feelings when sunk in torpor. She wept with me, and for me. When reason returned, she would remonstrate, and endeavor to inspire me with resignation" (132). Her role is exhausting, especially given that it is her primary duty, but it entails changing Victor's mentality and personality and values, which only he can do. She is given an impossible task. She seems to exist only in service to him. She is emotionally enslaved. Other times, however, Elizabeth fails to fulfill her duty and reform Victor. He admits: "the gentle affection of my beloved Elizabeth was inadequate to draw me from the depth of my despair" (101). He seems to hold her responsible for failing rather than taking responsibility for his own emotions.

Botting claims that the women in the novel "remain securely within their families performing their domestic duties as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters more than adequately and with hardly a complaint" (*Making Monstrous* 100). But Elizabeth again reveals her dissatisfaction with her gender role. She challenges the idea that women are responsible for their husbands' happiness when she tells Victor that the family all "'depend upon you; and if you are miserable, what must be our feelings?'" (106). Elizabeth's statement is significant. She questions the validity of women's expectation to reform their lovers. She reminds Victor that, in essence, he alone is responsible for his own happiness; Elizabeth cannot be expected to elevate his mood anytime he feels miserable, and she reminds him that he is not fulfilling his duty to care for his family. She also unwittingly reprimands him for being the source of their misery, though she does not yet know his secret.

Elizabeth and Victor's relationship is a criticism of a society that limits women so extensively, then assigns them a duty that they cannot perform because it depends too greatly on others' personal responsibility. This role and this expectation ultimately serve to further degrade women and keep them enslaved.

In all the novels in this study, women enter into marriage without a full understanding of the man they are marrying and without options to escape once they discover the truth. Their inexperience challenges both the validity of consent to an unknown, and the inability to escape from marriage once that consent is given. It is a situation that traps women in marriages and is one that needs to be rectified. Shelley also addresses the oversimplified definition of consent and how that attenuated consent impacts coverture. In a scenario that nineteenth-century women would have feared, Elizabeth, without the full knowledge of what she is entering, sentences herself to a lifetime with a monster who will have legal authority over her. Another complication to Elizabeth's consent is that it is given without her knowing the truth about her future husband. Unlike Isabella in *Wuthering Heights* or Helen in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, no one warns Elizabeth about Victor's capacity for cruelty. Victor withholds vital information that would allow Elizabeth to make an informed decision regarding his proposal. In a letter to Elizabeth, he writes:

I have one secret, Elizabeth, a dreadful one; when revealed to you, it will chill your frame with horror, and then, far from being surprised at my misery, you will only wonder that I survive what I have endured. I will confide this tale of misery and terror to you the day after our marriage shall take place; for, my sweet cousin, there must be perfect confidence between us. But until then, I conjure you, do not mention or allude to it. This I most earnestly entreat, and I know you will comply (131).

Victor gains her voluntary consent to trap her in coverture. He denies her the ability to make an informed choice. Yet, because of the consent law, even if she wanted a divorce once she discovered the truth about Victor, the law does not provide an amendment for such an instance, even though her consent was manipulated. According to the law, “Fraud will sometimes be a ground for annulling the marriage; as on account of banns having been published, or license obtained, under false names, . . . but unless the name was assumed for the purpose of defrauding the other party, or the parents, the circumstance of the marriage being in a fictitious name will not invalidate it” (Blackstone 438). Only misrepresentation about identity is categorized as fraud. Victor does not lie about his identity, so she could not dissolve the marriage once she discovered his secret, although she never gets that chance. Because of Victor’s deceit, Elizabeth makes an uninformed decision, one which, based on nineteenth-century coverture laws, she will be unable to reverse once they are married. And, in a particularly sinister statement, Victor insists that he will wait to divulge his secret until after they marry so there will be “perfect confidence between” them (131). He alludes to the kind of spousal confidence guaranteed under coverture: that wives cannot testify against their husbands because they are one single legal entity. While one could argue that Elizabeth should have insisted that Victor inform her, she has been trained in self-sacrifice and submission, traits that Victor exploits.

Victor’s conscious deceit in acquiring Elizabeth’s consent serves as an example of a scenario that complicates existing marriage laws. Once Elizabeth marries, her mother’s fortune and her legal existence will be controlled by the very man who destroyed what she loves most, her family, and this man has tarnished the one goal society trains her to attain, marriage. Her reaction to her upcoming nuptials demonstrates the fear of relinquishing one’s entire existence to another human being. Victor recalls, “She looked forward to our union with placid contentment, not unmingled with a little fear, which past misfortunes had

impressed, that what now appeared certain and tangible happiness, might soon dissipate into an airy dream, and leave no trace but deep and everlasting regret” (133). Victor’s language could be read as Elisabeth’s fear that yet another obstacle will delay or prevent her marriage to Victor. However, given what readers know about Victor’s secret and about Elisabeth’s helplessness, his statement could also be read as Elisabeth’s fears that her marriage will not provide the domestic bliss she desires. Their marriage might instead become a domestic nightmare that she will regret entering but will have no power to escape. Elisabeth is murdered before Victor can divulge his secret that he is ultimately responsible for William’s, Justine’s, and Henry’s deaths. However, had she lived to learn that Victor is the source of all the misery and suffering in her life, she would have felt “deep and everlasting regret,” mingled with horror (133).

Elisabeth’s growing fear and physical deterioration as the wedding-day approaches demonstrates Shelley’s warning that marriage can be dangerous for women. Her metaphoric death is already starting to take effect. On Elisabeth’s wedding day, which Victor refers to as “the day that was to fulfill my wishes and my destiny, she was melancholy, and a presentiment of evil pervaded her” (133). This is not the blissful bride of a Gothic Romance, but a terrified, isolated woman who has no choice but to marry a man who willfully deceives. It is a Bluebeard-like situation, except that Elisabeth is aware of a secret but is murdered before she can discover it. Victor attributes her fear before the wedding to the secret. He says, “perhaps also she thought of the dreadful secret, which I had promised to reveal to her the following day” (133). Victor acknowledges, even in hindsight, that the presentiment of evil is not her death, but the secret she would discover. What makes his effect on her so sinister is that he recognizes it, acknowledges that he is the cause of it, actively hides it from her, and continues with the wedding, which manacles her to the very man who is the cause of all her suffering. The closer she gets to the wedding day, the more she deteriorates. Her

situation would terrify nineteenth-century readers because there is no process by which women can protect or save themselves from such a scenario once they are married. Victor has not beaten her or committed adultery, which could grant her a divorce *a mensa et thoro*, nor has Victor committed fraud, as the law defines it, but Shelley demonstrates that there are other instances beyond those the law decrees that should be a legitimate reason to void a marriage.

Elizabeth's murder serves as Shelley's literal representation of women's metaphoric death when they marry. Women are no longer considered legal individuals once they wed; therefore, losing their legal status becomes a kind of death. Dickerson's claim that the female characters have a "wraith-like existence" is one that supports legal interpretation (82). While she applies this reading to all the women in the novel, under coverture they become mere specters of their former selves. Once Elizabeth marries, she does not survive the night because she has lost any right to personal agency and has become Victor's property. Her death is also the result of Victor's emotional abuse. One contributing factor to her death is that Victor abandons her on their wedding night. In a scenario that reverses the traditional Gothic Romance plot in which a hero rescues an abandoned damsel in distress from a villain, Victor abandons Elizabeth, forcing her into the position of a damsel in distress, all in an effort to protect himself. Armed with a gun for his own safety, he roams the halls, checking doors and windows, leaving Elizabeth unprotected, uninformed, and vulnerable. Victor's narcissism and neglect contribute to her death. She suffers a terrifyingly brutal death alone on her wedding night because of Victor. The creature murders Elizabeth, but this scene in which Victor describes the position of her dead body can also be read as Shelley's presentation of Victor as culpable in her murder, as he is with the creature's other victims. Victor describes the scene; "She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair" (135). While this death

scene is tame compared to that of the monstrous Eve, it emphasizes nineteenth-century women's limited duties and inability to save themselves. Once they marry, they become lifeless and inanimate.

II

The monstrous Eve's situation most profoundly challenges the laws of consent and coverture. Of the three women, she is the most vulnerable because her existence, the specifics of her appearance, and her life's purpose have been predetermined. She will exist solely for the creature who will be her father-figure and husband. One could interpret the lines from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that appear on the title page of *Frankenstein* exclusively in relation to the creature, but they become increasingly poignant when attributed to Eve, as if she were speaking to Victor or to the creature. "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/From darkness to promote me?" (3). These lines are especially disturbing when considering the motive for her creation and her violent fate. Alan Richardson argues that the creature is "a representation of nineteenth-century constructions of the feminine" (207). But a close examination of the creature's specifications for his own ideal woman exposes the level of control nineteenth-century men had over their wives under the law of coverture. The creature tells Victor, "You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse" (98). His demand for property, in essence for a slave, exposes the monstrosity of a patriarchal society in which women have such little value. A man had a right to own property, but a wife did not have any such right; and in the novel, while the creature can

demand such a right, Eve cannot. Before Eve's birth, she is already reduced to an object, and a denial of any independent identity has already been initiated.

The creature demonstrates the level of authority nineteenth-century husbands had over wives when he specifies Eve's appearance and predetermines her life. In a near comic understatement, the creature says, "What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me" (98). She will exist only to satisfy his needs. As much importance as he places on her role in comforting him, it is a role that reduces her to servitude. Victor and the creature's plan to condition and create Eve specifically to be the creature's wife parallels the Frankenstein's plan to condition Elizabeth to be Victor's wife. Elizabeth and Eve will both be their husband's property, a position that makes them dispensable. The creature will use Eve's alienation to control her and manipulate her emotions, choosing what and how she will feel when she is bound to him. He says, "It is true, we shall be monsters, cutoff from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! My creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!" (98-99). The creature decides that she will be miserable, that she will sympathize with him, and that she will be attached to him. His determination again parallels Victor's satisfaction on discovering Elizabeth's despair because they can be miserable together.

The creature's embedded narrative has been read as being "an allegory of the sufferings of women" in which the creature is "as nameless as a woman in is patriarchal society" (qtd. in Botting, *Making Monstrous* 104). This view offers insight into women's position, but the scenes in which Eve's creation is planned uncovers a more sinister treatment

of women in the novel. The monstrous Eve has not consented to any of this. In fact, the creature places more importance on Victor's consent than on hers. He tells Victor, "If you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of South America" (99). He even uses the term consent, but again, only in reference to Victor. His future bride's desires and interests are not considered. According to social custom, "The husband's responsibility was to support his wife according to his taste and ability" (Stetson 6). Therefore, husbands assumed that their wives would relinquish their own tastes and opinions when they wed. The creature already treats her as if she were under coverture because it is understood that, as his property, she must obey him. He continues, "I swear to you, by the earth which I inhabit, and by you that made me, that, with the companion you bestow, I will quit the neighborhood of man, and dwell, as it may chance, in the most savage of places" (99). The creature seems to have no fear or doubt that Eve will be a submissive and selfless wife who embodies the qualities of the ideal nineteenth-century wife. He also selects her home, her diet, and her character. He says, "My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed of dried leaves; the sun will shone on us as on man, and will ripen our food" (99). Her needs are not considered. She is expected to follow him to live in an isolated and unforgiving local. She will adapt to his tastes, just as nineteenth-century women were expected to do. But just as the creature longs for a relationship with Victor, the female creature, too, may long for a filial relationship with Victor, her creator. However, Victor and the creature deny her even an attempt at any such relationship. Victor demands that the creature swear that he will leave humans once he "deliver[s] into [the creature's] hands a female who will accompany [him] in [his] exile" (100). The vocabulary is that of birth, but also of possession. Her existence depends upon

the creature; she is created specifically to serve him. Her abandonment is another link to Elizabeth. Both women are unwanted and rejected by their fathers, leaving them vulnerable to and dependent on their future husbands.

Although Eve resides beyond human laws, she is still expected to uphold nineteenth century gender expectations. Eve is expected to reform her husband, like Elizabeth, like Helen in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, like Jane in *Jane Eyre*, and like Isabella in *Wuthering Heights*. The creature desires a female companion because he believes that his “evil passions will have fled, for [he] shall meet with sympathy” (99). Like Victor, the creature depends on a wife to lift his spirits. While he claims that he will reform, given the poor track record of the abusive husband’s reform in the other novels in this study, it is unlikely that he would be the exception. The creature tells Victor,

you still refuse to bestow on me the only benefit that can soften my heart, and render me harmless. If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes, and I shall become a thing, of whose existence every one will be ignorant . . . my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being. (100)

He claims that she would be an equal, but she will only be equal in isolation and misery, not in their relationship. Because he has summoned her into existence and predetermined her life without her consent, he owns her. She will be in a position where no one would be able to save her if the creature continues to act on his violent impulses. At this point in the novel, the creature has already committed two murders: William’s by strangulation, and Justine’s by execution. He is clearly willing to resort to violence when he is distressed, angry, or vengeful. Therefore, Eve would be more vulnerable to spousal violence and cruelty because she is the most isolated of all the women in this study. She is not recognized as human, so

she resides outside the realm of any legal authority; thus, she has no one to whom she can appeal for assistance.

While Caroline and Elizabeth challenge and question the specifics of consent, it is Eve's situation that most explicitly violates the law of consent. She, like all women once they marry, is not recognized by the legal system. But unlike Caroline and Elizabeth, Eve has no knowledge of the ideal social expectations of a nineteenth-century wife. Botting argues that, "To deviate from the norms of female propriety is to invoke the wrath of the institutions which police the existence of women within prescribed identities" (*Making Monstrous* 108). Any woman who does not conform to social guidelines will be cast out or severely punished by society, and before Eve even has the opportunity to rebel, her future is determined for her again—this time by Victor, who assumes that she will reject any gender expectations or codes of conduct.

Eve might not recognize these social guidelines, and Victor fears that she will not recognize the society or social laws do not recognize her. He articulates his fear:

I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighborhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again

alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species. (114)

One cause for Victor's destruction of Eve is his realization that she did not consent to the arrangement he made with the creature. She is denied true consent, as is Elizabeth, and Victor fears that she will not live by social laws as Elizabeth will. However, he does not seem able or willing to transfer those same concerns about consent to Elisabeth. He fears a woman who is not bound or guided by any social or moral code. He also fears that Eve will reject and abandon or "divorce" the creature, leaving him miserable and potentially violent because he might attempt to destroy humans if he is abandoned again.

There seems to be an underlying fear of what men will do if they are not reformed by their wives and if they lose the ability to control their wives. For example, Victor fears that if she is not physically attracted to the creature "she will prefer to mate with ordinary males" (Mellor 224). Mellor writes that, "implicit here is Frankenstein's horror that, given the gigantic strength of this female, she would have the power to seize and even rape the male she might choose" (224). Critics agree that this scene reflects Victor's fear of women's sexuality. Hoeveler also argues that "Victor's inability to allow the female creature to live is, for feminist critics, more than narcissism; it is another instance of the misogyny and fear of female sexuality that Shelley exposes and condemns" (52). This continued focus on her sexuality is important, but it overlooks her connection to the other women in the novel who share a similar Pygmalion-like conditioning to be the ideal wife. One of the most significant differences between Eve and the other women in the novel is her size and strength. Eve "defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing—but available only to their lawful husbands" (Mellor 224). Indeed, Victor is only comfortable when he is in an uncontested dominant role. I argue that Victor's crimes against Eve represent the conditions of women living a patriarchal society, conditions that

become a prison and a hell for women who must be enslaved within in or be executed if they defy it. Women are powerless and vulnerable to the very men they are expected to reform. This scene also demonstrates the social fear that society will collapse if women are allowed to leave their husbands. These fears lead Victor to brutally destroy Eve before she can “awaken” and “marry” the creature. Victor’s violence is represents society’s treatment of women: it denies them personal agency and legal power, metaphorically killing them.

Ironically, Shelley uses Victor’s various fears about completing Eve to demonstrate the inadequacies of consent and coverture laws. Victor’s predictions of the possible disasters that could occur once Eve is born are also examples of what a man would do if his identity and freedom were taken away. It is the only time he considers what it would be like to live as a woman bound by coverture. The fear that she would reject a predetermined life of coverture causes him to euthanize/abort her. He recalls, “I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose existence he depended for happiness, and, with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew” (115). Shelley kills Eve rather than subject her to a made-to-order, extreme version of an arranged marriage where she, too, has no opportunity to decline the creature’s proposal. But this is not an argument that husbands should be allowed to kill their wives to spare their pain. Shelley is articulating that wives already live a death-like existence when they have no legal identity, authority, or consent. Coverture metaphorically kills women by denying them agency.

The methods Victor uses to destroy Eve suggest his potential for committing violence against women; “The remains for the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (118). The image of him standing among the remains of a dismembered woman is highly disturbing. His ability to so savagely and brutally destroy a helpless and vulnerable woman

reveals his potential for violence. Mellor argues that Victor “violently reasserts a male control over the female body, penetrating and mutilating the female creature at his feet in an image that suggests a violent rape” (224). He fears the female creature’s possible “uninhibited female sexuality” (Mellor 224), and to control it, he enacts on her that which he fears in her. This scene illustrates Victor’s innate monstrosity, especially those over whom he has unbridled control. He will be the legal guardian of Elizabeth, in a marriage from which she cannot escape; thus, she will be married to a monster. Victor does not physically abuse Elizabeth, but the image of him standing in a crime scene, confirms that Elizabeth will be marrying a madman. The scene in which Victor violently destroys Eve is also significant in its connection to the other monstrous men in this study. Heathcliff, Rochester, and Huntingdon all threaten and describe the gross violence they want to commit against Isabella, Jane, and Helen, descriptions that reference tearing and crushing of women’s bodies, the exact violence that is committed against Eve. The men in this study all demonstrate that they have the potential to commit violence against women, under the guise of discipline, and it is violence that the law permits under coverture.

III

The creature’s imbedded narrative provides Shelley the opportunity for a more pointed critique of society’s patriarchal values. Mellor concentrates on the creature’s education,⁵ but this section includes yet another vision of marriage. In the creature’s backstory, Shelley includes an example of a woman who appears to differ from Caroline, Elizabeth and Eve. However, even in Safie’s narrative, readers witness how, in a patriarchal society, women’s condition is similar to that of a slave. Safie’s mother was “seized and made a slave by the Turks; recommended by her beauty, she had won the heart of the father of

Safie, who married her” (83). Although she was not granted consent, her situation is disturbingly similar to that of both Caroline and Elizabeth, who are also denied any viable consent. This similarity between the East’s enslavement of women in harems is an apt comparison to Western women’s enslavement in marriage. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester also references harems in conversations with Jane, scenes in which the imprisonment of women whether via a harem or via a marriage condemns a society that objectifies women. Despite being forced into slavery and marriage, Safie’s mother instills in her gender expectations that defy those of both the East and of the West. She “spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced [and] instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit” (83). This sense of agency and self-value inspire Safie to seize control of her own life. After Safie’s mother dies, Safie was “sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and the being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue” (83). She seems destined for greatness; she has received an education different from those of Caroline, Elizabeth and the other women in this study. Unfortunately, she has misconceptions about the level of freedom she could have in a Western marriage; “The prospect of marrying a Christian, and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society, was enchanting to her” (83). It is clear that Safie is not aware of just how little “rank in society” she will have once she is married and enters coverture; she will simply be entering another form of slavery (83).

Even though Safie’s mother trained her to desire more from life than servitude, she still suffers from the consequences of living in a patriarchal society that continues to view women as property. Safie, without her consent, is traded and used by her father and by Felix. Her father still asserts patriarchal authority when he uses her as property to be exchanged for

his own benefit, to lure Felix into helping him. Safie's father does not want her to marry Felix, but since, at that point, he was still dependent on Felix, "He revolved a thousand plans by which he should be enabled to prolong the deceit until it might be no longer necessary, and secretly to take his daughter with him when he departed" (84). Safie's father was clearly not concerned with Safie's hopes for her future; his authority overrides them. Felix, too, treats Safie as property when he "agrees not to marry her and to leave her [so he can instead] free his father and sister from prison" (84). This abandonment can be likened to Victor's eventual abandonment of Elizabeth when he leaves her to create Eve. There is a pattern of women being sacrificed for others. Gender expectations demand them to martyr themselves, but there is something sinister about others offering them as human sacrifice.

Safie demonstrates her strength of character and her potential to be a new kind of heroine when she defies her father, who gives her "his tyrannical mandate" "to think no more of her lover, but to prepare to return with him to her native country" (84). Felix only concerns himself with her consent; her father's consent is not necessary. To Safie, her early training by her mother has clearly offered her the ability to envision new options for her life, so much so that "[a] residence in Turkey was abhorrent to her; her religion and feelings were alike adverse to it" (85). She becomes a woman who asserts her own agency. When she hears that Felix is exiled and poor, she, "resolved in her own mind the plan of conduct that it would become her to pursue in this emergency" (85). In this scene, Safie's escape from her controlling father can be likened to the escapes from abusive marriages of the other women in this study. She even arranges and executes her dangerous escape as do the other women: "Taking with her some jewels that belonged to her, and a small sum of money, she quitted Italy, with an attendant, a native of Leghorn, but who understood the common language of Turkey, and departed for Germany" (85). She is an adventurous heroine who defies her father and who rescues her lover, reversing the Gothic Romance plot again.

Safie and Felix's romance offers the possibility for the one happy marriage in the novel, but it is one that reasserts nineteenth-century women's domestic expectations of submission and self sacrifice. The creature describes the transformation Safie initiates in the DeLacys: "The presence of Safie diffused happiness among [the cottage's] inhabitants" (88). She has reformed them, performing the role of the angel in the house. Mellor explains Safie's disappearance from the text as having biographical links to Mary Shelly. She writes, "When Safie flees with the De Lacey family, we as readers are deprived of the novel's only alternative to a rigidly patriarchal construction of gender and sex roles" (Mellor 223). Mellor likens this removal to Mary Shelley's loss of her mother as an alternate guide to traditional gender expectations. Mellor views Safie as a role model who defies accepted gender codes of conduct. But Botting and Richardson contest this view and question whether Safie realizes her full potential. I argue that, upon a closer examination, Safie's life is as complicated and oppressed as the rest of the women in this study. Botting argues that Safie "displays an instance of female resistance. She leaves her treacherous and tyrannical father to search independently for Felix, her beloved. Her success and subsequent happiness vindicates women's capacity for activity and autonomy, albeit within a romantic sphere, as well as exhibiting female propensities to learn" (*Making Monstrous* 101). Safie's moment of resistance can be likened to Elizabeth's moment of confessing to Victor that she wishes for the same kind of education and experiences that men have. She might desire it, but, ultimately, she must perform her role as a woman and submit and sacrifice for her family. Likewise, Richardson takes this view further than Botting, writing that Safie's domestic bliss and entrance into the domestic sphere questions "just how far the harem has been left behind after all" (Richardson 209). Despite her defiance of her father and of her courage to travel alone in a country whose language she does not speak, Safie repeatedly bows down to Felix's father when she arrives at the cottage. Upon first meeting him, Safie "knelt at the old man's

feet, and would have kissed his hand” (78). Later, when Felix leaves the cottage to work, she again “sat at the feet of the old man, and, taking his guitar, played some airs” (79). Her position at the feet of the old man suggests that she believes herself to be subservient. Safie also learns to speak the language of her husband, but not one member of the DeLacy family attempts to learn hers. Felix’s position is clearly more highly valued, and she becomes the submissive angel in the house, like all the other women in the novel.

IV

The consequences for the women who marry in *Frankenstein* are the harshest consequences of all the women in this study. It is only in this novel that they all die, except Safie, who disappears into a foggy future. Botting argues that this treatment of women in the novel is cruel: “The fact that women suffer no matter how well they conform to the demands of domesticity appears gratuitous and unjust” (*Making Monstrous* 101). But so too is their treatment, treatment that is justified by marriage laws that grant husbands so much control over their wives. In *Frankenstein*, women’s lives orbit around and are devastated by marriage. The marital situations that Shelley describes deal with consent, coverture, and women’s most valuable qualities, qualities that make them vulnerable to their husbands. With each generation of women, the consequences are more destructive because of the lack of reform and social evolution in women’s legal rights. Victor’s impact on Elizabeth is more detrimental than M. Frankenstein’s on Caroline, and Eve is even more powerless and victimized by the marital system than either by any woman. The novel prosecutes the legal system itself. Beyond marriage laws, Shelley proves the inadequacies of criminal law to protect women through Justine’s conviction, confession, and execution. Like Caroline and Elizabeth, Justine gives a form of consent through her confession. This consent is also

tainted because she has been manipulated into giving it, but she thinks that it is the only way she can save her soul. Even here, the law continues to privilege men. Justine is executed for William's murder, a murder that Victor initiated, and later, Victor is exonerated for Henry Clerval's murder, another murder he initiated. The law indicts innocent women, and it acquits guilty men.

Literature is one way to address social injustice, and Shelley uses the popularity of Gothic fiction to initiate a conversation about the consequences of denying women true consent to an institution that imprisons them and strips them of their agency. Generations of women have been trapped by circumstances, indebted to and dependent on the men they marry. *Frankenstein* "presents an especially complex and elaborate version of the critique of female education which Radcliffe brought into the Gothic" (Richardson 204). The novel includes a multitude of situations that question consent laws. Caroline and Elizabeth consent to marriage, but their circumstances put them in a position that compromises that consent. They have legal rights as a *feme sole*, but they relinquish those rights when they marry, which makes options for women beyond marriage all the more important. Caroline and Elizabeth also fulfill the angel in the house domestic ideal, though neither of their circumstances are ideal. They are in positions where they are so indebted to their future husbands that they cannot decline their offers of marriage. The indebtedness is even greater for Elizabeth than it was for Caroline and would have been even more for Eve than for Elizabeth. These women are trained to be wives, and they exist to serve their husbands, but through their deaths, Shelley exposes marriage as an enslaving institution for women, one that is so controlling that it becomes the equivalent of a death sentence.

Chapter Two

Isabella's Imprisonment and Escape

from Domestic Ruin in *Wuthering Heights*

Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* joins the subgenre of the Gothic that participates in discourses about social issues. The traditional Radcliffian Gothic Romance "distances, relocates, reterritorializes" scenes of violence and horror, a strategy that shields its readers (Punter, *The Gothic* 289). Brontë departs from the traditional Gothic Romance to contribute to a growing subgenre of Gothic realism, the domestic Gothic, in which domestic spaces replace haunted castles and abbey ruins, and husbands and family members replace supernatural creatures such as ghosts and demons. Brontë locates the Gothic, not only in England but also in the home.

In combining "Victorian literature's general preoccupation with the relationship between the individual and society," authors of Gothic fiction often "deployed [Gothic conventions] to shed light on the dark side of socio-political realities and institutions that necessitate unnatural self-repression" (Davison 128). In the nineteenth century, one such institution was marriage. In *Wuthering Heights*, it is clear that Brontë is aware of and commenting on a variety of social issues, issues of class, race, and gender, with marriage being a significant focus. Despite being arguably one of the most canonical Victorian novels, it is also one of the most commonly misrepresented and misunderstood. Since its publication, readers have continued to reduce the narrative to Heathcliff and Catherine's tragic romance. It has been argued that "[a]s soon as *Wuthering Heights* began to be taken seriously, attempts were made to make it conform to the same kind of love-and-marriage model as *Jane Eyre*" (Stoneman 233). This focus on romance has prevailed because film adaptations and many literary scholars have focused on Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship. However, current literary scholars agree "that to see it as a 'romantic' novel is neither to do justice to its formal

inventiveness nor to begin to explain the sources of its peculiar power” (Haggerty 66).

Although it is still most famous for its romance, the novel’s complexities fully emerge when critical attention is given to its focus on narrative, gender, class, race, Imperialism, religion, psychoanalysis, law, and the Gothic.¹

Scholars argue whether the novel participates in social reform. Some critics suggest that Bronte had no intentions of advancing social reform when she wrote *Wuthering Heights*. In *Sex and Subterfuge*, Eva Figs asserts that Emily Bronte rose “above the social conflict between the sexes and ignore[ed] it” and that she “ignored the constraints placed on women because for her they did not exist, and therefore did not impinge upon her consciousness” (139). However, Bronte’s very precise references to gender-biased marriage laws and gender expectations counter this claim. Bronte was fully aware not only of gender constraints, but also of the legal specifics of those constraints.² In *Contempt: Nineteenth-Century Women, Law, & Literature*, Kristin Kalsem writes that *Wuthering Heights* “has no explicitly legal scenes; however, it would be difficult to imagine a novel in which the law of coverture and its implications with respect to married women’s property, child custody, and the power relationships within marriage were more integral to the plot” (30). No scenes in the novel take place in a courtroom, nor are there any lengthy discussions about legal proceedings. There are nonetheless multiples scenes of dialogue that specifically reference aspects of coverture, the legality of spousal discipline, and the legality of spousal confinement. Kalsem mentions coverture in her discussions of the novel, but she, like other scholars, regulates its discussion to one or two paragraphs. Other *Wuthering Heights* scholars who focus on the law, emphasize different aspects of the law. For instance, legal scholar Ian Ward, in two different texts, discusses the law in *Wuthering Heights*, but neither text focuses on coverture. In *Law and the Brontes*, Ward concentrates on illegitimacy and the legal rights of illegitimate children, specifically Heathcliff. Ward argues: “The jurisprudence that lies perhaps nearest

the surface of *Wuthering Heights* is that which addressed, or perhaps failed to address, the situation of bastards” (Law 52). In *The Brontes in Context*, Ward acknowledges that “[s]pousal abuse occurs in *Wuthering Heights*” (290), but he focuses on inheritance laws and Chancery law, not on coverture.

Examinations of the specifics of coverture, abuse, and divorce *a mensa et thoro* is thus absent from the scholarship on the novel (Blackstone 440). In addition, while more has been written on the tumultuous relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff than on any other relationship in the novel, little attention has been given to Isabella’s marriage to Heathcliff. Judith E. Pike addresses an aspect of this gap concentrating on “the key distinctions that Bronte makes between her characterization of the unmarried Miss Linton and the more sobering rendering of Isabella as *Mrs. Heathcliff*” (349). She questions the ideal of the compassionate marriage, or marrying for love, as the solution to the marital issues that arise with marriages of social rank or convenience. Pike’s close examination of Isabella’s letter to Nelly and her role as the novel’s third narrator documents the life of an upper-class wife’s domestic abuse, as a way to “demonstrate[] through Isabella’s story that as long as the laws of coverture are intact, compassionate marriage is at risk of being exploited and compromised” (383). Pike and I both concentrate on Isabella’s experiences in marriage, but I, unlike her, examine how Heathcliff and Isabella’s marriage exposes the effects of nineteenth-century coverture and reveals how consent and divorce *a mensa et thoro* need revision. I also argue that Bronte re-appropriates Gothic conventions to discuss these issues and to reveal the dangers of and the potential horrors of marriage while coverture is in effect. The novel’s Gothic conventions are important because Bronte incorporates Gothic conventions in scenes in which she condemns the Victorian domestic ideal of marriage and coverture.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte enters into social discussions about marriage

reform to challenge coverture and to expose it as destructive to, rather than protective of, domestic bliss. Coverture ensured that husbands had full authority over their wives. Under coverture, “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law” (Blackstone 441). While the concept of joining two souls into one has romantic undertones, this romantic view conceals coverture’s sinister consequences for women because only wives relinquish their legal status when they marry. Coverture is not about love; it is about a gendered understanding of personhood that denies women agency. According to the law, “Upon marriage a woman became a *feme couverte*: she lost her separate legal status of *feme sole* and came under her husband’s tutelage as though she were one of his children or part of his property” (Stetson 5). This attitude toward and treatment of women as property creates a power dynamic that makes wives vulnerable to their husbands. When women married, “the very being or legal existence of the woman [was] suspended during the marriage, or at least, [was] incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she perform[ed] every thing” (Blackstone 441).

The specification of a husband’s responsibility to protect and provide for his wife is important because the law did not offer enough stipulations that would help women escape marriages when husbands did not fulfill these duties. By law, “neither a married women’s money nor her body were her own—both were the ‘property’ of her husband” (Shanley 157). Because women were property, they lost the ability to sue abusive husbands or to testify against them because women were no longer legally acknowledged as a whole individual. A divorce *a mensa et thoro* was the only legal escape for wives whose husbands were sources of pain and abuse, whose husbands became the very person from whom wives needed protection. Courts could

grant divorce *a mensa et thoro*, from bed and board, to a wife whose life was in danger from her husband’s cruelty or to a husband whose wife committed

adultery. Such a divorce was really a separation since spouses were not permitted to remarry. It suspended marital obligations of the innocent spouse: a husband did not have to support an adulterous wife; a wife did not have to cohabit with a cruel husband. (Stetson 6)

This legal separation was one that favored husbands because adultery had a clear definition, whereas a husband's cruelty was vague, but the law at least saved some wives from further abuse or even murder. In the case of divorce *a mensa et thoro*, the law allow[ed] alimony to the wife" (Blackstone 441). But this legal separation did not assure a wife's protection either. A wife "could not own even the bare necessities of life; nor could she enter into a binding agreement to buy them. By common law her husband had a duty to maintain her, but, as she could not sue, she could not enforce this duty by action if he failed to fulfill it" (Doggett 18). Despite there being possibilities to escape abuse, there were problems with the system that prevented women from protecting themselves once they married.

Not only did the law fail to safeguard wives from violent husbands, it also gave husbands the legal authority to use violence against their wives. The law thus seemed to contradict a husband's duty to protect his wife. The conditions of separation and inferiority, and women's lack of legal identity, made wives vulnerable to husbands who had the authority to use violence and cruelty as control. By law, "[t]he husband also . . . might give his wife moderate correction. For, as he is to answer for her misbehavior, the law thought it reasonable to entrust him with this power of restraining her, by domestic chastisement, in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his apprentices or children" (Blackstone 443). A wife's powerlessness, in conjunction with a husband's authority to apply physical discipline trapped wives who wed husbands who did not live up to their marital expectations as the protector of the domestic sphere.

These powerless of wives and the nearly unrestricted author of husbands to discipline

their wives plays a central role in *Wuthering Heights*. Using Isabella and Heathcliff, Brontë reflects the need to shift cultural attitudes towards women who flee domestic abuse. She specifically deals with the aspects of coverture that left women with no legal authority to save themselves from cruel husbands, thus revealing the dark side of the law and exposing the abuse and isolation that coverture perpetuates.

Through Brontë's descriptions of *Wuthering Heights* as a Gothic hell instead of a domestic haven and of her depiction of Heathcliff as a Gothic monster instead of a model husband, the novel disrupts the middle-class domestic ideal that was so prevalent in women's fiction. Specifically, it challenges the logic behind the law of coverture through the radical but often overlooked Isabella. Isabella can be interpreted as Cathy's frail doppelganger; this, however, reduces Isabella to a device that serves only to elevate Cathy. Isabella is a figure who needs to be magnified rather than marginalized. In Isabella, Brontë envisions new possibilities for abused women. The novel exemplifies situations when divorce *a mensa et thoro* should be applicable. In Isabella's escape and separation from Heathcliff, Brontë imagines a kind of self-created divorce *a mensa et thoro*. Isabella's pseudo divorce works—only, however, because Heathcliff permits it, not because the law protects her. I focus on Heathcliff and Isabella's marriage and argue that Brontë incorporates Gothic devices to disrupt the Victorian domestic ideal and to portray scenarios when coverture becomes inhumane and when divorce *a mensa et thoro* should be more readily accessible.

I

In two other novels in this study, *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the heroines are specifically cautioned against marrying men who will not fulfill the nineteenth-century image of the ideal husband. In *Wuthering Heights* Isabella is warned, but unlike

Helen and Jane, the warning to Isabella is tainted by Cathy's jealousy and cruelty and by Edgar's patriarchal values. I initiate my examination with the circumstances and characters that contribute to Isabella's naive participation in her own demise. It is important to note that, while Isabella represents the ideal middle-class woman who has been instructed in the cult of domesticity, her actions are not those of the ideal woman. Isabella betrays her family by eloping with an outsider of whom her guardians disapprove; once married, she violates the social expectation of becoming the dutiful angel in the house, and after only two months of marriage, she breaks the law by leaving her husband and kidnapping their unborn child. According to Victorian cultural expectations and laws, her actions are illegal and punishable, not Heathcliff's. However, Isabella's initial decision to wed is one that reveals the consequences of living in an isolated and patriarchal world. Because Isabella is the product of an idealistic middle-class woman's education, she cannot imagine that Heathcliff, her ostensible masculine protector, would destroy her life. Isabella is warned about Heathcliff's cruelty, but still she marries him. To make an argument that even women who make an unfortunate choice in marriage should not be imprisoned and tortured for life, Bronte includes scenes that demonstrate the inadequacies of Cathy and Edgar's warnings to Isabella.

Before she marries, Isabella represents the naive nineteenth-century woman whom society had generated. Further contributing to Isabella's vulnerability is her lack of prospective husbands. Because Edgar and Cathy do not introduce her to society or help her participate in the marriage market, the only bachelors in her life are male servants and Heathcliff, and Isabella recognizes and resents her isolation. She complains that Catherine "would allow her to be nothing in the house, and Edgar neglected her" (Bronte 75). Isabella has no sense of purpose in her own home and receives little attention from Edgar, her only family, and the only man in her life. This isolation and ignorance about what marriage entails contributes to her desire to wed. It is commonly understood that the literature nineteenth-

century women read contributed to creating this false ideal of marriage. Gilbert and Gubar argue, “Ironically, Isabella’s bookish upbringing has prepared her to fall in love with (of all people) Heathcliff. Precisely because she has been taught to believe in coercive literary conventions, Isabella is victimized by the genre of romance” (“Looking Oppositely” 67). Because of this, Isabella constructs a narrative for Heathcliff that does not exist; she has transformed Heathcliff into the misunderstood love interest from romantic novels. Isabella tells Nelly, “Mr. Heathcliff is not a fiend: he has an honourable soul, and a true nature, or how could he remember [Cathy]?” (Bronte 76). Isabella has created a fantasy character. The Heathcliff she imagines is not representative of his true villainy. It is clear that Cathy understands how Isabella romanticizes Heathcliff as a hero in a romance novel. She warns Isabella, “Pray don’t imagine that he conceals depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior! He’s not a rough diamond—a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic” (75-6). Cathy attempts to convey to Isabella that Heathcliff will not undergo any moral reformation.

Heathcliff also understands Isabella’s delusion. After they marry, he tells Nelly: Isabella “pictur[ed] in me a hero of romance, and expect[ed] unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character, and acting on the false impressions she cherished” (111). However, as an upper middle-class, single woman, isolated in the country, it is not unusual that she would romanticize any eligible bachelor, especially because her ultimate goal would have been marriage. Cathy’s descriptions of Heathcliff specifically address the romanticized version that Isabella has conjured. But it is important to remember the cultural factors that led Isabella to construct this narrative. She is not simply the “irrational creature” that Cathy and Heathcliff believe her to be. Nineteenth-century social and legal understandings of women’s place in marriage lead Isabella to view Heathcliff as a benevolent protector. Not only is he wealthy, thus assumed to be a gentleman,

but when women married, they lived under “wing, protection, and *cover*” of their husband (Blackstone 441). Isabella clearly cannot imagine him not fulfilling this role. Because Isabella identifies Heathcliff as a misunderstood romantic hero, she is attracted to him, but “she underestimates both the ferocity of the Byronic hero and the powerlessness of all women, even ladies,’ in her society” (Gilbert and Gubar, “Looking Oppositely” 67). She will not have the ability to reform him, and she will become vulnerable to his rages.

Sadly, Isabella’s only advisors are Edgar, who views her with patriarchal eyes; Catherine, who views her as a romantic rival; and Nelly, a servant. Cathy warns Isabella against loving Heathcliff, but because Cathy had already ignited Isabella’s jealousy, Isabella considers Cathy as competition for Heathcliff’s affection. Again, it is important to note that Isabella is a single woman, eligible for marriage, and Heathcliff is the only eligible bachelor in her life. Heathcliff is a viable option, yet her married sister-in-law monopolizes his time. Not surprisingly, Isabella is jealous of Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship. Isabella “fretted and pined over something. She grew cross and wearisome, snapping at and teasing Cathy continually, at the imminent risk of exhausting her limited patience” (74). Isabella resents Cathy. Ideally, Cathy and Edgar would assist Isabella in finding a suitable husband, but they take no steps to involve Isabella in social functions or travel to London where she might meet someone in the season. When Catherine and Heathcliff take a walk and send Isabella away so they can be alone, Isabella complains ““I wanted to be with . . . him: and I won’t be always sent off!’ She continued, kindling up. ‘You . . . desire no one to be loved but yourself!’” (75). Because of her competition for Heathcliff’s attention, Isabella does not heed Cathy’s warnings, even though Cathy describes Heathcliff as the monstrous husband he would certainly be. The competition between women over husbands speaks to a social institution that sets women against each other, which contributes to wives’ further isolation and inability to escape once they enter abusive marriages.

Using Gothic language, Cathy gives Isabella a truthful account of Heathcliff's brutality. Cathy tells Isabella, "he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man" (75-76). Her wolf reference links a wild, carnivore that hunts and kills its prey to Heathcliff, who hunts and "kills" his prey, the Lintons. Cathy even specifically addresses the narratives Isabella has conjured. She tells Isabella, Heathcliff is "an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation: an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone" (75-6). He is no gentleman; he is violent, wild, fierce, and has no mercy. Cathy's warnings also include the physical abuse that Isabella would endure if she marries Heathcliff. Twice Cathy uses bird references for Isabella to illustrate how fragile and vulnerable she would be to Heathcliff. Cathy tells Isabella, "I'd as soon put that little canary into the park on a winter's day, as recommend you to bestow your heart on him!" (76). The danger that a canary would face in a park on a winter's day is equivalent to how long Isabella would last in a home with Heathcliff as her husband. Her "death" would be almost instantaneous. Cathy continues her bird references, telling Isabella, "[H]e'd crush you like a sparrow's egg, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge. I know he couldn't love a Linton; and yet he'd be quite capable of marrying your fortune and expectations!" (76). She again uses violence to demonstrate what kind of treatment Isabella could expect from Heathcliff. Also disturbing is Cathy's acknowledgement that Heathcliff would marry Isabella for her money and status, not because he loves her. Catherine cautions Isabella; "I wouldn't be you for a kingdom, then' Catherine declared emphatically: and she seemed to speak sincerely" (75). She calls Isabella mad (75) and tells her, "It is deplorable ignorance of his character, child, and nothing else, which makes that dream enter your head" (76). Her verbal abuse, however, inflames rather than restrains Isabella's infatuation with Heathcliff. Half of Cathy's warnings rely on telling Isabella that she is foolish and insulting her and the other half in telling Isabella the truth about Heathcliff. Cathy's cautions are valid, but they are delivered with too much cruelty and too many insults to render them effective.

Bronte offers an interesting turn on the idea of Gothic villains with Cathy herself becoming villainous. Isabella recognizes this monstrosity. In response to Cathy's cruel warning, Isabella challenges her, saying, "[Y]ou are worse than twenty foes, you poisonous fiend!" (76). Isabella's language is significant in revealing Cathy's role as a female Gothic monster. Cathy is her enemy, deadly and poisonous. Cathy recognizes Isabella's jealousy, saying, "Ah! You won't believe me, then? . . . You think I speak from wicked selfishness?" (76). Isabella confirms Cathy's suspicion, replying, "I'm certain you do" (76). Because she views Catherine as competition rather than support, she distrusts Cathy's advice. This scene can be read to support the idea that Isabella is foolish girl, a foil to Cathy's strength.³ Yet, it is Cathy who eventually withers and dies. While Isabella undergoes a transformation, reminiscent of Cathy's earlier bird references, Isabella flies from Heathcliff to escape his abuse.

Cathy's actions in thrusting Isabella into Heathcliff's path demonstrate that Victorian women can become monstrous as well. Female monsters are not uncommon in literature. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and later in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), Geraldine and Carmilla are female monster/villains. The traditional use of the female monster/ villain is different for Cathy. Traditionally, female monsters take the shape of creatures who are sexual and powerful, for instance the figure of the femme fatale, Coleridge's Geraldine, the Medusa. These figures seem to embody the fear a patriarchal society has of powerful women, especially those who are sexual (Auerbach, *Woman* 75). In this scenario, Cathy is less a powerful woman who incites men's fears than she is a woman who works for the patriarchy, sacrificing other women to its cause. In these scenes, she is not monstrous to men, only to other women. While Isabella is not tricked into marriage or manipulated by Heathcliff, she is manipulated and made vulnerable by Cathy, who becomes the monstrous Gothic villain who violates her duties to Isabella as her guardian and sister-in-

law. Cathy fulfills the role of a Gothic villain when she cruelly initiates the relationship between Heathcliff and Isabella.

Heathcliff has taken so little notice of Isabella that their marriage likely never would have occurred had it not been for Cathy, who changes the course of Isabella's life. When Isabella accidentally divulges her romantic interest in Heathcliff "in a transient fit of passion" (77), Cathy immediately seeks revenge. When Cathy sees "Heathcliff pass the window" (77) she had "a mischievous smile on her lips" (77). Once he enters, rather than allowing Isabella's romantic revelation to remain secret, Cathy says, "Heathcliff, I'm proud to show you, at last, someone that dotes on you more than myself" (77). When a mortified Isabella tries to leave, Cathy holds her, confining her and forcing her to endure further emotional abuse. While still clutching Isabella, Cathy tells Heathcliff, "My little sister-in-law is breaking her heart by mere contemplation of your physical and moral beauty. It lies in your own power to be Edgar's brother!" (77). It is Cathy, not Heathcliff, who reveals marriage as an option, a path Heathcliff has clearly not contemplated. Cathy's treatment here is nothing short of cruel emotional abuse. Not only does Cathy plant the seed of marriage in Heathcliff's mind, she also discloses to him the extent of Isabella's infatuation: "Isabella swears that the love Edgar has for me is nothing to that she entertains for you" (78). She continues, "I was informed that if I would but have the manners to stand aside, my rival, as she will have herself to be, would shoot a shaft into your soul that would fix you forever, and send my image into eternal oblivion!" (77). Given what Cathy knows about Heathcliff's feelings for her, these statements would also infuriate Heathcliff and mark Isabella as an enemy to his love for Cathy. In these scenes, Cathy truly does become Isabella's enemy, and her actions inspire Heathcliff to concoct a plan. Nelly sees him "smile to himself . . . and lapse into ominous musings" (79). Jill Matus argues that "Heathcliff's seduction of Isabella [is] . . . an elaborate revenge scheme; he sees Isabella as a pawn in a game" (332-3), but it is a

game that Cathy initiates. Cathy has the ability to prevent Isabella and Heathcliff's marriage from taking place, but her own need for revenge results in her sacrificing Isabella to a man she knows would brutalize her.

Isabella's actions in this scene are particularly significant because they reveal her underlying strength of character and her reaction to abuse. Isabella first attempts to correct Cathy's statements by saying, "I'd thank you to adhere to the truth, and not slander me, even in joke! Mr. Heathcliff, be kind enough to bid this friend of yours release me: she forgets that you and I are not intimate acquaintances; and what amuses her is painful to me beyond expression" (77-8). Isabella's efforts to defend herself illustrate a refusal to passively submit, a quality that will later save her. But her appeals to Heathcliff also demonstrate his contempt toward her and offer a glimpse into their future. In response to Isabella's appeal, Heathcliff "stared hard at the object of discourse, as one might do at a strange, repulsive animal: a centipede from the Indies, for instance, which curiosity leads one to examine in spite of the aversion it raises" (78). Heathcliff does not just view Isabella as subhuman, which is disturbing in itself; he views her as an insignificant and grotesque insect that evokes his hatred. His reaction to Isabella is especially painful because the man she loves, in discovering her love, treats her with such cruelty. Not only do his actions reveal that he is not the gentleman she imagines him to be, but they foreshadow the kind of treatment she will receive as his wife. In this scene readers also witness the result of the abuse on Isabella, who resorts to violence to free herself:

The poor thing couldn't bear that: she grew white and red in rapid succession, and, while tears beaded her lashes, bent the strength of her small fingers to loosen the firm clutch of Catherine; and perceiving that as fast as she raised one finger off her arm another closed down, and she could not remove the whole together, she began to make use of her nails; and their sharpness

presently ornamented the detainer's with crescents of red. (78)

This scene predicts Isabella's future actions in the face of confinement and abuse. She demonstrates the lengths to which she is willing to go to save herself. Isabella will not submit to abuse, and she will resort to violence to escape. Isabella does not faint or sink down in passive acceptance of her situation; she fights, using increasing levels of violence until she has freed herself from Cathy's grip. It is a revelation of strength of character that readers will also witness in her escape from Heathcliff's imprisonment later in the novel.

In this scene, Bronte also presents Heathcliff as the monstrous husband who does not fulfill the nineteenth-century domestic ideal. After Isabella leaves the room, Heathcliff more openly vocalizes how he would treat Isabella if she were his wife. When Cathy warns Heathcliff that Isabella might one day use those claws on him, he says, "I'd wrench them off her fingers, if they ever menaced me" (78). His overreaction exposes the level of his violence: he would answer a scratch with an amputation. Heathcliff also confirms that he would abuse Isabella if they married. He says, "You'd hear of odd things if I lived alone with that mawkish, waxen face: the most ordinary would be painting on its white the colours of the rainbow, and turning the blue eyes black, every day or two" (78-9). Heathcliff only verbalizes the most common abuse Isabella would face, beating her until her body becomes the colors of bruises, and blackening her eyes, and he details the frequency of these actions—every few days. If he openly discusses these abuses, one can only imagine the horrors of what those "odd things" he will not discuss could be. Later in the novel he tells Nelly, "But, at last, I think [Isabella] begins to know me: I didn't perceive the silly smiles and grimaces that provoked me at first; and the senseless incapability of discerning that I was in earnest when I gave her my opinion of her infatuation and herself. It was a marvelous effort of perspicacity to discover that I did not love her. I believed, at one time, no lessons could teach her that!" (111). His description of Isabella's realization of her dire situation reinforces her naive ideals

about marriage, the very same ideals that nineteenth-century women readers would have held. Heathcliff tells Nelly, “I never told her a lie about it. She cannot accuse me of showing one bit of deceitful softness. The first thing she saw me do on coming out of the Grange was to hang up her little dog; and when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her, except one: possibly she took that exception for herself” (111). Heathcliff seems to believe that because he warned her, she deserves whatever brutality he delivers. This cruelty takes place before the wedding and should have warned her away from connecting her life to his, but she continues on with the marriage. These scenes, I believe, expose two social issues: the depth of conditioning that misled nineteenth-century women about the realities of marriage, of Byronic heroes that they could reform, and it reveals the naivety about the utter powerlessness wives had in a patriarchal society.

Isabella’s warnings do not just come from Cathy. Edgar, too, cautions Isabella against marrying Heathcliff, but his warnings are contaminated by his patriarchal perspective. The law of coverture leads men to view women as future property. Edgar’s failure to properly warn Isabella stems in part from laws that prevent him from thinking of her as an individual agent. Critics have identified Cathy’s choice to marry Edgar instead of Heathcliff as representative of “[t]he tremendous personal costs of a marital marketplace where economics trump matters of the heart” (Davison 131). But this focus on economics over people can also be applied to Edgar’s half-hearted warnings and treatment of Isabella when she marries Heathcliff. Once Edgar learns of Isabella’s affection for Heathcliff, he warns her; then, when she disobeys him, he disowns her, a treatment that is particularly harsh given her lack of knowledge and experience. Isabella marries Heathcliff when she is only eighteen and “infantile in manners, though possessed of a keen wit” (74), but she has no experience in love. Her life thus far has not prepared her to make such an important life choice. According

to nineteenth-century ideals, Edgar should serve as her guardian and advisor, but his economics-focused warnings demonstrate male priorities to which she cannot identify. Edgar considers Isabella's interest in Heathcliff misguided and tells her that marriage to a "nameless man" (74) would degrade her. And he fears "that his property, (Edgar's) in default of heirs male, might pass into such a one's power" (74). He is more concerned with the way Heathcliff might eventually handle Thrushcross Grange than he is about how he would handle Isabella. In Edgar's mind, "[p]ossession matters because it facilitates control and it sanctions violence. Wives are beaten for the same reason as doors are kicked in, windows smashed and crockery thrown" (Ward, *Law* 58). Edgar's concerns are for the marital property that Heathcliff could inherit, not for Isabella's well-being.

Edgar focuses his warnings to Isabella on Heathcliff's lack of position and social rank, issues that a nineteenth-century teenager who reads romance novels would overlook. Edgar might have convinced Isabella had he been open about all of Heathcliff's faults, but he does not address the one issue that might deter her, Heathcliff's violence. Even though Edgar "shrank forebodingly from the idea of committing Isabella to [Heathcliff's] keeping" (74), revealing that he is aware of Heathcliff's capacity for brutality, he remains silent about this aspect of Heathcliff's character. Edgar fails Isabella miserably. She is his sister, and her being kept in ignorance and near coverture-like isolation "protected" from the world, only infantilizes her. It is as if, because she is a woman, he already thinks of her as her future husband's property. Even before she marries, she has all but lost her legal identity, but because of patriarchal values, it is an identity that she never truly developed.

Even before Isabella marries Heathcliff, she has been his victim. He torments her in Cathy's presence, and he hangs her dog. But once Isabella marries him and enters her coverture, she becomes even more vulnerable to his abuse. In Isabella, Bronte develops a complicated victim who was not forced into an unhappy marriage, nor was she tricked into

one. Unlike Elizabeth Frankenstein, Jane Eyre, or Helen Huntingdon, who are morally infallible and who are manipulated by their lovers, Isabella is not seduced and manipulated by Heathcliff. What makes Isabella's choice and her ultimate fate more poignant is that she specifically selects him. Gilbert and Gubar argue that "Isabella patently chooses her own fate, refusing to listen to Catherine's warnings against Heathcliff and carefully evading her brother's vigilance" ("Looking Oppositely" 66). However, I argue that Edgar is not vigilant and that Cathy's warnings are untrustworthy because Cathy, herself, is untrustworthy.

Isabella craves free agency to choose her own husband, but when she claims it, she pays a heavy price. Readers immediately witness the consequences Isabella faces for marrying Heathcliff. When Edgar learns that Isabella left, he "laid the blame on Heathcliff's deliberate designing" (74), and Edgar "would have recoiled still more had he been aware that her attachment rose unsolicited, and was bestowed where it awakened no reciprocation of sentiment" (74). I would argue that he is also culpable in contributing to a scenario that makes her vulnerable to Heathcliff. Despite believing Isabella to be Heathcliff's victim, and despite knowing her naivety and her innocence, Edgar still disowns her.

His abandonment is even more sinister than it seems because he could have taken action to dissolve the marriage. Isabella's right to accept or decline marriage offers fell in a vague area of the law. The legal age at which women no longer need parental or guardian control was twenty-one (Campbell 55). This is the age when women can acquire property and enter into contracts as a *feme sole*. However, the age at which women could legally consent to marriage was twelve while for males, the age of marital consent was fourteen (Campbell 55). At twelve, girls could enter coverture, an age discrepancy that puts girls at a disadvantage because they are not yet mature enough to fully understand the legal consequences of their consent. However, there is a legal provision to protect women between the ages of twelve and twenty-one from consenting to an ill-fated marriage, the very scenario

that Isabella faces. The laws states: “Where either of the parties is a minor, i.e. above the age of matrimonial consent and under twenty-one, the consent of parents or guardians is required by the Marriage Act, 1823” (55). This provision requires more precision. Campbell writes that it “appears to be merely directory, and the want of consent would not generally nullify [the marriage, unless] . . . where dissent has been openly expressed by a parent or guardian at the time of the proclamation of banns, the publication of banns is void” (55-6).

This describes Isabella’s situation. She is eighteen, so she can legally consent, but because she is not yet twenty-one, her guardian’s, (Edgar’s) approval is necessary. Such an action would require Edgar’s willingness to fight for Isabella, a step he is clearly not willing to take. Nelly, though, seems to believe that there is a chance to recover her, and there were legal measures to do so. When they learn that Isabella eloped with Heathcliff, Nelly asks Edgar, “Are we to try any measures for overtaking and bringing her back” (Bronte 98), but Edgar replies, “She went of her own accord . . . she had a right to go if she pleased. Trouble me no more about her. Hereafter she is only my sister in name: not because I disown her, but because she has disowned me” (98). He seems to resent that Isabella uses her own agency, especially when her decision links him to Heathcliff. Once Edgar can no longer control Isabella, once she is legally united with Heathcliff, Edgar cuts her out of his life. She is only valuable to him when he can control her. Edgar could have sought to void the marriage, but it is as if he, like Cathy, uses Heathcliff to punish Isabella’s independence. Edgar is not, however, aware of Cathy’s involvement in initiating the situation. He places responsibility for Isabella’s demise solely on her own shoulders. After Isabella makes one decision that displeases Edgar, he condemns her to isolation with a man he knows will brutalize her.

Edgar’s behavior toward Isabella is both passive and cruel and reveals the lack of social and familial support for upper-middle class women if they married against the family’s wishes. After Isabella marries Heathcliff, Nelly reports that Edgar “did not make single

enquiry further, or mention her in any way, except directing [Nelly] to send what property [Isabella] had in the house to her fresh home” (98). He acknowledges Isabella’s future misery, but he still punishes her for her decision. When Nelly urges Edgar to write to Isabella, he says, “It is needless. My communication with Heathcliff’s family shall be a sparing as his with mine. It shall not exist” (108). Isabella is no longer his sister; she is “Heathcliff’s family” now. In Edgar’s mind, she has lost her biological identity and her legal identity. Even Heathcliff acknowledges Isabella’s isolation, telling her, ““Your brother is wonderous fond of you too, isn’t he?” Observed Heathcliff scornfully. ‘He turns you adrift on the world with surprising alacrity’” (110). It is one more form of patriarchal abuse Isabella must endure. And through Edgar’s actions, Bronte seems to condemn the families who refuse to assist sisters who make unwise marital decisions, by participating in their abuse and misery. Edgar admits to Nelly, “I’m sorry to have lost [Isabella]; especially as I can never think she’ll be happy. It is out of the question my going to see her, however: we are eternally divided” (108).

Scholars agree that Edgar “is rigid in not forgiving his sister for her lapse from civilized standards;” in fact, even when he contrives of ways that Isabella could live without Heathcliff, his purpose is not to save her from a violent husband but to please himself (Figs 145). He tells Nelly, “[S]hould she really wish to oblige me, let her persuade the villain she has married to leave the country” (Bronte 108). His suggestion could save Isabella because under nineteenth-century law if there is a consent between husband and wife to live separately, and there is no “allowance agreed on, or none paid, then it must be presumed that she has still his authority to contract for her necessities, and he remains liable” (Blackstone 442). In the case of apparent abandonment, if Heathcliff leaves the country, Isabella would have property rights and a supportable income. But given that, under coverture, her legal guardian is a villain whose life’s purpose is to punish the Lintons for “stealing” Cathy, it is

unlikely that she will successfully convince him to leave the country.

Through Brontë's depiction of Isabella's isolation in her new life, she condemns both Edgar and Nelly, who represent a society that understands the dangers that wives face but act as bystanders even in situations when they have the ability to reform the cultural attitude. Even though her brother, sister-in-law, and childhood home are a mere four miles away, Isabella is reduced to writing the only person in the world with whom she can communicate, Nelly, a servant. When Isabella realizes that Edgar "is either too angry or too distressed to answer" her letters, she writes to Nelly: "I must write to somebody, and the only choice left me is you" (100). This act illustrates the level of Isabella's isolation. Rather than view herself as the villain who deserves this punishment, Isabella acknowledges Edgar's culpability in her situation. She recognizes Edgar's cruelty and condemns him for it. Isabella writes, "Edgar has not been kind, has he? And I won't come suing for his assistance; nor will I bring him into more trouble. Necessity compelled me to seek shelter here" (127). Furthermore, as she is married, Edgar is under no obligation to provide for her, but she does not seem to understand the law. Rather than perpetuating the cult of domesticity, Brontë fully reveals the depth of isolation that Isabella undergoes when she marries and the inadequacies of her knowledge about the extent of her limited freedoms once she marries.

Nelly is the only person with whom Isabella can communicate, but Nelly, too, abandons her in favor of patriarchal law. Nelly contributes to Isabella's misery and vulnerability by exposing Isabella's isolation and vulnerability to Heathcliff; when Isabella expects a letter from Edgar, Nelly says, in the presence of Heathcliff, "My master bade me tell his sister that she must not expect either a letter or a visit from him at present . . . but he thinks that after this time, his household and the household here should drop intercommunication, as nothing could come of keeping it up" (109). Her statement reinforces the extent Heathcliff's authority over Isabella. Isabella's situation demonstrates the consequences of coverture. Not

only is she no longer a whole person, she has been abandoned by the only remaining member of her biological family, and now she is taunted and abused by her new husband. Although Isabella has the strength and confidence to demand respect and proper treatment, in this vulnerable situation, she has not yet gained the courage to rebel and instead, “Mrs. Heathcliff’s lip quivered slightly, and she returned to her seat in the window” (109). In Heathcliff’s inhumane treatment of Isabella, and in Edgar’s decision to disown her, she has lost both her identity and her home. Rather than forcing Isabella to live out her life in misery, however, Bronte uses her as an example for readers. Despite being warned more vehemently than any other heroine in this study, Bronte still allows Isabella to escape the brutality and inhumanity of her choice.

II

By using Isabella to dismantle the Victorian angel-in-the-house ideal and to spotlight married women’s the lack of agency under coverture, Bronte exposes coverture as working against Victorian marital ideals rather than securing them. One myth perpetuated by eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels was the joy married women felt at being mistresses of their own home. Bronte reveals that, because of coverture, wives have no such power; they are property, like the house they think they will run. Bronte disrupts the illusion that any domestic space will be ideal. The romance of a secret marriage with Heathcliff is grounded in Isabella’s belief that in fleeing her brother’s “cultured home” she is not also fleeing her life-style because “it will simply be replaced by another cultivated setting” (Gilbert and Gubar, “Looking Oppositely” 67). Bronte shatters Isabella’s upper-middle class values and her education in domestic bliss when she reaches Wuthering Heights. Isabella’s social position is particularly significant because “Bronte exposes how even genteel women can

become victims of abuse, due not to their slatternly behavior but rather to their naïveté and their blind inculcation of false notions of romance and marriage” (Pike 372). In Isabella’s first entrance to her new home, she likely imagined being warmly and respectfully greeted. Instead, when she knocks on the door, Hindley answers and does not know who she is or why she is there; ““What’s your business here?” he demanded grimly. ‘Who are you?’” (Bronte 102). Isabella is met with hostility and an obvious ignorance of her new status as mistress of the house. Interestingly, she does not identify herself as Isabella Heathcliff. She seems uncomfortable with her new identity and prefers to identify herself as her former self; ““My name *was* Isabella Linton”” (102). Isabella seems to already recognize that, not only will her home not be the same, her life will not either.⁴ It is clear that she imagines coming home to a warm, clean, well-lit, home where servants have prepared dinner for the new bride, and where they wait to assist her. Instead, when she enters the kitchen, she describes it as “a dingy hole” (101). The image of the ideal domestic setting is immediately tarnished. The reality is not a clean, open kitchen, a civilized space, but a dirty hole reminiscent of a cave in which an animal would live. It is as if, in marriage, she is devolving rather than evolving.

Isabella does not have a recognizable identity in her new home; she also does not have a room of her own. That first night, Joseph takes Isabella to a room where she expects a bedroom prepared for her, but instead of a comfortable room, she is taken to “a kind of lumber-hole smelling strong of malt and grain; various sacks of which articles were piled around, leaving a wide, bare space in the middle” (105). This room is closer to a description of a prison than a brides’ new wedding suite. Joseph’s action sends a strong message; even a servant thinks that Isabella is worth a mere bare space in the middle of a storage room, not a proper apartment. She is merely another possession to be stored away. In this scene, Isabella’s naivety reveals itself because she initially assumes that Joseph does not understand her desire to be taken to her own room. It does not occur to her that she would be treated so

in her new home. She says, “Why, man! . . . this is not a place to sleep in. I wish to see my bedroom” (105). But her lack of position is reinforced when Joseph again takes her, not to her own room, but instead shows her Heathcliff’s room, which she is not allowed to enter, as Joseph tells her, “he allas keeps it locked, un’nob’dy iver mells on’t but hisselsn” (105). Isabella does not have a voice nor can she find “a place of refuge and means of repose” (106). She is not welcome there. When she later asks Heathcliff for a key to their locked room, Heathcliff “swore it was not, nor ever should be mine; and he’d—But I’ll not repeat his language, nor describe his habitual conduct” (107). Isabella’s failure to convey Heathcliff’s exact words exposes their harshness and the level of verbal abuse she suffered. His words are not fit to be repeated, and his insistence that she would never get the key reinforces the notion that wives actually have very little say in their own homes. Coverture strips them even of that right.

Isabella’s introduction to married life is not a proponent for the institution. Overall, *Wuthering Heights* does not have a reputation as an uplifting novel. In fact, for Punter and Gilbert and Gubar, the novel is associated with a decent into Hell.⁵ While they apply this view only to Cathy and Heathcliff, it can also be applied to Isabella, specifically to her embodiment of what women endure when they marry abusive husbands and are legally bound to them for life. In Isabella’s first night at Wuthering Heights, she describes the home as “an ancient castle” (101). This reference to traditional Gothic conventions is important because in the Gothic, “The castle represents desubjectification: within its walls one may be ‘subjected’ to a force that is utterly resistant to the individual’s attempt to impose his or her order” (Punter, *The Gothic* 262). The cultural myth that Isabella has adopted—the myth that she will have control over her domestic space—is immediately revealed to be false. The description of Heathcliff’s room shatters the domestic ideal and suggests the abuse Isabella will soon face. The room’s carpet was high quality,

but the pattern was obliterated by dust; a fireplace hung with cut paper, dropping to pieces, a handsome oak bedstead with ample crimson curtains of rather expensive material and modern make; but they had evidently experienced rough usage: the valances hung in festoons, wrenched from their rings, and the iron rod supporting them was bent in an arc on one side, causing the drapery to trail upon the floor. The chairs were also damaged, many of them severely; and deep indentations deformed the panels of the walls. I was endeavouring to gather resolution for entering and taking possession. (106)

Heathcliff's room is terrifying. It demonstrates the level of his violence, his mental instability, and his physical strength. He has broken chairs, broken wall panels, and ripped curtains. Readers can only imagine the damage he could do to Isabella and question why he would chose to live in such a state. It is the bedroom of a madman, one who now has legal control over Isabella. The haunted castle reference is also applicable here. The haunted castle "challenges all notions of rescue and salvation; it exposes us before an excess of patriarchal power, while at the same time it conveys to us that even the utmost monuments of human grandeur become, or perhaps always have been, ruins" (Punter, *The Gothic* 262). The violently disordered room suggests the violence soon to be inflicted on Isabella. The description of the room also hints at sexual violence. Pike argues that "it seems extremely implausible to imagine that Linton Heathcliff was ever conceived under amorous conditions" (375), and the idea of marital rape did not exist in the early nineteenth century. According to Mary Shanley, "Married women were unable to prosecute husbands who forced them to have sexual intercourse; sexual access was taken to be part of the marriage contract, and marital rape was not legally cognizable. A woman who left her husband because he forced her to have sexual relations with him was guilty of desertion and could lose all rights to maintenance and custody" (Shanley 156). It is a cause that John Stuart Mill advances in *The*

Subjection of Women (1869). And indeed, the description of the bedroom seems to support the theory that Isabella endured spousal rape. The emphasis on domestic space also helps to expose the limits on women's agency. Ideally, wives were granted a level of authority in their home, yet Isabella is denied even that.

Isabella's nightmarish introduction into the realities of married life is one from which she does not awaken. Isabella describes her actions after Joseph leaves her with no room in which to eat or sleep; "I flung my tray and its contents on the ground; and then seated myself at the stairs-head, hid my face in my hands, and cried" (106). Isabella is alone in the dark, not attended to by her new husband or any staff. Her situation reflects her new legal status, as she is now virtually non-existent, and it reflects the lack of agency that wives could have in their own homes. When she finally gets a room, she falls asleep only to be awakened by Heathcliff in the middle of the night. Isabella describes the encounter: "[H]e had just come in, and demanded, in his loving manner, what I was doing there?" (Bronte 107). In a place where she is supposed to belong, she is treated as an outsider, a treatment that reflects her loss of identity and her loss of value as a person. She has no female servant to assist her; she must cook the porridge for dinner; she is threatened with dog attacks, verbally abused, made to feel unwanted, and forced to cleanup after herself. It is not the idealized vision of a married woman's first night in her new home. Isabella's initiation into the reality of marriage is harsh and cruel.

The women in this study discover that their husbands deceived them and manipulated them into marriage. For Helen Huntingdon, it is a few months; for Elizabeth Frankenstein, it is her wedding night; for Jane Eyre, it is the moment when the sham wedding is halted; and for Isabella, it is after just one night at Wuthering Heights. Isabella tells Joseph "I think the concentrated essence of all the madness in the world took up its abode in my brain the day I linked my fate with [Heathcliff and Catherine's]!" (105). In her confession to Nelly, Isabella

not only discloses her misery, she also hints at the threats and abuse she has already experienced. Isabella tells Nelly, “You’ll not be surprised, Ellen, at my feeling particularly cheerless, seated in worse than solitude on that inhospitable hearth, and remembering that four miles distant lay my delightful home, containing the only people I loved on earth; and there might as well be the Atlantic to part us, instead of those four miles: I could not overpass them!” (102). Her inability to travel the four miles is clearly not for a lack of will or strength. She has obviously been forbidden to leave Wuthering Heights. On her first night there, it has already become her prison. She also appeals to Nelly to inform Edgar that her absence does not convey her feelings for him. She writes,

Inform Edgar that I’d give the world to see his face again—that my heart returned to Thrushcross Grange in twenty-four hours after I left it, and is there at this moment, full of warm feelings for him, and Catherine! I *can’t follow it, though* . . . they need not expect me, and they may draw what conclusions they please; taking care, however, to lay nothing at the door of my weak will or deficient affection. (100)

Her letter discloses that she is already imprisoned in Wuthering Heights; Heathcliff has taken measures to assure that she cannot leave or communicate directly with those whom she loves.

Bronte also uses Heathcliff to dismantle the illusion of domestic bliss that marriage was believed to bring to women. Heathcliff is quite obviously not the ideal middle-class husband. Nineteenth-century society imagined that husbands protected their wives and consequently, nineteenth-century laws did not adequately account for instances when husbands did not behave as the loving spouse. The law’s lack of precision in detailing the extent to which physical violence was condoned allowed husbands a great deal of latitude in how they treated their wives. Moderate violence was considered acceptable to use on any inferior person, such as a servant, child, or wife because the law considered these corrections

for the inferiors' benefit. However, the law did not specify the boundaries of moderate correction; it did not explicate at what point moderation became excess. This left the law open to interpretation in ways that forbade wives to protect themselves from abusive husbands. The law did state that "the husband was prohibited from using any violence to his wife, *aliter quam ad virum, ex causa regiminis et castigationis uxoris suae, licite et rationabiliter pertinent* [Otherwise than lawfully and reasonably belongs to the husband for the due government and correction of his wife]" (Blackstone 444; Jones 39). But this law is written in a manner that allows nearly any violence to be excused as reasonable. Overlooking the gross power dynamics that allowed a husband the legal authority to physically discipline his wife, the law failed to create clear boundaries between acceptable correction and criminal violence. Some violence was more specific though it favored the husband's choice; "for some misdemeanours" the husband was allowed "*flagellis et fustibus acriter verbarer uxorem* [to wound his wife severely with whips and fists]. For others, only *modicum castigationem adhibere* [to apply modest corrective punishment]" (Blackstone 444; Jones 39). Because the law is so vague, it left room for husbands to verbally and physically abuse their wives with no legal ramifications. When a woman married, she bound herself for life to a man who could become monstrous by the amount of power the law granted him.

Bronte's descriptions of the domestic space of *Wuthering Heights* reveal the deterioration of the domestic ideal in an abusive household. When Nelly visits for the first time, Isabella makes no effort to conceal her misery. While Pike reads this as reflecting her lack of credibility, I argue that it is a direct rebellion against women's expectations in marriage.⁶ Isabella refuses to contribute to the false illusion that is the middle-class domestic ideal. After only six weeks, Nelly witnesses Isabella's transformation as a result of the abusive marriage. In a view that exposes the culture that diminishes women, Isabella, not Heathcliff, is criticized for not maintaining this illusion of bliss. When Nelly enters

Wuthering Heights, she says, “There never was such a dreary, dismal scene as the formally cheerful house presented!” (108). Nelly judges Isabella for not keeping her new home clean, but the domestic space reflects the state of the marriage; it is in tatters. In a devastating insult, Nelly judges Isabella for not maintaining the illusion of domestic bliss, but Isabella refuses to contribute to that false ideal. Isabella “sighed, for it seemed as if all joy had vanished from the world, never to be restored” (129). This is her domestic nightmare, and it demonstrates the reality of living under coverture when the husband is abusive. Isabella had “already [partaken] of the pervading spirit of neglect which encompassed her. Her pretty face was wan and listless; her hair uncurled: some locks hanging lankly down, and some carelessly twisted round her head. Probably she had not touched her dress since yester evening” (108). This description is far from the well-groomed and fashionable Isabella from just before the wedding. Her appearance is representative of her interior anxieties. Pike argues, “Bronte’s portrait of Isabella comes strikingly close to nineteenth-century accounts of the coarsened nature of laboring-class women, who, though victims of ‘wife-torture’ are deemed somehow more inured to such violence” (Pike 271). Scenes like these show that the social responsibility of maintaining the mirage of domestic bliss lies with the wife.

Heathcliff also demonstrates his disgust for Isabella through verbal abuse. He tells Nelly, “Now, was it not the depth of absurdity—of genuine idiocy, for that pitiful, slavish, mean-minded brach to dream that I could love her? Tell your master, Nelly, that I never, in all my life, met with such an abject thing as she is. She even disgraces the name of Linton” (111). His cruel words associate her with an abused dog, an association that is especially sinister because the dogs in the novel are so often the recipients of abuse. Heathcliff hangs Isabella’s dog, and Hareton hangs a litter of puppies. Given this association, his language can also be read as a confirmation that Isabella, like the dogs, has been abused, and even hanged as a form of torture. Heathcliff’s intense hatred for Isabella is shocking, as is his labelling her

an idiot and a slave. Through him, Bronte offers an example of a monstrous husband who stays within the law, but the law itself is inadequate. Scholars of empire read scenes such as this one that articulates Heathcliff's power over Isabella and treating her like a slave as being an imperialist power reversal.⁷ But I argue that it is more than an imperialist reversal with the dark Heathcliff ruling the white Isabella. The power dynamic between Heathcliff and Isabella is the legal standard power that coverture grants husbands; he owns her despite their races.

Bronte uses Gothic conventions to represent the dangers of marriage to women. In *Wuthering Heights*, vampirism becomes a way to view coverture. In contrast to Isabella's deterioration, Heathcliff "never looked better" (108). There is something vampiric about this description. Isabella has been weakened, body and soul by Heathcliff, who has grown stronger. Vampirism or cannibalism "is also the ultimate manifestation of the violation of boundaries, and represents the fear, on the most immediately horrifying personal and bodily level, of being invaded and used by another for his own purposes" (Meyer 177). In terms of coverture, the wife is absorbed into the husband, losing her own power. In further evidence of Heathcliff's vampirism, Nelly points out, "So much had circumstances altered their positions that he would certainly have struck a stranger as a born and bred gentleman; and his wife as a thorough little slattern!" (108). Her comment portrays patriarchy as feeding off women, strengthened by their growing weakness. Feeding off of others' despair strengthens Heathcliff. He also talks of what he will do to Edgar if Cathy ever loses her regard for him: "I would have torn his heart out, and drunk his blood!" (110). This barbaric act is both vampiric and cannibalistic, references that are historically significant. Matthew Beaumont examines "Bronte's figurative use of the cannibal" in *Wuthering Heights* concentrating on her "allusive identification of Heathcliff with the emblematic figure of the cannibal, which, historically, has functioned in imperial discourse as the ultimate emblem of enlightened

civilization's dark other" (139). Beaumont argues that Heathcliff's cannibalism "is not merely a trigger for sensational emotion, but a form of committed social criticism" (139). Heathcliff's brutality in this scene against both women and men, reveals his capacity for unmitigated violence, and, if the cannibal represents a form for social criticism, then, in my reading, his cannibalism can also be read as demonstrating the necessity for the law to protect wives from brutal husbands.

In Bronte's descriptions of Heathcliff and Isabella's marriage, she addresses aspects of the coverture law that need to be revised. Critics have acknowledged Bronte's awareness of and interest in the law. Ward argues that Bronte "was just as well versed in both the weakness of humanity, and the weakness of the laws that were devised to refine it" (Ward, *Law* 58). Her depiction of Heathcliff seems to deliberately challenge the near universal power marriage laws gave husbands over wives. Marriage laws supported men, especially men like Heathcliff, who, is even more favoured by the law because of his social status.⁸ The marriage is destroying Isabella, but based on the laws of the time, she would not be allowed to divorce Heathcliff, despite his violence. One purpose of the divorce courts was "to make husbands and wives more moral" (Hammerton 116). This is reflective of the domestic myth the culture perpetuated, not the reality. According to Blackstone, "When people understand that they *must* live together, except for a very few reasons known to the law, they learn to soften by mutual accommodation that yoke which they know they cannot shake off. They become good husbands and good wives from the necessity of remaining husbands and wives" (Blackstone 440). The discrepancy in power, however, between husbands and wives leaves wives vulnerable to abuse. In the case of Isabella and Heathcliff, Bronte reveals that this idealistic effect is unrealistic and a divorce *a mensa et thoro* should be a more viable solution.

Isabella and Heathcliff's treatment of each other demonstrates the true consequences of spouses being forced to live together. Heathcliff uses his authority as a form of torture rather

than as protection. She calls him a “tyrant,” “murderer,” “fiendish,” “monster,” “brute beast,” “goblin,” and she identifies him as her “enemy.” She tells Nelly, “He’s a lying fiend! A monster, and not a human being!” (112). This is not the language of love and respect. Isabella’s pet names for him are not terms of endearment; they are terms of hatred. She asks Nelly, “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil? I shan’t tell my reasons for making this inquiry; but, I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married” (100-101). Isabella uses Gothic language to describe Heathcliff, demonstrating his failure to fulfill a husband’s role. Her marriage is so violent that she desires to be “anywhere out of the reach of my accursed—of that incarnate goblin!” (127). Heathcliff is her enemy; he is a goblin, an evil, demonic, sub-human creature. Their relationship is not improving because they are forced to live together; it is deteriorating. Isabella’s dialogue is not typical of the way lawmakers imagined middle-class women talking about their husbands. Her word choices reveal the level of his brutality, statements that warn readers that no wife, no matter how moral, could reform such a monster. Because of the law, her only solution is to abandon the marriage.

Bronte’s depiction of Heathcliff also illustrates a wife’s vulnerable position. Like Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Isabella begins to hate rather than to love her husband. Heathcliff tells Nelly, “for this morning [Isabella] announced, as a piece of appalling intelligence, that I had actually succeeded in making her hate me! A positive labour of Hercules, I assure you! If it be achieved, I have cause to return thanks” (111). This is not the result of being forced to live together that the lawmakers imagined. Rather than both spouses learning to love each other and live morally, a battle ensues. Heathcliff also calls Isabella a “viper” (132) and says, “She degenerates into a mere slut!” (111). These specific names question her honor and associate her with manipulation and sexual immorality. In Heathcliff’s slut reference, and Isabella’s physical deterioration, Bronte “presents a classic

scenario of a mentally or morally depraved woman, whose degraded state is her own doing and moral failing” (Pike 365). Isabella’s “unkenmpt appearance [thus] her appearing of questionable virtue” seems to support Heathcliff’s comments that undermine her credibility (Pike 365). He asks Isabella, “Can I trust your assertion, Isabella? Are you sure you hate me? If I let you alone for half a day, won’t you come sighing and wheedling to me again? I dare say she would rather I had seemed all tenderness before you: it wounds her vanity to have the truth exposed. But I don’t care who knows that the passion was wholly on one side” (111). Heathcliff understands the domestic role that Isabella wishes he would, at least, pretend to fulfill. He claims that Isabella still loves him despite his treatment of her and that she comes “sighing and wheedling” anytime he ignores her.

Heathcliff’s statements do not align with Isabella’s version of their marriage, and, in fact, he lays the blame for Isabella’s unhappiness on her, not his treatment of her. He tells Nelly, “She is tired of trying to please me uncommonly early. You’d hardly credit it, but the very morrow of our wedding, she was weeping to go home. However, she’ll suit this house so much the better for not being over nice, and I’ll take care she does not disgrace me by rambling abroad” (111). Heathcliff’s version of Isabella’s first few days of marriage differs greatly from Isabella’s own version. He criticizes her for not fulfilling her wifely duties, but he confirms that she instantly regretted her decision to marry. Heathcliff also promises to prevent Isabella from running away, which means he will exercise his right to confine her, and he confirms that upon Isabella’s first night as a wife, she was imprisoned in her new home.

Bronte’s depiction of life in an abusive marriage is exposed in Isabella’s letter to Nelly and in Isabella’s later escape. In the letter to Nelly, Isabella begins to reveal more details about the kinds of abuse she endures. Like a Gothic villain, Heathcliff relishes not just tormenting Isabella, but also witnessing the effects of his abuse on her. Isabella admits to

Nelly, “[H]e is ingenious and unrelenting in seeking to gain my abhorrence! I sometimes wonder at him with an intensity that deadens my fear: yet, I assure you, a tiger or a venomous serpent could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he wakens” (107). She likens him to two deadly animals, revealing his potential to be lethal. It seems clear that she understands the dangers of living with him. Once married, “Isabella is quickly disillusioned; her premarital vision of Heathcliff as ‘a hero of romance’ is destroyed” (Lamonica 109). After less than two months of living in an abusive household, she tells Nelly, “I do hate him—I am wretched—I have been a fool!” (107). She clearly regrets her decision, but thus far, any criteria for divorce has not been met. Thus, her coverture remains in place.

Isabella undergoes multiple transformations: from the defeated, abused, hopeless wife, into a savage, vengeful wife, and finally into a radical fugitive, an unconventional woman. Brontë transforms Isabella into a woman who refuses to submit to a man who does not deserve her sympathy, thus, should not have the legal authority to her life. It is a reminder that no one human should have such complete control over another. Because some men will not live up to a domestic ideal, all women should not lose their legal capacity to save themselves when they marry monstrous husbands, whether the decision was poorly made or not. Rather than an angel in the house reforming a misguided husband, the reverse has happened, and the angel in the house has been corrupted. Isabella’s “delusive infatuation for Heathcliff turns to hatred [as] she becomes just as wild and bloodthirsty as anyone else at the Heights, and thinks seriously of helping to kill Heathcliff” (Figs 145). As a result of living with a Gothic villain, Isabella is losing her humanity and compassion. She no longer wants to reform Heathcliff; now she wants to hurt him. When he weeps over Cathy’s imminent death, she says, “I couldn’t miss this chance of sticking in a dart: his weakness was the only time when I could taste the delight of paying wrong for wrong” (133). Isabella’s reaction to abuse differs from Helen Huntingdon’s in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Helen

wishes for Huntingdon to reform and returns to care for him until he dies. Isabella is more similar to the young Jane Eyre who fights back against John Reed; Isabella wants to punish Heathcliff. She wants revenge. Rather than marriage forcing them both to be better people, they both deteriorate into cruelty.

Bronte dedicates scenes to Isabella's confession of regret and explaining her new, clear vision of Heathcliff. She admits, "His forehead, that I once thought so manly, and that I now think so diabolical, was shaded with a heavy cloud; his basilisk eyes were nearly quenched by sleeplessness, and weeping, perhaps, for the lashes were wet then; his lips devoid of their ferocious sneer, and sealed in an expression of unspeakable sadness" (133). Heathcliff is diabolical, devil-like, satanic, evil, his eyes are deadly, like the gaze of the mythological creature is said to be lethal to any who meet its eye. These descriptions expose the depth of his evil and cruelty, and they emphasize that he is deadly. Isabella accounts for the transformation of Heathcliff from her romantic ideal to the reality of his villainy. Bronte uses Isabella's situation and her transformation to expose the nineteenth-century belief that husbands who employ discipline on their wives are gentleman, not villains. After Isabella speaks derogatorily of Heathcliff, Nelly urges her to conform to social standards. She tells Isabella, "Hush, hush! He's a human being . . . Be more charitable: there are worse men than he is yet" (128), but Isabella contradicts her:

He's not a human being . . . and he has no claim on my charity. I gave him my heart, and he took and pinched it to death, and flung it back to me. People feel with their hearts, Ellen: and since he has destroyed mine, I have not power to feel for him: and I would not, though he groaned from this to his dying day, and wept tears of blood for Catherine. No, indeed, indeed, I wouldn't" (128).

Isabella's comments reveal the effect the abuse has had on her. Heathcliff has destroyed her humanity; however, his abuses have not quelled her desire to live. She rejects her role as a

reformer and as a submissive wife, and she denies that he has any right to her, though the law says that he does.

Once Heathcliff and Isabella are married, Heathcliff is not only emotionally cruel; he is also physically violent. Bronte specifies some of Heathcliff's abuses, but many are implied, and these abuses occur during the mere two months that Isabella lives at Wuthering Heights. Even if one could argue that Heathcliff uses his authority to correct Isabella's behavior, the result is that he terrorizes her. When he accuses Edgar of causing Cathy's illness, Heathcliff "promis[es] that [Isabella] should be Edgar's proxy in suffering, till, he could get hold of him" (107). Not only does he punish Isabella for what he sees as her shortcomings, but he also punishes her for that which is completely out of her control. The abuse Isabella describes illustrates women's greatest marital nightmare. Isabella tells Nelly, "He shook me till my teeth rattled, and pitched me beside Joseph" (132). In another scene, Heathcliff "seized and thrust her from the room: and returned muttering: 'I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy in proportion to the increase of pain'" (112). Heathcliff desires to crush and torture her because of her fragility. And his comparison of Isabella to a worm is yet another example of how he views her as subhuman, a view that coverture encourages.

Much of Heathcliff's abuse is not described, which suggests the possibility that Isabella has endured horrors worse than those she does specify, which includes physical and emotional abuse. She details the scene when he throws a knife into her neck, so we can only imagine what else she might have suffered. Also, Isabella seems to suggest that she had previously tried to escape, and had suffered horrific consequences. Heathcliff tells Nelly, "I've sometimes relented, from pure lack of invention, in my experiments on what she could endure, and she still creeps shamefully cringing back" (111). Heathcliff's use of the word

experiments recalls the scientific experiments that Victor Frankenstein performs. It is the level of power that the law grants one being over another that seems to give husbands the permission to treat their wives with cruelty. Heathcliff's language suggests tortures that no one has yet attempted, but that he will try on Isabella. His unstated abuse is more horrifying than that which Isabella details because readers can imagine the extent to which Heathcliff can terrorize a being who is legally his property. Heathcliff recognizes the change in Isabella, who has become accustomed to her new uncivilized living situation. He tells Nelly, "But no brutality disgusted her: I supposed she has an innate admiration of it, if only her precious person were secure from injury!" (111). He seems surprised that she has adapted to survive, and, in another parallel to *Frankenstein*, Heathcliff has molded Isabella through his violence. His wish that Isabella's body were stronger so she could withstand more violence is highly disturbing in its revelation to what kind of abuse she has already endured versus the level of violence he wishes to use. The horror is in the not knowing, leaving the reader to imagine what he has done to her. His statement also shows his understanding the law. There is a line he cannot cross, but that line seems to be one that would lead to her death.

Through Heathcliff, Bronte demonstrates her understanding of the intricacies of marriage laws and, based on Heathcliff's language, he, too, knows the legal boundaries, and he does not give Isabella any grounds on which she can divorce him. Pike argues, "Heathcliff's account not only clearly reveals that Bronte had a keen awareness of the marriage laws and coverture, but also, more surprisingly, it shows her very incisive understanding of the legal grounds by which a husband could incarcerate his wife" (Pike 351). Heathcliff also announces his understanding of the laws concerning spousal violence. He tells Nelly to tell Edgar, "to set his fraternal and magisterial heart at ease: that I keep strictly within the limits of the law. I have avoided, up to this period, giving her the slightest right to claim a separation" (Bronte 122). This announcement is particularly chilling because

the law does not specify the limit of that law; Heathcliff need stop only just short of murder. Heathcliff again references the law when he tells Isabella, “No; you’re not fit to be your own guardian, Isabella, now; and I, being your legal protector, must retain you in my custody, however distasteful the obligation may be” (112). Heathcliff’s reference to her lack of legal rights and to his own responsibility as her guardian demonstrates that he is aware of his role as her protector, but he will use it to control and torment her, not to protect and cover her. His reaction to this role reveals that he perverts this responsibility.

Like Elizabeth Frankenstein, Isabella seems to see death as her only escape. Isabella tells Nelly, “I just hope, I pray, that he may forget his diabolical prudence and kill me! The single pleasure I can imagine is to die or to see him dead!” (112). However, in the same sentence she also wishes for Heathcliff to die instead, so she may live. She values her life above his. Pike argues that when Isabella becomes violent, “Bronte takes a most radical step by portraying a genteel woman as a victim of domestic violence, where her coarseness is not something inherent to her class but is a result of her domestic life” (Pike 373). When Isabella threatens this, Heathcliff tells Nelly, “If you are called upon in a court of law, you’ll remember her language, Nelly!” (112). Heathcliff seems to be aware to the laws that allow a husband to confine or even institutionalize a wife who is mentally unstable or who threatens his life. Because Heathcliff is a baron, he has even more authority over Isabella than a lower class husband would. According to the law,

If a baron kills his feme [wife] it is the same as if he had killed a stranger, or any other person; but if the feme kills her baron, it is regarded by the laws as a much more atrocious crime; as she not only breaks through the restraints of humanity and conjugal affection, but throws off all subjection to the authority of her husband. And therefore the law denominates her crime a species of treason, and condemns her to the same punishment as if she had killed the

king. And for every species of treason, (though in petit treason the punishment of men was only to be drawn and hanged,) . . . the sentence of women was to be drawn and burnt alive. (Blackstone 44)

In the nineteenth-century, women who murdered their husbands were not drawn or burned because of the issue of public nudity. Instead, wives were hanged for the murder of their husbands. The more brutal consequences for women reinforce the law's patriarchal values. The consequence when she threatens him is far greater than when he threatens her.

Hoeveler argues that Isabella and the abuse scenes do not have much to offer about marriage or abuse in the novel. She argues that Isabella's "class-based critique of Heathcliff, so painfully detailed, is little more than a beating fantasy with the other woman as the victim, Catherine as the voyeur, and Heathcliff as sadistic and paternally displaced aggressor" (Hoeveler 195). However, these scenes have more value than simply shock and entertainment. Bronte is clearly scrutinizing the level of brutality a husband can employ within the law. While Hoeveler acknowledges that the abuse "seems to suggest that for Bronte marriage is a form of institutionalized torture" (195), she also argues that marriage is a form of "sexual depravity for women [with] Isabella's wallowing in masochistic postures at Heathcliff's feet suggest[ing] her need not simply to humiliate her brother's class-based snobbery but to debase herself as well" (Hoeveler 195). I would dispute the view that Isabella's transformation into aggression and violence is a self-punishment. Rather, I would argue that it is a survival technique, and one that is a direct result of her treatment at Wuthering Heights. Even given Heathcliff's extreme violence against Isabella, because the law does not specify the limits of abuse, the law would support him especially because she throws the knife back at him. Ward writes, "There is a sorry inevitability about the serial abuse of wives. The law might have sought to limit the rights of chastisement, but there is nothing, in practice, that can save Isabella from being assaulted by her husband" (Ward, *Law*

57).

III

All of the women in this study escape oppressive marriages one way or another. Elizabeth Frankenstein dies; Jane Eyre cannot legally marry Rochester, so she leaves. Only two of the women flee abusive marriages: Helen Huntingdon and Isabella Heathcliff. Helen escapes a very different kind of suffering, and her method of escape is also quite different. Helen endures emotional abuse for years before she ever takes action, and she is a highly moral and religious woman whose convictions gain her respect that seem to grant her a reprieve from the illegal act of separating from her husband. Her exit can be seen as a sacrifice rather than a sin because Helen leaves not to protect herself, but to protect her son. Isabella, though, leaves Heathcliff after only two months of marriage, and when she leaves, it is to save herself. Isabella is most frequently compared to Cathy, but the women's reactions to their unhappy marriages distinguishes them. Critics, moreover, are beginning to shift their views of Cathy as a powerful and revolutionary character. Lamonica argues that "Catherine simply allows her imprisonment and unfulfilled longing to overcome her" (109). While Cathy is clearly unhappy, but not abused, she makes no move to end her marriage to Edgar or to run away with Heathcliff. Only "Isabella actively contrives an escape" (Lamonica 109). Some critics have recognized the exceptionality of Isabella's actions, with Lamonica noting "In one of the most radical escapes allowed a woman in a Victorian novel, Isabella flees, pregnant and alone, to live and raise her child by herself" (110). Bronte shows that the options for abused women are criminally insufficient. Had Isabella stayed with Heathcliff, it is unlikely that she would have survived. Most critics largely ignore Isabella's escape and her life after the escape, but Isabella takes her fate into her own hands, defying every code of

submission that society has instilled in her, an act that calls for a more thorough critical investigation.

When Isabella escapes *Wuthering Heights*, her actual exit and the circumstances that initiated it differ greatly from those of Jane Eyre and Helen Huntingdon. Isabella details the knife attack and the other acts of violence that counter the social ideal of the domestic haven. Isabella's most specific account of physical abuse is also the one that prompts her escape. It is a horrific scene that highlights the dangers of one human being having control over another. Isabella describes the event to Nelly. Heathcliff "snatched a dinner knife from the table and flung it at my head. It struck beneath my ear, and stopped the sentence I was uttering; but, pulling it out, I sprang to the door and delivered another; which I hope went a little deeper than his missile" (134). The wound from the knife attack results in blood pouring down Isabella's neck (127). After Heathcliff throws the knife at Isabella that sticks in her neck, she pulls it out and throws it at him, "The last glimpse I caught of him was a furious rush on his part, checked by the embrace of his host [Hindley]; and both fell locked together on the hearth. In my flight through the kitchen I bade Joseph speed to his master; I knocked over Hareton, who was hanging a litter of puppies from a chair-back in the doorway" (134-5). Isabella's detailed description of her final night at Wuthering Heights captures the horrors of spousal abuse. The last time she sees Heathcliff he is attempting to overtake and attack her, and as she escapes the house, bleeding, she passes even more violence: Heathcliff and Hindley in a fist fight; Hareton killing puppies. This is no middle-class domestic ideal; it is a house of horrors.

Readers witness a different Isabella as she escapes. If entering Wuthering Heights is a descent into Hell, then escaping it is a rebirth. Punter argues that *Wuthering Heights* "is a story of reincarnations, for Heathcliff and Catherine both die and are reincarnated *within* the text" (Punter, *Gothic Pathologies* 134). Isabella undergoes a kind of reincarnation as well.

Gilbert and Gubar recognize that, while marriage does not kill Isabella, “when she escapes, giggling like a madwoman, from *her* self-imprisonment, she is so effectively banished from the novel by her brother (and Bronte) that she might as well be dead” (“Looking Oppositely” 67).

Once Isabella escapes, the language she uses reveals the action necessary to save oneself if the law cannot or will not. It is a reminder that, even though nineteenth-century culture expected submission, in this situation, submission could be fatal. Isabella describes her escape after the knife attack:

blest as a soul escaped from purgatory, I bounded, leaped, and flew down the steep road; then, quitting its windings, shot direct across the moor, rolling over banks, and wading through marshes: precipitating myself, in fact, towards the beacon light of the Grange. And far rather would I be condemned to a perpetual dwelling in the infernal regions than, even for one night, abide beneath the roof of Wuthering Heights again. (134-5)

Isabella’s language is significant. She is escaping a place of infernal regions. She labels Hell a more viable option than Wuthering Heights. Her actions mirror those of a criminal escaping a prison. Isabella bounds, leaps, and flies; she shoots and rolls and wades. And unlike Helen Huntingdon, who endures years of abuse and rides away in a carriage with a servant and her son, Isabella refuses to subject herself to further humiliation and torture. She escapes alone on foot to Thrushcross Grange, then alone in a carriage to an unknown location. When faced with the possibility of death, Isabella does not passively allow Heathcliff to kill her, a kind of “suicide by husband.” Instead, she fights for her life. Isabella’s escape reflects her resistance to her untenable position in this marriage. She is not willing to endure more than two months of hell.

Isabella’s escape also reveals the extent to which her sense of self was damaged. Nelly

first hears Isabella outside of Thrushcross Grange “out of breath and laughing” (126). This is very different from the suicidal Isabella earlier in the marriage. She has not planned or prepared like Helen Huntingdon by saving money and securing a place of residence. When Isabella leaves, she has no money, only the clothes on her back and no place to go beyond stopping at Thrushcross Grange and taking her old belongings. Isabella tells Nelly, “I have run the whole way from Wuthering Heights! . . . except where I’ve flown. I couldn’t count the number of falls I had. Oh, I’m aching all over! . . . have the goodness to step out and order the carriage to take me on to Gimmerton, and tell a servant to seek up a few clothes in my wardrobe” (126). Material goods are no longer important; safety is her only concern. Her light silk dress also illustrates her former interest in maintaining her image of ideal femininity. She escapes in clothing she would likely have resisted soiling before her marriage, but now, she runs four miles in the winter through the swamp, and over embankments with no thought to the state of her clothing. While Isabella’s language and demeanor are manic and celebratory, her appearance reveals the horrors she endured. Isabella certainly seemed in no laughing predicament;

her hair streamed on her shoulders, dripping with snow and water; she was dressed in the girlish dress she commonly wore, befitting her age more than her position: a low frock with short sleeves, and nothing on either head or neck. The frock was of light silk, and clung to her with wet, and her feet were protected merely by thin slippers; add to this a deep cut under one ear, which only the cold prevented from bleeding profusely, a white face scratched and bruised, and a frame hardly able to support itself, through fatigue. (126)

In this scene, Isabella is wounded, cold, and exhausted and weak. Yet this is still an improvement on her condition at Wuthering Heights. Isabella leaves despite not having adequate clothing for an escape. She is vulnerable and exposed with no coat or adequate

shoes. Her knife wound and her cut and bruised face do not match the girlish clothing she wears. Isabella's dress in this scene has been discussed as reflective of her immaturity.⁹ Pike also argues that Isabella's clothing is to make her appear "shockingly unrefined" and that "Isabella's appearance only lends further proof to Nelly's earlier remark about her looking like a slattern" (Pike 370). However, I see Isabella's appearance as the direct result of her experience as a wife; thus her clothing is also reflective of a wife's vulnerability to her husband and how gender expectations handcuff them and deny them agency over their own lives. Her appearance and her clothing exposes the dichotomy between Isabella's gender expectations and what she must do to save her own life.

As Isabella waits at Thrushcross Grange for the carriage to continue her escape, she reveals the depth of the transformation she has undergone from naive bride to abused wife, and finally to a defiant woman who asserts her right to life. She tells Nelly, "Ah, he was in such a fury! If he had caught me! It's a pity Earnshaw is not his match in strength: I wouldn't have run till I'd seen him all but demolished, had Hindley been able to do it" (127). It is clear that she knows she would have been horribly abused if Heathcliff had caught her. Hindley likely saved her life. But it is her claim that she wished she could have witnessed Heathcliff's murder that is most astonishing. She no longer wishes to die in an effort to escape her hell; she now wishes for Heathcliff to die so she can be released from his tyranny. She challenges the law's privileging men over women. Isabella tells Nelly, "I've recovered from my first desire to be killed by [Heathcliff]: I'd rather he'd kill himself!" (128). Her statement reveals that, because of his despicable behavior, her life should be privileged over his. It is an argument that actions are more important than gender. She, not Heathcliff, deserves to live free. Isabella's revolutionary statement directly challenges the law and the ideal of the submissive angel in the house.

Even once Isabella has escaped, she continues to use Gothic language to describe

Heathcliff as devilish. She explains the impact that living with such a husband has had on her. She tells Nelly,

He has extinguished my love effectually, and so I'm at my ease. I can recollect yet how I loved him; and can dimly imagine that I could still be loving him, if—no, no! Even if he had doted on me, the devilish nature would have revealed its existence somehow. Catherine had an awfully perverted taste to esteem him so dearly, knowing him so well. Monster! Would that he could be blotted out of creation and out of my memory! (128).

She attributes her hatred directly to his actions, not to her failure as a wife. She also acknowledges that it is not in Heathcliff's nature to change. The impact of Heathcliff's abuse has revealed itself.

Isabella's explanation of why she finally leaves supports the self-reinvention needed for wives to save themselves when the law will not. In her conversation with Nelly, Isabella says:

You asked, what has driven me to flight at last? I was compelled to attempt it, because I had succeeded in rousing his rage a pitch above his malignity. Pulling out the nerves with red-hot pincers requires more coolness than knocking on the head. He was worked up to forget the fiendish prudence he boasted of, and proceeded to murderous violence. I experienced pleasure in being able to exasperate him; the sense of pleasure woke my instinct of self-preservation, so I fairly broke free; and if ever I come into his hands again he is welcome to a signal revenge (128).

Heathcliff is too angry to stay within the already vague law that outlines the boundaries between acceptable discipline of a wife and a criminal act. She fears he will murder her and it is this pleasure in being able to anger him that reignites her desire to live. Isabella sees herself turning into an abusive person, but rather than becoming that which she despises, she

frees herself. Heathcliff's marriage to Isabella Linton serves as an example of what wives endure and why a divorce *a mensa et thoro* should have been more readily accessible.

Despite Isabella's new assertive role, her legal position as a *feme covert* still forces her to rely on those who have betrayed her. According to the law, "the husband is bound to maintain his wife, and when he turns her from his house he does not thereby discharge himself of that liability" (Blackstone 442). However, "If a wife elopes from her husband, though not with an adulterer, the husband is not liable for any of her contracts" (442). If Heathcliff had expelled Isabella from Wuthering Heights, he would be legally bound to financially support her as long as she had not committed adultery. In Isabella's situation though, because she leaves without his permission, he is not bound to financially support her. She contemplates living at Thrushcross Grange; however, she tells Nelly,

But I tell you [Heathcliff] wouldn't let me! Do you think he could bear to see me grow fat and merry—couldn't bear to think that we were tranquil, and not resolve on poisoning our comfort? Now, I have the satisfaction of being sure that he detests me, to the point of its annoying him seriously to have me within earshot or eye-sight. (128)

Isabella understands that Heathcliff's feelings toward her are the polar opposite of what she imagined and of what the law imagines a husband's treatment of his wife should be. He holds so much contempt for her that he would actively prevent her from experiencing any happiness, but his repulsion toward her is even greater than his need to see her in misery.

Isabella provides details of her marriage that disrupt the domestic model and become a dark parody of marriage. Ideally, a husband would greet his wife with kindness and love. Instead, Isabella tells Nelly,

I notice, when I enter [Heathcliff's] presence, the muscles of his countenance are involuntarily distorted into an expression of hatred; partly arising from his

knowledge of the good causes I have to feel that sentiment for him, and partly from original aversion. It is strong enough to make me feel pretty certain that he would not chase me over England, supposing I contrived a clear escape; and therefore I must get quite away. (128)

Isabella's very existence inspires rage that Heathcliff can barely restrain. But this description offers her the only hope to escape Heathcliff. If she runs away, the law would label her a fugitive, and he could legally imprison her. Her only hope is that the revulsion she inspires in him will be so strong that he would prefer her to leave him and be rid of her than confine her and have to interact with her. He later confirms her suspicion that his abhorrence of her ultimately saved Isabella. Before Isabella escapes, Heathcliff tells Nelly, "If she desired to go, she might: the nuisance of her presence outweighs the gratification to be derived from tormenting her!" (Bronte 111-112). Heathcliff's announcement demonstrates not only that he has been tormenting her, but that he has enjoyed it. His statement also demonstrates, however, that his hatred for her is so great that he would rather relinquish his sadistic pleasure in order to remove her from his presence. His apathy saves Isabella because the law of coverture supports husbands over wives. It is the one statement that explains why he later allows her to live for twelve years without hunting her down, and he holds true to this statement.

After Isabella has left Heathcliff, he turns to Nelly for information on her whereabouts. Nelly says that Heathcliff,

enquired where [Isabella] lived. I refused to tell. He remarked that it was not of any moment, only she must be ware of coming to her brother: she should not be with him, if he had to keep her himself. Though I would give no information, he discovered, through some of the other servants, both her place of residence and the existence of the child. Still, he didn't molest her: for

which forbearance she might thank his aversion, I suppose. (135)

Through Nelly's account of Heathcliff's actions, it is clear that she has shifted her view of Isabella and of Isabella's wifely responsibilities. Now that she knows the abuses Isabella's suffered at Heathcliff's hands, Nelly sympathizes with her. Readers also learn how Heathcliff still has a level of coverture-like control over Isabella. He forbids her ever to visit Edgar, and threatens to imprison her himself if she ever attempts it. And because we know that she never does, she believes his threats. Because of his threats, Heathcliff haunts Isabella; she is never truly safe from him. In this conversation, readers also learn that Heathcliff allows her to live apart from him because her presence is so distasteful that he prefers that she stay away as long as he can guarantee that she never has the pleasure of visiting Edgar.

At any point after Isabella leaves Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff could force her to return, and he could take Linton, but he does not. Readers learn that Isabella settled three hundred miles from Wuthering Heights, but Heathcliff chooses not to travel that far, even though, based on the law of coverture, he could have had her escorted back to him. According to the law, wives "had no legal rights, no rights to own or use property, and no right to custody of her children; her husband was responsible for her, he had the rights to restrain her and mete out moderate correction. If she left his house, without due cause, she could be legally forced to return" (Stetson 5). The law of coverture did not take into account a husband's motivation for forcing his wife to return. A husband did not have to prove his love or even his ability or willingness to provide basic care in order to have her returned. For twelve years, Heathcliff allows Isabella to live alone and raise Linton by herself, providing her with no money to help raise the child, but also not bothering to confiscate the income she receives from Edgar. Ward argues, "If there is a happier future it has been achieved by luck and circumstance, and the exhaustion which finally overcomes Heathcliff. It has not been

secured by any institution devised by society, certainly not the Church and certainly not the law” (Ward, *Law* 61). It is Heathcliff’s hatred of Isabella, not the law, that saves her life.

Despite the domestic hell she is leaving, Isabella’s conversation with Nelly on the night of her escape demonstrates that she still feels the social and legal pressure to remain with Heathcliff. Her sense of survival, however, overpowers the need to conform to unreasonable legal expectations. Isabella clearly still fears him, especially because she knows that the law supports him and condemns her. She tells Nelly,

I’ve cried, too, bitterly—yes, more than any one else has reason to cry. We parted unreconciled, you remember, and I shan’t forgive myself. But, for all that, I was not going to sympathize with him—the brute beast! Oh, give me the poker! This is the last thing of his I have about me’: she slipped the gold ring from her third finger, and threw it on the floor. ‘I’ll smash it!’ She continued, striking it with childish spite, ‘and then I’ll burn it!’ And she took and dropped the misused article among the coals. (127)

Isabella desires a peaceful parting, one that a divorce *a mensa et thoro* might offer, but because she cannot get one without Heathcliff’s agreement, the law that acts to promote matrimony causes Isabella to throw and strike and burn the symbol of marriage, her wedding ring. This scene may be used to establish Isabella as immature and foolish, but it may also be read not as childish spite but as heroic anger that embodies Isabella’s desire for the law to allow her to divorce Heathcliff. Isabella is aware that this symbolic removal of the wedding band does not release her from Heathcliff’s tyranny. After she takes off the ring, she says, “There! He shall buy another if he gets me back again” (127). She knows that it is within Heathcliff’s right to force her back, even though he does it not because of any love for her, but to torture Edgar.

Isabella seems to understand Heathcliff’s true motive. She tells Nelly, “He’d be

capable of coming to seek me, to tease Edgar. I dare not stay, lest that notion should possess his wicked head!” (127). By assigning a motive, Isabella is trying to compensate for the law’s limitations, trying to make sense of her reality—something the law denies her. Marriage laws are patriarchal, and when the husbands who employ these are cruel and immoral, the law becomes culpable in enabling abuse. We witness this with Heathcliff, who “incorporate[s] all the darker arts of deception, intimidation and violence . . . [to] make much of the law’s apparent preference for men like him” (Ward, *Law* 58). As a wealthy man with social status, he is respected and assumed to be a gentleman. Therefore, to escape the law, Isabella must also exile herself from her family and live as a fugitive. Her marriage to Heathcliff and her loss of legal status has ruined her life and alienated her from her family. Even though Isabella has attempted to control her fate, she is nonetheless still limited by coverture.

VI

Isabella’s marriage to Heathcliff fuels my examination of how Bronte participates in the social discussion about spousal abuse and in dismantling the middle-class domestic ideal. Isabella’s life after leaving Wuthering Heights is vague because, unlike *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the narrative abandons her. Bronte offers only glimpses of what her life would have been. Readers know that “She was driven away, never to revisit this neighborhood: but a regular correspondence was established between her and my master when things were more settled. I believe her new abode was in the south, near London; there she had a son born, a few months subsequent to her escape” (135). It is likely that Edgar financially supports her, especially because she kept correspondence with Edgar once she leaves Heathcliff. However, readers learn little else about her life during those twelve years.

It is as if, because she has lost her legal status and lives as a fugitive, outside social boundaries, her absence from the text reflects the reality of her life. A wife who has left her husband and kidnapped his child has no place in society. Her life would have been terrifying. She never would have had a moment of peace because at any moment Heathcliff could force her and Linton back to Wuthering Heights. She would have been haunted by that fear, and it is a fear that a divorce *a mensa et thoro* would have eliminated.

In *Wuthering Heights* Bronte incorporates an ending for Isabella and Heathcliff that offers possibilities of a new support for women in abusive marriages. In the nineteenth century, “The public gaze was central to the process of marital regulation” (Hammerton 116). And Catherine Linton and Linton Heathcliff reveal a shift in the view of women who break coverture and leave abusive husbands. Readers witness this change when Heathcliff continues to cruelly abuse Isabella’s memory in an effort to contaminate Linton’s view of her. When Heathcliff learns that Isabella did not tell Linton about his father, he says, “No! What a shame of your mother, never to waken your filial regard for me! You are my son, then, I’ll tell you; and your mother was a wicked slut to leave you in ignorance of the sort of father you possessed” (155). Heathcliff’s derogatory language reflects the sentiment that divorce laws conveyed: wives who left their husbands were immoral and criminal. Yet, clearly, there is a shift in this view because the second generation views Heathcliff as monstrous and Isabella as his victim. Even when Linton learns about his father and that his mother concealed her past, he still remains loyal to her. Linton says, “‘My father!’ he cried in strange perplexity. ‘mamma never told me I had a father. Where does he live? I’d rather stay with uncle’” (152). He trusts his mother’s judgment for sheltering him from this man even though he does not yet understand why. She has not lost any credibility. Linton asks, “But why have I not heard of him before . . . Why didn’t mamma and he live together, as other people do?” (152). Linton questions Isabella’s silence about Heathcliff; he does not

condemn her. It is a reaction that grants wives agency without punishment. Catherine Linton also blames Heathcliff for Isabella's unhappiness. She says, "He must be wicked to have made Aunt Isabella leave him as she did" (177). She is clearly not concerned with the law, which does not represent women's needs. The morality of the situation is what concerns her; here, social attitudes have evolved faster than the law. Even Nelly has shifted her view of Isabella; she tells the young Catherine Linton, Aunt Isabella "wasn't as happy as master; she hadn't as much to live for" (171). In the second half of the novel, Isabella is viewed as a victim of her situation, not as an immoral fugitive. She becomes someone who deserves sympathy and assistance.

There is a well-established connection between literature and discussions of social reform. In the nineteenth century, "Many women eluded themselves into believing that marriage could provide an escape from domestic male tyranny" (Figs 145) and "many women writers had warned against marriage for this reason" (145). In *Wuthering Heights*, readers witness the disasters that occur when women marry abusive husbands. Isabella Linton marries Heathcliff partially because she has created an image of him conjured from romantic novels. He, however, is no romantic hero. No one forces Isabella into the marriage; it was of her own choosing though Cathy did play an integral role. Heathcliff discloses that he knows the particulars of marriage laws that detail the guidelines of spousal treatment. The romance between Cathy and Heathcliff has often been a scholarly focus, but Isabella's narrative speaks to women's dire predicament if they marry a violent husband. While Cathy is often discussed as challenging social expectations for women, Isabella is the more controversial and progressive character. Cathy loves Heathcliff, but marries Edgar, who is the socially conventional suitor; therefore, she conforms to society more than Isabella, who demands an agency over her life in a way that Cathy never does. But both women still live in a patriarchal world that punishes women who defy expectations. While both Cathy and

Isabella suffer consequences for not submitting to the patriarchy, the methods of their deaths and their rebellions differ, revealing Isabella as the stronger character. Cathy cannot live torn between two men, so she starves herself to death, while Isabella cannot live with the monstrous Heathcliff so she runs away to live a full twelve years longer and raise her son.

Using Isabella and Heathcliff, Bronte demonstrates that all women, even the middle-classes, are vulnerable to the laws that strip them of power once they marry and of the social laws that encourage families to abandon sisters and daughters who marry or elope with men of whom the family disapproves. Isabella does not receive the expected punishment in being relocated to Wuthering Heights and imprisoned by Heathcliff; instead, her punishment is being imprisoned by living a life of virtual nonexistence. Isabella does not pretend to maintain the illusion of a happy marriage, as was expected of her, and as does Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Isabella is a new kind of woman who refuses to perpetuate social mores. Unlike Helen, Isabella does not endure years of abuse. After merely two months of living in an abusive marriage, Isabella leaves, never to return, and through her and Heathcliff, Bronte specifically addresses the tragic and violent potential of coverture. *Wuthering Heights* conveys that “marriage need not lead to permanent domestic happiness, as nineteenth-century novel closures commonly suggest” (Meyer 178). Because of coverture, marriage can actually lead to permanent horror rather than happiness. But in the novel, Bronte uses Isabella’s courageous heroism to represent both the suffering that women endure when they choose poorly in marriage and the ways that they can and should be allowed a second chance at life. Isabella’s narrative is short, but it is powerful, and Bronte uses her transformation to expose what women endure and to model what they can do to save themselves.

Chapter Three

Coverture, Abuse, and Imprisonment in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* continues the shift in Gothic fiction that Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley initiated. Brontë departs from the traditional Gothic Romance to contribute to a growing subgenre of Gothic realism, the domestic Gothic, in which domestic spaces replace haunted castles and abbey ruins and in which husbands and family members replace ghosts and demons. Eighteenth-century Gothic Romances such as those by Anne Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis did not allow for full freedom and development of the female characters, nor did they suggest that women wanted equality or more equity in marriage. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë incorporates critiques of marriage laws and "reject[s] . . . the traditional concept of woman as man's opposite and complement" (Brownstein 157). The novel is now recognized as "a feminist tract" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 338). Recent critics have approached discussions of gender in the novel through a variety of methodologies.¹ In fact, *Jane Eyre* is one of the most researched Victorian novels, with women's need for independence and equality being prevalent areas of concentration.

Feminist scholarship continues to be the most common approach used to examine the novel. In the touchstone work in Gothic feminism and the female bildungsroman *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that Bertha acts as Jane's doppelganger, representing Jane's raging, unconventional self who has no place in proper society. Gilbert and Gubar focus on the impact the patriarchy has on Jane, especially in Rochester's attempted emotional and intellectual imprisonment of her, and their study is one that critics have engaged over the past forty years. For scholars who examine patriarchy and inequality in *Jane Eyre*, marriage is still a common focus. Nicole Diederich examines the novel as "Brontë's rebellious commentary on the conventional marriage model as one that leaves wives in a powerless subject position" (2). She "place[s] the novel into a social

context and explore[s] the importance of doubles” (2). Gilbert, Gubar, and Diederich examine Jane’s emotional confinement, but they do not consider her confinement from a legal perspective. They emphasize Jane’s intuitions and instinctive fear of marriage but do not discuss the very real confinement of wives, which is arguably more frightening than the conceptual imprisonment. While feminist psychological interpretations lead to a deeper understanding of the characters, they do not address the legal conditions that create a patriarchal society.

By grounding this study in nineteenth-century legal definitions of marriage, I demonstrate that the novel takes a position with respect to the doctrine of coverture. Specifically, it suggests that Jane’s desire to have independence and equality as a married woman cannot be achieved while coverture remains in place. Psychological studies examine Jane’s emotional development and her intuition that marriage with Rochester would injure her, but they overlook the greater reality that nineteenth-century marriage laws imprison women and strip them of the few rights they have prior to marriage. Women’s limited exposure to the law meant that women did not know the full consequences of marriage and how it would legally entrap them. A thorough examination of marriage in nineteenth-century British literature should also include an examination of nineteenth-century marriage laws.

James Phillips concentrates on marriage in *Jane Eyre*, specifically how the novel “can be read as a treatise on marriage” (Phillips 209). The novel seems to question whether marriage is a connection between two people or a social contract; Phillips questions what constitutes marriage in the novel, by viewing Rochester and Bertha’s marriage as “the husk of a marriage” (204). He argues that Rochester and Jane’s illegal marriage is grounded in ideals of equality, while St. John and Jane’s proposed marriage is merely a social contract that reflects the Victorian valuing of “the respectability of loveless marriage” (208), but in his discussion about marriage and what constitutes marriage, he leaves out any discussion of

marriage laws that impact the power dynamic of both versions of marriage. Legal scholar Ian Ward does incorporate nineteenth-century laws in his discussion of Bertha and Rochester's marriage, but he concentrates not on marriage laws, but on insanity laws, specifically whether Rochester's confinement of Bertha was legal. He examines Bertha in the context of the treatment of the insane in the nineteenth century, in particular the methods of determining madness and how to treat insane family members. While he focuses on Bertha's madness, he does not consider coverture in his examination, which allows confinement of wives regardless of their sanity. Based on the laws of the time, scholars can view marriage as an imprisoning institution and women as slaves. Empire studies scholar Joyce Zonana's focus is the most relevant to my examination of marriage as an institution of enslavement. Zonana and I concentrate on the same scenes between Jane and Rochester. I ground my argument in her claim that "assumptions about the East have been used to further the Western feminist project" (595). These studies offer new ways to link imprisonment of slavery to the imprisonment of marriage; however, none of these examinations consider the law of coverture, a law that impacts all their conclusions.

Nineteenth-century British law did not provide specific instances in which divorce should be an option, and in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë reframes marriage as an imprisoning institution for both genders. I concentrate on Brontë's uses of Gothic devices to expose the consequences of coverture, to expose marriage as an institution that fosters and perpetuates abuse, and to expose the devastating consequences of marriage on both husband and wife when divorce is legally difficult or impossible. Rochester's marriage to Bertha becomes a compelling argument against coverture and for instances when spouses should be allowed to escape the confines of marriage. I argue that in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë creates scenarios that complicate the false narrative of the ideal marriage, that depict women's vulnerability in social training in submission and that speak to the need for just divorce laws.

I

While coverture technically unites husband and wife into one entity, with the wife being absorbed into the husband, a divide remains that encourages spousal cruelty. According to Blackstone: “though our law in general considers man and wife as one person, yet there are some instances in which she is separately considered; as inferior to him, and acting by his compulsion” (443). The only instances when wives were considered as separate individuals were in criminal cases, when the husband could not be convicted for a crime his wife committed. The instances in which wives were considered separately were situations that clearly benefited husbands more than wives (Blackstone 443). For example, a husband was responsible for his wife’s debts, but only the necessities; he was not required to pay any bills beyond her basic financial needs. Or if a wife illegally left her husband for another man, the husband was not responsible for any debts she might accrue once she had left the marriage. However, husbands were responsible for any debts his wife might have accrued before she married him “for he [had] adopted her and her circumstances together” (Blackstone 443). At first glance, this detail seemed to benefit wives more than husbands; however, women who were in debt might agree to marriages with emotionally unsuitable but financially suitable men. These women would marry for money to save themselves rather than risk financial ruin, which resulted in a form of legal prostitution that wives could not escape. Furthermore, a woman’s debt also made her less attractive to potential suitors. Finally, husbands could hold the debt over their wives and use it as one more way to control and demean their wives.

These conditions of separation and inferiority, and the lack of legal identity, made wives vulnerable to husbands who had the authority to use violence and cruelty as control.

According to the law, “[t]he husband also . . . might give his wife moderate correction. For, as he is to answer for her misbehavior, the law thought it reasonable to entrust him with this power of restraining her, by domestic chastisement, in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his apprentices or children” (Blackstone 443). This aspect of coverture reduced women to slaves in the home; apprentices and servants had more legal rights and had a limit to their servitude because at least they could search for other positions and free themselves from abusive situations. Children were under their father’s legal control, but once they came of age, they, too, could leave the house and the authority of their fathers.

Daughters were more dependent than sons because daughters lived with their parents until they wed. Girls were also granted a protection over their bodies that wives were not. Incest was one of the few reasons wives could divorce their husbands. There were other options for daughters, albeit very limited ones, on opposite ends of the spectrum: the nunnery or the streets. Running away was socially unacceptable and would result in women being labelled, and becoming social outcasts. Daughters could abandon their family, but they would likely become prostitutes or mistresses. Single women still had those options, while wives are sentenced to a lifetime of servitude because if they leave, they become fugitives.

The law’s lack of precision in detailing the extent to which physical violence was condoned allowed husbands a great deal of latitude in how they treated their wives. Moderate violence was considered acceptable to use on any inferior person, such as a servant, child, or wife because the law considered these corrections for the inferiors’ benefit. However, the law did not specify the boundaries of “moderate” correction; it did not explicate at what point moderation became excess. This left the law open to interpretation in ways that forbade wives to protect themselves from abusive husbands. The law did state that “the husband was prohibited from using any violence to his wife, *aliter quam ad virum, ex causa regiminis et castigationis uxoris suae, licite et rationabiliter pertinent*” (“Otherwise than

lawfully and reasonably belongs to the husband for the due government and correction of his wife”) (Blackstone 444; Jones 39). A husband can use force to discipline his wife, but only what is justifiable. However, this law was written in a manner that allowed nearly any violence to be excused as reasonable. Overlooking the gross power dynamics that allowed a husband the legal authority to physically discipline his wife, the law failed to create clear boundaries between acceptable correction and criminal violence.

Coverture forced women to be vulnerable to their husbands, a vulnerability for which society had prepared women since childhood. In the nineteenth century, girls were counseled to be submissive to men, behavior that conditioned them to enter their future coverture. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte addresses the inhumanity of a law that condones rather than condemns husbands who use violence or imprisonment against their wives and the society that prepares girls for this treatment. Coverture was especially damaging because it was the inevitable consequence of women marrying, and marriage was presented to women as their ultimate goal. In fact, “popular fiction presupposed marriage as the happiest state in life, implying that most marriages were successful,” and Bronte writes to an audience trained in the belief “that marriage was an unquestioned goal” (Reed, *Victorian Conventions* 105). Because marriage was so important for women, girls’ gender training began in childhood. Submission and suffering in silence were gender expectations that made girls vulnerable to abuse as children and, eventually, as wives, especially since the law did not specify what corrective action, short of murder, crossed a moral guideline into criminal actions.

Jane’s experiences with her cousin train her to accept abuse from the “man of the house,” whether that man is a cousin, brother or husband. However, single women had more rights than married women. Once past twenty-one, single women could keep their wages and sign contracts, rights they did not have as married women because husbands could appropriate their wives’ wages, and husbands had to be included in contracts. In addition,

because of coverture, wives could not testify against their abusive husbands in court, but a single woman, of age, (or *feme sole*) could testify against an abuser. Her ability to testify did not guarantee that the lawsuit would have been successful, but as long as she remains unmarried, she has a greater chance of escaping her abuser. With no one but the Reeds as guardians, Jane is powerless and vulnerable to their abuse. She is trapped until they decide her fate or until she turns twenty-one.

Despite the lack of legal specifications on what constitutes abuse, Bronte provides readers with a first-hand account of the emotional torment that abuse causes. Emotional and physical abuse were consequential whether the abuse was inflicted by a cousin or a husband. While the law allows husbands to take corrective measures to control their wives, readers can witness, in John Reed's and Jane's interactions, the terrible consequences of corrective behaviors that are within the law. I am not arguing that John Reed acts as Jane's husband, but that his abuse and her lack of rights anticipate what coverture condones and what her lack of rights as a wife will be.

Because girls are considered inferior and dependent, Jane is vulnerable to John Reed's corrective actions—actions that parallel a husband's rights under coverture. Jane endures abuse from John “not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually” (3), and she does not behave better as a result; instead, the effect of John's abuse is that “every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired, because I had no appeal whatever against his menaces or his inflictions” (3). The extent of her helplessness is like that of a slave to an owner. Empire studies scholars have paralleled Jane's position in the Reed's home that of a slave in a harem. Zonana links John Reed's position at Gateshead to “The pattern of home as harem” (606), where John Reed is the sultan

who rules over the household. While the “sexuality of the harem is absent from the Reed home” (Zonana 606), the training of women as possessions begins here.

We witness this training when Jane is expected to endure physical and emotional abuse at Gateshead. John Reed verbally abuses Jane by calling her ““Madame Mope,”” ““bad animal,”” and ““rat”” (2-3). He reminds her that she is ““a dependent”” and has no rights (3), and, indeed, as a female at this age, she does not. His dehumanizing verbal abuse and cruel reminder of the unbalanced power dynamic reinforce her vulnerability and dependence on the Reeds. But John does more than emotionally and verbally abuse Jane; he is also physically abusive. In one instance, John strikes Jane with such force that she is nearly knocked off her feet (3). He throws a book at Jane. She explains, “it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded” (4). While this treatment seems as if it has crossed the line into excessive abuse, the law did not specify what constitutes cruelty; therefore, this level of physical abuse could be excused as discipline and punishment rather than unlawful violence. Because Jane is being conditioned to accept her future coverture, any attempt to actively defy the law results in further punishment. And because there are no clear boundaries, Jane has no means by which to defend herself; instead, she is trained to endure it; “Accustomed to John Reed’s abuse,” Jane observes, “I never had an idea of replying to it; my care was how to endure the blow which would certainly follow the insult” (3). Until Jane turns twenty-one, suffering in silence is her only option.

It is important to investigate Brontë’s historical, literary, and religious references within the novel because they offer readers a deeper understanding of how *Jane Eyre* participates in social issues. These concentrations uncover the novel’s complexities, as do Empire studies and folklore, two areas of study in which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Joyce Zonana, Maryanne Ward, Phyllis Ralph, and Victoria Anderson have examined Brontë’s

Eastern and colonial references and her allusions to fairy tales. I apply this kind of attention to a seemingly minute historical reference because it reveals Jane's understanding of historical perspective and evolving cultural values. In the scene in which Jane fights back against John's abuse, she says, "'Wicked and cruel boy! . . . You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!'" (4). Her remarks remind readers of a time when the control and brutality emperors held over their slaves was accepted, but when viewed by future generations, the emperors' actions are condemned as inhumane. And emperors were not to be questioned. They were considered infallible gods, a reference that reveals the kind of power husbands had over their wives. Brontë includes these specific references to shifting cultural attitudes. I argue that she uses them to remind her readers that values and laws evolve over time and must be continually re-evaluated. Brontë's historical perspective challenges nineteenth-century laws, suggesting that future generations might look on coverture laws and corrective abuse as barbaric. Brontë's description of Mrs. Reed and John's actions also reveals an unspoken shift in attitudes. Mrs. Reed personifies the typical nineteenth-century attitude toward violence against women. She "was blind and deaf on the subject [of John's abuse]: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence; more frequently, however, behind her back" (3). Mrs. Reed's silence passively condones John's treatment of Jane, yet John still hides his abuse, signaling his inherent realization that his behavior is unacceptable. It is telling that a male from the younger generation seems to intuitively understand the inhumanity of domestic violence.

The abuse Jane endures at Gateshead and her limited options reflect women's limited life choices, limitations that begin in childhood. Girls move from their father's home and one extremely limited world to their husband's home, one that is even more restrictive. Jane's abuse at Gateshead "lays the groundwork for a pervading subtheme in Brontë's novel: the

victimization of women by men, condoned by the system. With the exception of this childhood trauma, the theme occurs principally in the context of marriage or intended marriage” (Tyson 98). Through Jane, Bronte challenges the social guidelines that limited the authority women had over their lives. Rather than John being punished for abusing Jane, it is Jane who is reprimanded when she refuses to passively submit. After a violent attack with a book which left Jane bloody and aching, “no one had reproved John for wantonly striking me; and because I had turned against him to avert farther irrational violence, I was loaded with general opprobrium” (6). Despite her early conditioning to submit, Jane recognizes the inhumanity of abuse and questions its legitimacy. “‘Unjust!—Unjust!’ said my reason” (6).

Her child’s innocence and logical reason questions a society that allows violence against women. Even a child can recognize the law’s injustice. She considers “running away, or if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (6). Although Jane has more rights than a wife under coverture because her imprisonment will end once she comes of age and marries, her conditioning for coverture trains her to believe that her only options are to suffer in silence, to escape, or to commit suicide. Suffering in silence is the conventional course, but it is one that makes her vulnerable to abuse. Escape is another option, but it is not socially acceptable, so it leaves her with no support, thus vulnerable to the world where she will likely end up victimized in an even more horrific way. And suicide is not socially or religiously acceptable, but it is the only choice that truly allows her to control her own fate. These options, especially the suicidal thoughts, are disturbing reactions from a child, but they capture the horrors of what a powerless existence wives who are tied by coverture may face.

Bronte uses the married women in Jane’s life as examples to comment on what marriage does to women. Victorian novels “developed categories that defined the ideal woman in her married state. Her reputation was . . . practical and detailed,” and she was

expected to have “unqualified obedience to her husband” (Armstrong 67). It is not just the abuse that Jane endures at Gateshead that prepares her for her possible life as a wife, for the corrective behavior her husband might give her; it is also the lack of exposure to healthy spousal relationships that contributes to Jane’s warped understanding of marriage. Tyson argues that “Jane escapes the usual entrapment partly by accident and partly because of her healthily aggressive personality” (Tyson 95). As a result, Jane appears to be the only character in a woman’s gothic novel who survives childbirth and lives with her gothic hero to tell the tale” (Hoeveler 205). Jane’s rejection of her feminine training contributes to this. The women in Jane’s life are traditional, submissive women, but because Jane is not satisfied with their passive lives, she rejects the traditional behavior they represent. Because Aunt Reed married and lost her sense of self in the expanse of her husband’s power, she exemplifies women’s lack of authority in the home. Although Aunt Reed has been a widow for nine years, she still does not have full authority over the household. Even in death, Mr. Reed controls Mrs. Reed because, despite her own wishes to the contrary, she carries out his directive to care for Jane. His authority haunts her, and she still lives as if bound by coverture. This marriage is Jane’s first exposure to a union based on inequality, and it makes a deep and lasting impression on her. Bessie and Aunt Reed try to teach Jane to behave like a proper woman, but Jane rejects their instruction because she does not want the life that Aunt Reed has led.

In addition to rejecting the behavioral training she gets from Bessie and Aunt Reed at Gateshead, Jane also rejects the behavioral instruction she gets at Lowood from Miss Temple. Through these women Bronte questions “what becomes of the individual in the institution of marriage” (Tyson 95). Jane also rejects Miss Temple as a role model because she, too, enforces the nineteenth century’s ideals for women. When Jane first arrives at Lowood, Miss Temple is her guide and mentor. She tells Jane to “act as a good girl” (44), to be submissive

and to suffer in silence. Instead of developing as an individual, Jane merely takes on the guise of Miss Temple's passivity, a flaw she eventually recognizes. After Miss Temple marries and leaves Lowood, Jane realizes "I had imbibed from her something of her nature and much of her habits: more harmonious thoughts: what seemed better-regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind. I had given in allegiance to duty and order; I was quiet; I believed I was content: to the eyes of others, usually even to my own, I appeared a disciplined and subdued character" (53). Jane realizes that she merely maintains the outward appearance of submission, which leads to dissatisfaction that can have multiple interpretations. Her specific wording that she "believed [she] was content" reads to me as an unfinished thought—I believed I was content, but I am not. This awareness could be her realization that she has merely mimed Miss Temple's qualities rather than fully embraced them or it could be read that she is dissatisfied that she has mimed another person's qualities rather than developing her own.

Like Aunt Reed, Miss Temple becomes another example of how marriage erases women, and through Miss Temple's disappearance, the institution is reinforced as one that destroys women. Miss Temple has earned a position as the "superintendent of Lowood" who also educates its top tier students. Despite her accomplishments, once Miss Temple marries, she loses that position and disappears from the text. Miss Temple leaves everything she has made of herself, a career and a position of some status (for a woman), to wed and reap the reward of domestic bliss that is described in eighteenth-century Gothic Romance novels. Jane realizes, to Miss Temple's "instruction I owed the best part of my acquirements; her friendship and society had been my continual solace: she had stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and, latterly, companion. At this period she married, removed with her husband (a clergyman, an excellent man, almost worthy of such a wife) to a distant county, and consequently was lost to me" (53). Miss Temple sacrifices her entire world to disappear into

her husband's life, fulfilling coverture. She does not even keep a correspondence with Jane; it is as if Miss Temple died. This disappearance serves as yet another warning of the dangers of marriage for women. While it is not evident at this point in the novel, after her first engagement with Rochester and her near engagement with St. John, Jane rejects the idea of marriage that Miss Temple's perpetuates, and instead, desires a marriage where husband and wife are equal, where the wife will not disappear into the husband's life. Bronte seems to suggest that nineteenth-century women need other options in marriage because dying like Caroline and Elizabeth in *Frankenstein* or disappearing like Miss Temple should not be women's fate.

II

Bronte uses Jane's relationship with Rochester to reveal the ways that women's childhood training and their lack of any valuable knowledge about what marriage entails makes them victims in a patriarchal system that is already weighted against them. This study highlights nineteenth-century women's ignorance about the law of coverture, and the reality of how their lives will change once they marry. They are informed, instead, by conduct books that romanticize the institution. Diederich writes that "Much of the language describing this domestic ideal of marriage in the nineteenth century comes to us from marriage manuals or advice books, many written by men to young women" (3). These male authors have a vested interest in presenting coverture and women's submission as ideal because it allows them to maintain their power and authority through the marriage. For example, "*The New Female Instructor or Young Woman's Guide to Domestic Happiness* promotes the combination of character and love as key components of marriage practice"

(Diederich 3). It does not mention coverture, but instead focuses on the ideal, not the possible reality, and it gives women a sense of equality in marriage that by law does not exist.

Once Jane reaches Thornfield, readers can fully understand how her experiences at Gateshead and at Lowood prepared her for her future vulnerability and helplessness in coverture. In a scene where Rochester has manipulated Jane into confessing her feelings for him, Jane also reveals her personal desires. Because of Jane's childhood conditioning, her expectations are disturbingly low. Jane has been prepared to be victimized and her lack of authority over her own life makes her vulnerable to a system that already privileges men, and Jane's explanation to Rochester for why she wants to stay at Thornfield reflects this disturbing view. She tells him,

I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright and energetic, and high. . . . I have known you, Mr. Rochester; and it strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you for ever. I see the necessity of departure; and it is like looking on the necessity of death. (167)

Jane desires to live in a home where she is not abused or frightened or threatened. Her thinking that a place where she is not abused is a paradise reveals her low expectations. And, disturbingly, she seems willing to erase herself if she cannot be in Rochester's company. However, she also desires a place where she can develop intellectually and not be constrained or ignored, where she and her husband can have a relationship based on respect and honesty. These specific details are important because they describe what her life is about to become, and they detail the fright and anguish Jane experiences when she discovers that Rochester is a Gothic villain, not a fairytale prince. Rochester will attempt to trample her; both he and

Bertha will petrify her; she will discover the terrible secret Rochester has hidden from her that would destroy her, and she will leave him to save herself.

Through Rochester and Jane, Bronte exposes the disturbing similarities between master and servant relationships in spousal relationships. Because Jane has had such extensive training in submission and has no family, she is particularly vulnerable to Rochester. Before Jane is engaged to Rochester, she regularly employs language of servitude, language which is at times appropriate because of their employer/servant relationship, but which becomes inappropriate when she uses it in their romantic relationship. She says, "I like to serve you, sir, and to obey you in all that is right" (143). It is the language of submission, language of which Helen Burns would have approved. But Jane's servitude is conditional on Rochester's morality not on simple conformity. As a servant, she is not bound by coverture, and she has more authority over her life because she could find another governess position if Rochester ever does ask her to do anything immoral. It is not a choice she would have as a wife. At times, Jane carries this submissive language too far, revealing the depth of her dedication to Rochester, a dedication that borders on self-negation. Before they are engaged, Jane tells Rochester, "I'd give my life to serve you" (134). While telling Rochester that she would like to serve him is appropriate language for a servant when speaking to an employer, her declaration that she would die to serve him reveals an unbalanced level of dedication and sacrifice of self, lessons she learned at Gateshead and at Lowood. Once Jane is affianced to Rochester, her language of servitude continues. She repeatedly uses obedience-driven language when talking to Rochester, such as "I obeyed" (184). But, in fact, the relationship between master and servant is disturbingly similar to that of the husband and wife relationship, and coverture, which valued husbands' welfare over wives', reflects a nineteenth-century gender bias that devalues women and reduces them to second-class citizens.

Critics have differing views on Rochester's initial motivation for courting Jane.

Phillips argues that "Rochester wishes to marry Jane because it is through marriage that they will be able to enter a relationship of equals: he wishes to marry her precisely because he does not want to take advantage of her" (Phillips 203). However, Rochester's calculated manipulation and his growing desire to control Jane dispute Phillip's claim. Rochester abuses his power as her employer in questioning her dedication to him. After Mason interrupts his house party, Rochester asks Jane if she would reject social expectations and remain loyal to him if society tried to cast him out. He asks, "if I were to go to them, and they only looked at me coldly, and whispered sneeringly amongst each other, and then dropt off and left me one by one, what then? Would you go with them?" (134). Rochester knows that this is the treatment he would receive if his peers learned that he courted Blanche Ingram while he was married to Bertha, but his omissions of the details mislead Jane and influence her answer. His language suggests that his friends have cruelly bullied him, a situation to which Jane is particularly sensitive. When he asks "And if they laid you under a ban for adhering to me?" she replies that if she even knew about their ban she "should care nothing about it" and that she would "dare censure" for "any friend who deserved my adherence" (135). He has manipulated her into revealing both her loyalty to him and her trust in him, but her reply also reveals her rejection of blind adherence to social rules. Rochester and Jane have different ideas about what breaking social rules means, however. Jane is guided more by her own personal sense of morality than by social expectations, which is a form of rebellion, but it is a morally-driven rebellion. Rochester's rebellion, by contrast, is both illegal and immoral, and he decides that he deserves to keep Jane as his mistress without getting her consent. He tricks her, and this scene becomes symbolic of the ignorance of many women on the realities of marriage. Women do not know who they are marrying.

Bronte uses Rochester to depict two possible version of how marriage affects men. One version is the gothic villain, driven to evil by a distorted social power; the other is as a victim, imprisoned by marriage. In keeping with her goal of educating women about the cruel reality they might face when they marry and enter coverture, Bronte depicts one version of Rochester as a controlling, manipulative, and monstrous husband, like Victor Frankenstein, like Heathcliff, and like Arthur Huntington. Bronte casts Rochester in the role of a predator, preying on Jane's inexperience, dependence, and obedience. Scholars have linked Rochester's actions to those of Bluebeard. Anderson writes, "The idea that it is the human husband, rather than a rapacious and inhuman villain, who is at fault reveals a connection to Middle Eastern folk tales," specifically, "Bluebeard" (114). Rochester mistakes Jane's loyalty to him as unconditional, but without giving her the specific details about his marriage, she cannot answer accurately. After Jane thinks that Grace Poole has tried to kill Rochester, he admits to Jane, "I see you ask why I keep such a woman in my house: when we have been married a year and a day, I will tell you; but not now. Are you satisfied, Jane? Do you accept my solution of the mystery?" (189). His Bluebeardesque statement asks her to repress her curiosity and to trust him completely. While Jane is not comfortable with his suggestion, she thinks, "satisfied I was not, but to please him I endeavoured to appear so—relieved, I certainly did feel; so I answered him with a contented smile" (189). Her childhood training to submit without question leaves her vulnerable to the man who would betray her trust and potentially corrupt her.

It is important to note that this is the second instance in this study when a bride has been told that a husband has a dark secret that he will tell her once they are married, when she is irreversibly manacled to him. In *Frankenstein*, Victor constantly questions Elizabeth's commitment to him, while withholding information about the creature. Similarly, Rochester begins to test Jane's obedience to see whether she would consent to become his mistress and

is prepared to trick her into a counterfeit marriage if he senses she would not compromise her morality.

As their relationship develops, Rochester attempts to force Jane into a coverture-like power dynamic, robbing her of her already limited freedom before they are even married. At Thornfield, Rochester is Jane's master, he pays her wages, and she obeys his commands; however, this master/servant business relationship continues into their romantic relationship, highlighting the power imbalance that coverture has on marital relationships. Servants have more freedom to save themselves than do wives because servants are not confined by coverture. As a governess, Jane has a legal right to leave, whereas if she becomes Rochester's wife, the law would forbid it.

In another manipulative text that circulated in the early nineteenth-century women are misled about marriage. In "*A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, first printed in 1789, but reprinted throughout the nineteenth century, John Gregory instructs his daughters that 'a married state, if entered into from proper motives of esteem and affection, will be the happiest for yourselves [and] make you most respectable in the eyes of the world'" (Diederich 3). Through their courtship, Jane reveals her ignorance of the level of control she will have over her own life once she marries. She and Rochester argue over when she will relinquish her governess position. Rochester tells her that she "will give up your governing slavery at once" (179). However, Jane insists that she will continue to work until they marry: "Indeed! Begging your pardon, sir, I shall not. I shall just go on with it as usual. I shall keep it out of your way all day, as I have been accustomed to do: you may send for me in the evening, when you feel disposed to see me, and I'll come then; but at no other time" (179). Tyson focuses only on Rochester's manipulation of Jane before his proposal and glosses over Rochester's behavior toward Jane during their engagement, including Rochester's attempts to control Jane through materialism. Instead, Tyson focuses her

argument on St. John's controlling nature over Jane. However, Jane and Rochester's engagement requires more examination. Rochester's answer reveals his plan to apply coverture to its full extent. He replies, "it is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently: and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just—figuratively speaking—attach you to a chain like this' (touching his watch-guard)" (179). Rochester's language is ominous. Although he claims to be figuratively speaking, coverture is still a legal statute; his statements thus represent the literal control the law grants him as a husband, a law of which Jane seems ignorant. Rochester also has a history of acting on the power that coverture permits. He has already imprisoned and chained Bertha, and he is certainly capable of doing it again. His language suggests that he intends to control Jane both emotionally and physically once they marry and she is under coverture. He will dominate every part of her life, stripping away her individuality and freedom.

Like Victor's relationship with Elizabeth and the creature's proposed relationship with Eve in *Frankenstein*, Rochester plans to assume control over much of Jane's life, including her wardrobe, once he has legal authority over her (or once she thinks he does because she thinks their marriage will be legitimate). After Jane and Rochester are engaged, Rochester continues to use his financial power to dominate her. He has a history of mistresses when he had dressed and weighed down with expensive jewelry and bright silk dresses until they either suffocated under the burden of his gifts or he grew bored with them. He uses this oppressive imagery when he threatens Jane: "I will myself put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead . . . and I will clasp the bracelets in these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings'" (171). Rochester repeatedly describes Jane using images of jewelry or property, which are also symbols of restraint and control. Necklaces become nooses and chains; bracelets become manacles. These are warnings that Rochester means to control Jane even further once they marry, a control that

nineteenth-century husbands not would have viewed as control because “The husband’s responsibility was to support his wife according to his taste and ability” (Stetson 6).

Therefore, husbands assumed that their wives would relinquish their own tastes and opinions when they wed. When shopping for a wedding dress, he tells Jane that the grey silks “‘might pass for the present, . . . but he would yet see [her] glittering like a parterre’” (177). He continues his pattern, turning Jane into the mistresses he despises, reducing her to a possession, not a spouse. He tells Jane, “‘Yes, bonny wee thing, I’ll wear you in my bosom, lest me jewel I should tyne’” (179). This is not the language of a man speaking about his love but a man diminishing his fiancé into an ornament, stripping her of her humanity, just as coverture strips her of her legal existence. Rochester’s slow transformation of Jane into a kept woman is disturbing because in his attempt to turn her into that which he despises, a materialistic mistress, he is ignoring her as a person.

Bronte repeatedly uses Eastern references to women’s enslavement, references that Empire studies scholars have investigated. I use Empire studies critics’ focus on slavery as a way to more closely emphasize the view of marriage as an enslaving institution. In “The Gospel According to Jane Eyre: The Suttee and the Seraglio,” Maryanne C. Ward writes “there is also a link between the unstable and corrupt family Rochester describes and the belief on the part of the abolitionists that owning slaves helped to cheapen all aspects of human life” (19). This reference to slaves calls to mind Jane’s childhood reference to Roman emperors owning slaves. Rochester tells Jane, “Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (207). He knows that Jane would be his mistress, not his wife, so his actions and language show that, if he succeeds in turning Jane into a stylized mistress, he would likely tire of her and dispose of her once he grew bored with her, as is his pattern with mistresses. In imagery that construes the wife as a doll, Jane begins to recognize

a side of Rochester that she had not before seen. She recoils when he smiles at her the way that a “sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched: I crushed his hand, which was ever hunting mine, vigorously, and thrust it back to him red with the passionate pressure” (178). This association is unsettlingly accurate given the level of authority masters had over their slaves, a level of authority that can be likened to the power that coverture grants husbands over their wives. Whether a woman is a mistress, a slave, or a wife, the amount of power the man has over her is disturbingly similar to that which coverture grants husbands over wives. If reading these relationships as equivalent based on women’s vulnerability and helplessness, Jane’s reaction to the slavery can also be read as a reaction to any institution that renders women so powerless, including the institution of marriage.

Jane’s reaction to Rochester’s early assertion of coverture offered nineteenth-century readers a new perspective on how women might feel about sacrificing their legal rights when they marry. As Rochester and Jane’s courtship continues, Jane increasingly resents Rochester’s assertion of control. Jane expresses her frustration at Rochester while out shopping for silks: “Glad I was to get him out of the silk warehouse, and then out of a jeweler’s shop: the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation” (177). It is not just the difference in their income; it is his making decisions for her and robbing her of her voice and identity that distresses her, and her reaction offers insight into what women might feel under coverture. It is a reminder that material goods like jewels and new clothes, while presented as tokens of affection, can also be used as objects of oppression. Rochester orders Jane’s wardrobe, choosing the specific fabric for her dresses, decisions that reflect his lack of respect for her. She writes, “I can never bear being dressed like a doll by Rochester” (177). The image of Jane being reduced to a figurine for Rochester to dress illustrates the power dynamic between husbands and wives in coverture. She will be

his to control. Yet, because they are not married, when Rochester asserts his control, Jane still has the legal power to resist. It is only when she is married that she will lose this legal right.

The eastern references in the novel were not lost on Victorian audiences, who would have recognized “the harem [as] an inherently oppressive institution” (Zonana 594). Even in Jane and Rochester’s first meeting, when he refers to himself as Mahomet, Zonana argues that nineteenth century readers “would unambiguously identify him as a polygamous, blasphemous despot—a sultan” (608). Bronte equates Rochester with a sultan, who has enslaved Bertha and who wished to enslave Jane. The master/slave power structure is disturbingly similar to the power dynamic between a master and his mistress and between a husband and his wife under coverture. Interestingly, in these three relationships, the one in which women have the most personal agency is the mistress/master relationship because the man has no legal authority over his mistress, nor is she legally his property. However, coverture more closely aligns wives to slaves. Bronte continues her Eastern references when Rochester tells Jane, “I would not exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk’s whole seraglio, gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!” (178). His language equates Jane with an object that can be traded, and he thinks she should be honored that he chooses to keep her. This line also demonstrates that Rochester believes he has the power to trade women at will.

Jane’s angry reaction reveals that she, too, makes the connection between eastern oppression of women through slavery and western oppression of women through marriage. Jane gives an unconventional reaction: “The Eastern allusion bit me again:[and she tells Rochester] ‘I’ll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio. . . so don’t consider me an equivalent for one; if you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay; and lay out in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here” (178). Jane’s response shows that

she refuses to be objectified, but she does not seem to see the connection between the kind of powerlessness slaves have and the kind of powerlessness wives had. The analogy is not exact, as wives did have some legal protection, but the shared treatment of wives under coverture and slaves as property is similar. Rochester views women as property, whether they be a slave, a mistress, or a wife. To Rochester, the seraglio and the marriage bed are not so different, a view that represents the connection between slavery and marriage while coverture is still in place.

Zonana argues that because Jane begins to see the parallels between a sultan's behavior and Rochester's, she is more able to disengage herself from a situation that would place her in a harem. Zonana focuses, not on religion, but on the society and on "the attitude of Rochester and men like him who are at ease with the seraglio and the suttee" (Ward, "The Gospel" 22). Rochester clearly does not struggle with gender inequality; nor does he think it needs to be reformed. Ward also argues:

Jane's preaching is not what 'converts' Rochester. He is 'reformed' through the radical intervention of Bertha, perhaps guided by the Providence, which spared him in the refining fire. Whatever Bronte would have us believe about Jane's strength, her missionary effort is unable to claim even a single convert. Jane's state at the end of the novel is not unlike that of the liberated slaves; she has the acknowledgement of her equality, but is given a very narrow sphere with which to exercise her freedom. (22)

Ward spotlights not only how little Jane transforms Rochester, but also what little freedom Jane has when she weds. What Ward does not clarify is that Jane is not granted this freedom by the law because Jane is still bound by coverture.

Slaves in harems and Victorian wives have a similar lack of freedoms and share a similar imprisonment. Rochester continues the Eastern allusions, antagonizing Jane in a

comment that could suggest his plan to keep mistresses even after their illegitimate marriage. He asks Jane, “And what will you do. Janet, while I am bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes?” (178). Jane’s responses reveal her as a new heroine who believes in social reform. Jane says:

I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny; and you, three-tailed bashaw as you are, sir, shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands: nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred. (178)

Jane sees the need to free women from such enslavement, but she does not yet seem to see wives as being in a similar danger or of needing the same kind of rescuing. She has been conditioned to believe that marriage is a socially acceptable institution that will provide her with a position and security, a misconception that also misleads many of the women in this study. Jane does not seem to understand that when she enters coverture, she, too, will have entered a form of enslavement that denies her agency and that reduces her to property.

She will also have consented to this position, whereas the slaves were denied this option. Ward argues that, “in preaching against the seraglio and the suttee . . . Jane has limited her missionary activity to those institutions and customs which were based on the presumption of sexual inequality” (Ward, “The Gospel” 21). But I argue that marriage, too, is an institution that is based on the presumption of sexual inequality and that, while Jane’s willingness to help others who are imprisoned, is heroic, to Jane’s detriment, she does not see the similarities between the institutions. Bronte’s use of these allusions is one that should make readers see the objectification of women in a harem, in a mistress’s apartment, and in the matrimonial bedroom. Zonana also comments on Jane’s connection between Rochester

and a sultan, but not between Jane and a slave. She writes, in this scene, “Jane not only compares Rochester to a sultan but engages with him in an extended discussion of women’s rights and uses her comparison of him to a sultan as a means by which to secure more rights for herself” (Zonana 596). I argue that it only takes an extension of Jane’s view of Rochester, her future husband, as a sultan to viewing herself as a slave. At this point, she sees herself as having more rights, and indeed, she does, while she is unmarried, but once she enters coverture, she, too, becomes property.

Bronte continues the Eastern allusions in the interaction between Rochester and Jane. She uses song lyrics to expose the level of commitment and sacrifice that wives are expected to make to their husbands. Rochester sings a melody in which the lyrics read,

My love has placed her little hand
 With noble faith in mine,
 And vowed that wedlock’s sacred band
 Our nature shall entwine
 My love has sworn, with sealing kiss,
 With me to live---to die;
 I have at last my nameless bliss:
 As I love—loved am I! (180).

These lyrics demonstrate a cultural ideal that wives would rather die than live without their husbands, and they more closely link the cultural values of the east and the west. The reference to eastern customs exposes a level of spousal dependence and devotion that is disturbing because of women’s loss of identity in marriage. They lose that identity and become one with their husbands; if their husband dies, they are no longer whole enough to continue on alone. Jane, however, does not accept the supposed romance of the song; “he had talked of his future wife dying with him. What did he mean by such a pagan idea? I had

no intention of dying with him—he might depend on that” (181). Like the wives in *Frankenstein* who die after they marry and lose their rights as complete beings, the suttee illustrate the extent of such a limited existence and the connections between the ideas behind coverture and suttee. Jane argues: “I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had: but I should bide my time, and not be hurried away in a suttee” (181). Jane does not seem to recognize the rights that she will lose under coverture.

Bronte does not rely only on eastern references to discuss marriage as a dangerous institution for women, who are vulnerable to abuse by their husbands. Because of coverture, nineteenth-century men had few regulations in their treatment of their wives, a scenario that perpetuates domestic violence and devalues women. Rochester’s view of women allows him to rationalize his abuse of them and reveals the kind of monstrous husband he could become. In his mind, women instigate his anger, and he thus faults them for his own cruel treatment. He tells Jane, “To women who please me only by their faces, I am the very devil when I find out they have neither souls nor hearts—when they open to me a perspective of flatness, triviality, and perhaps imbecility, coarseness, and ill-temper: but to the clear eye and eloquent tongue, to the soul made of fire, and the character that bends but does not break—at once supple and stable, tractable and consistent—I am ever tender and true” (172). Rochester’s comments express the cultural belief that women should be abused when they need corrective behavior. The laws that devalue women have influenced social views of women. In this instance, rather than the law working to secure equality and protection for all, it serves to justify violence against women. In Rochester’s eyes, if a woman is verbally or physically abused, it is a sign of a fault in her, not in the husband, and it is a socially conditioned belief that has been imposed upon Jane.

Nineteenth-century marriage laws influenced both men’s view of women and the treatment women deserve and women’s view of themselves and the treatment they deserve.

The abuse Jane endured at Gateshead and at Lowood colors her expectations of marriage and her expectation of abuse. When Rochester courts Jane, he begins to verbally abuse her in a way that is reminiscent of John Reed's abuse. Rochester calls Jane an "elf" (161) a "fairy" (162), which are meant to be pet names, but are still not human. But then he begins calling her, "sprite or salamander" (173), a "witch" (186), a "hard little thing" (181), and an "almost unearthly thing!" (168). These dehumanizing names could be likened to the law of coverture dehumanizing women. Rochester also takes delight in Jane's dependent situation, reminding her how "poor and obscure, and small and plain as" she is (168). It is a double cruelty that nineteenth-century women were encouraged to enter into an institution that stripped them of their rights and forced them into dependency, then used that dependency to trap them in marriage.

In *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the brides are naïve about marriage, their future lives, and their identity and individuality. In all these novels, this ignorance leads to an instinctive fear of marriage as the date of the wedding approaches. In *Jane Eyre*, readers witness a related fear of the changes marriage entails for women. As Elizabeth declines physically and mentally before her wedding, as Helen increasingly doubts Huntingdon's character during their engagement, and as Isabella is treated with intensifying cruelty by Heathcliff before they elope, Jane also experiences treatment that is close to abuse as the wedding date nears. Jane says, "the best words at my service were 'provoking puppet,' 'malicious elf,' 'sprite,' 'changeling,' &c. For caresses, too, I now got grimaces; for a pressure of the hand, a pinch on the arm; for a kiss on the cheek, a severe tweak of the ear" (181-2). This cruel treatment is a mere introduction to the kind of abuse she might endure once they marry. The only aspect of his treatment that is more disturbing than his abuse is Jane's acceptance of it. She writes, "It was alright: at present I decidedly preferred these fierce favours to anything more tender" (182). Her conditioning to

expect and endure abuse at Gateshead and at Lowood has clearly been effective. Insidiously, Rochester treats Jane like this when she can still escape and she endures it, so there is no reason to think that his abuse will not escalate once she enters into marriage.

Rochester can be read both as a flawed hero or a sympathetic villain, and Brontë, at times, characterizes him as a monster who preys upon Jane. While Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha as Jane's monstrous double, created by a patriarchal society (360), Anderson likens Rochester to literary villains such as Bluebeard, a reference that also casts him in a Gothic villain role (111). This characterization is significant because in Gothic literature, as David Punter writes, "the horrific appearance of the monster had begun to serve an increasingly moral function Through difference, whether in appearance or behaviour, monsters function to define and construct the politics of the 'normal.' Located at the margins of culture, they police the boundaries of the human, pointing to those lines that must not be crossed" (263). If we read Rochester as the potentially monstrous husband, he marks a line that must not be crossed in his treatment, not just of Bertha, but of Jane as well. Examining Rochester as a monster whose role is to mark a moral boundary allows his abuse to be acknowledged as immoral even though the law allows it.

Rochester not only verbally abuses Jane, he walks the line of physical assault, threatening her with more violence if she does not submit to him completely. Jane acknowledges, "Mr. Rochester affirmed I was wearing him to skin and bone, and threatened awful vengeance for my present conduct at some period fast coming" (182). Disturbingly, this "period fast coming" is their wedding. In *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Jane Eyre*, men abuse their future brides, which threatens further abuse once they marry. Rochester unconsciously warns Jane that he will be a monstrous husband, but Jane's reactions demonstrate her ignorance about the extent of authority he will have over her. When he threatens her, Jane writes; "I laughed in my sleeve at his menaces: 'I can keep

you in reasonable check now,' I reflected; 'and I don't doubt to be able to do it hereafter: if one expedient loses its virtue, another one must be devised'" (182). Her reaction also exposes her idealized understanding of how much power she will have as a wife—what she will be sacrificing once she marries. Her language reveals that she believes she will maintain a level of control within their marriage even after she is subject to the law of coverture. Like Elizabeth, Isabella and Helen, Jane, too, idealizes her role in marriage. In reality, when wed, Rochester will have legal authority over her, and she will be powerless to protect herself. Of course, he would actually have no legal authority over her if they married while Bertha was still alive, but Jane does not know this. And if she sleeps with Rochester, his deceit would not matter because she would be lost and fallen, although she would still have more legal rights than if she married him.

Bronte evokes both madness and monstrosity in Rochester's treatment of Jane. His abuse does not end once he realizes that he cannot marry Jane, thus cannot control her. When Jane tells Rochester that she must leave him after she learns of Bertha, he continues his tirade; "His fury was wrought to the highest: he must yield to it for a moment, whatever followed; he crossed the floor and seized my arm, and grasped at my waist. He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance: physically, I felt, at the moment, powerless" (210). His gaze seems to hypnotize her, and Bronte's language of consumption evokes Gothic devices of cannibalism and vampirism. He consumes her, and she is powerless. Gothic literature is known for "express[ing] the tensions between powerlessness and power, between aggression and victimization" (Reed, *Demon-Lovers* 59). Rochester and Jane certainly fit the profile of the powerful victimizing the powerless. And Bronte's allusion to vampirism in this scene is significant because historically "Vampires supposedly join 'the living dead' as a result of some great crime committed while alive, and they are thought to victimize those they loved the most on earth" (Reed, *Demon-Lovers* 60). When applying this understanding of

vampires to my Gothic-influenced examination of marriage in the novel, Rochester becomes vampire-like as a result of his past crimes against Bertha and against Celine Varnes. Now Jane becomes his victim, even though he loves her more than anyone on earth; she becomes a human sacrifice as punishment for his past sins.

Rochester's abuse is more than emotional. In order to control Jane, he physically hurts her; "his grip was painful, and my overtasked strength almost exhausted" (211). The combination of his physical and his emotional abuse is draining her strength from her, and he seemingly feeds off her helplessness, growing even more violent. He says, "A mere reed she feels in my hand! (And he shook me with the force of his hold) 'I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?'" (211). His language highlights Jane's frailty; likening her frame to a reed that can be broken by him evokes images of Rochester snapping Jane's spine, breaking her bones, ripping her flesh. The violent imagery evokes the Gothic nightmares that traditionally articulate ingrained fears. In this instance, these fears are that Rochester has the capacity to murder Jane. Disturbingly, Rochester's verbal expression of this violence does not alarm him; it drives him into an even more violent imaginative frenzy. Rochester tells Jane, "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" (211). He uses words like "reed" and "cage" and "prison" and "house," but he is talking about destroying Jane. If we replace those terms with Jane's body, the imagery is brutal and violent. His daydream of murdering Jane recalls the violent scene in *Frankenstein*, when Victor dismembers Eve.

Rochester also threatens Jane with violence if she does not allow him to control her choices.

Jane! Will you hear reason? (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear)
 because if you won't, I'll try violence. His voice was hoarse; his look that of a
 man who is just about to burst an insufferable bond and plunge headlong into a
 wild license. I saw that in another moment, and with one impetus of frenzy
 more, I should be able to do nothing with him. The present—the passing
 second of time—was all I had in which to control and restrain him: a
 movement of repulsion, flight fear, would have sealed my doom,—and his.
 (201)

In this scene, readers also witness the length to which Rochester will go to control Jane, the man to whom she is expected to relinquish her legal status. Because Rochester is not capable of having a relationship in which he is not in control, his violence threatens Jane so that she must find a way to diffuse the situation to protect herself from harm and to prevent Rochester from committing a crime for which he could be convicted. The scene also questions the legitimacy of any relationship where one person must be in such control over another, where freedom of choice is a threat. Rochester and Jane certainly fit the profile of the powerful victimizing the powerless. Under coverture, husbands were granted permission to physically discipline their wives. According to the law, “for some misdemeanours” the husband was allowed “*flagellis et fustibus acriter verbarer uxorem* [To beat his wife severely with scourges and sticks]. For others, only *modicum castigationem adhibere* [To use moderate chastisement]” (Blackstone 444; Jones 39). Because the law was so vague, it left room for husbands to verbally and physically abuse their wives with no legal ramifications. When a woman married, she bound herself for life to a potential monster, who was supported by the law. In a patriarchal society where coverture existed, wives were vulnerable to their husbands, and, while murder was forbidden, Rochester clearly violates a moral boundary of abuse and control.

III

In the novel, Bronte addresses aspects of marriage that are harmful to both genders, the inability to dissolve a marriage, and the failure of marriage to match the idealized institution that society promotes. Jane is repeatedly warned against marriage, and even Rochester, St. John, and Bertha condemn its restrictions. Her past experiences also make her wary of marriage; she seems to question and distrust the institution based on what she witnesses with Aunt Reed and Miss Temple. Like most nineteenth-century readers, Jane would not have known the specifics of marriage laws, and her education at Gateshead and Lowood guaranteed that she had not seen marriage at work. Her knowledge comes from literature, something she conveys to Rochester. When he is disguised as the gypsy woman and asks Jane what kind of novels she likes, she says, “Oh, I have not much choice! They generally run on the same theme—courtship; and promise to end in the same catastrophe—marriage” (130). Based on her limited knowledge of marriage through literature, Aunt Reed, and Miss Temple, Jane clearly sees through its idealization. Before she experiences romantic feelings of her own, she is skeptical of the institution. Jane, again, specifically addresses literature’s participation in her ideas about marriage. After they are engaged, Jane tells Rochester, “I suppose your love will effervesce in six months, or less. I have observed in books written by men, that period assigned as the farthest to which a husband’s ardour extends. Yet, after all, as a friend and companion, I hope never to become quite distasteful to my dearest master” (172). Literature has taught her that wives quickly become “distasteful” to their husbands, the very men who have legal authority over them. Rochester, too, when telling Jane about his life experiences, reveals the pitfalls of marriage. He says, “I found not one whom, had I been ever so free, I—warned as I was of the risks, the horrors, the loathings

of incongruous unions—would have asked to marry me” (206). For Rochester, it is too late to avoid the risks, horrors, and loathings of an unhappy and even abusive marriage.

Bronte repeatedly equates marriage with a prison, challenging the institution’s purpose and its irreversibility. She uses language that references the novel’s Gothic conventions and the imprisonment that is marriage. In traditional courtship novels, domestic spaces were idealized as havens, but in *Jane Eyre*, they are prisons. Even St. John addresses the confines of marriage. When discussing the probable outcome of marrying Rosamond Oliver, he tells Jane, “while I love Rosamond Oliver so wildly . . . I experience at the same time a calm, unwarped consciousness that she would not make me a good wife; that she is not the partner suited to me; that I should discover this within a year after marriage; and that to twelve months’ rapture would succeed a lifetime of regret” (248). The fear of imprisonment in marriage is common to both men and women, neither of whom can easily escape. Bronte equates marriage to a prison in the game of charades in the Thornfield house party. The game uses two wedding-related scenes, the mock wedding and the story of Elizer and Rebecca² to create the word “Bridewell” which was both the name of an actual prison near London and a word that as often used generically to denote ‘prison’ (120). The message is not subtle. Marriage, as it stands under coverture and its near impossibility to break, is a prison for both genders.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte addresses an aspect of coverture that the other Gothic novels do not: a woman’s reaction to the new identity she assumes when she takes her husband’s name. Jane is not comfortable with her future identity as Jane Rochester. When Rochester tells Jane that she will soon change her name, she reacts; “The feeling, the announcement sent through me, was something stronger than was consistent with joy—something that smote and stunned: it was, I think, almost fear” (170). Jane’s new name is a concrete example of the transformations she will undergo once she marries Rochester. She might fight to control her

wardrobe, but she must still change her identity. Her fear is so strong that Rochester recognizes it and comments on it; “You blushed, and now you are white, Jane: what is that for?” (170). Jane fears the ways in which she has to change her life and her identity once she marries. Her fear of marriage recalls Elizabeth’s growing fear of marriage to Victor Frankenstein. Once united to their husbands, these women’s lives will be dictated by men who will fashion them into the ideal wife. Jane attempts to explain her reaction to Rochester: “Because you gave me a new name—Jane Rochester; and it seems so strange” (170). She does not yet identify with this new woman. She says, “Jane Rochester, [is] a person whom as yet I knew not” (182). It is the death of Jane Eyre and the birth of Jane Rochester, a woman Jane does not know that disturbs her, and it is not a transformation that men must endure once they marry.

Throughout the novel, Bronte uses Gothic devices to express the fear that women face when they are going to marry and enter coverture. Jane fears having her identity erased and becoming a woman without legal status. She writes,

She did not exist: she would not be born till to-morrow. . . and I would wait to be assured she had come into the world alive before I assigned to her all that property. It was enough that in yonder closet, opposite my dressing-table, garments said to be hers had already displaced my black stuff Lowood frock and straw bonnet. . . . I shut the closet, to conceal the strange, wraith-like apparel it contained. (182)

Jane says that Jane Rochester does not yet exist, but the law insures that Jane Rochester will not legally exist either because it will not acknowledge their illicit marriage. Jane’s fear that Jane Rochester does not yet exist can also be attributed to her experience with Miss Temple’s disappearance after she married. If Jane’s marriage to Rochester were legal, under coverture, Jane would lose the legal rights she has as a *feme sole*. Jane’s fear of her loss of self when

she marries is revealed in how she describes her clothing as wraith-like. It is a fitting description of what a married woman becomes under coverture. Bronte specifically uses Gothic imagery with the term wraith to illustrate the consequences of marriage on women, where women become like ghosts when they marry.

The ghost allusion is significant because ghosts had long been used as a warning in Gothic literature.³ Ghosts “represent[] “a primal scene in a deeper sense also, as the past that comes back to haunt the present is almost always a deeply domestic one, involving mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, and personal transgression that has been repressed, shut away in a bottom drawer of the family dressing-table” (Killeen 129). Jane’s new garments reflect this understanding of a ghost’s purpose. Ghosts also function to educate. Ghosts “tell[] us that that which we believe to be complete and known is, in fact, possessed of gaps and fissures, that reality is undercut by a kind of otherworldly double” (Killeen 130). Here, the clothes she will wear as Jane Rochester caution her that there are aspects of marriage of which she is unaware, and this is frightening, especially given the level of control the law grants husbands over wives. Ghosts and wraiths demonstrate the state of a woman in marriage. The wraith reference also evokes the deaths of married women in *Frankenstein* and the disappearance of married women in the text, like Miss Temple. The wraith could be a warning not to marry because women figuratively die in marriage, and once Jane becomes Jane Rochester, she will become insubstantial. At this point, because of coverture’s detrimental effects, marriage is dangerous for women because, they no longer exist as a whole person.

Bertha Mason acts as another figure who warns Jane against marriage to Rochester. She indirectly alerts Jane about marriage’s flaws. When Jane is engaged to Rochester, Bertha enters Jane’s room, picks up Jane’s veil, puts it on her head, then “‘rent[s] it in two parts, and fling[s] both on the floor, trampling on them’” (188). Gilbert and Gubar have interpreted Bertha’s action as a symbolic gesture that expresses her desire to free herself from the

marriage in which she is imprisoned (359). Diederich argues that Bertha's actions are meant to threaten Jane, her romantic rival (Diederich 8), while Hoeveler reads Bertha's action as a warning about entering a world of sexual experience (216). In the light of coverture, the tearing of the wedding veil can be both a warning to Jane not to marry and Bertha's desire to dissolve her marriage to Rochester. The wedding veil that clouds the bride's true vision being ripped into two pieces allows the bride to see clearly, beyond the veil, past the idealized version of marriage.

Many scholars have analyzed Rochester's imprisonment of Bertha without exploring its legal ramifications with respect to marriage. Esther Godfrey, James Phillips, Nancy Tyson, and Ian Ward all address this aspect of the novel in their writings. Interestingly, the law of coverture is one methodology that has not been applied, but is one that strengthens these other arguments. Through Rochester and Bertha's marriage, Bronte critiques women's confinement in coverture. In *Law and the Brontes*, Ward focuses his *Jane Eyre* chapter on Bertha, but he concentrates on laws and social guidelines for diagnosing insanity at the time, not the legal authority husbands had over their wives. Ward argues that Bertha's sexuality and disregard for social conformity are determining factors that contribute to her being labeled as insane. These laws also threaten Jane if she does not conform to social and moral norms, a lesson she begins to learn at Gateshead when she is imprisoned in the red room. Ward points out "that in Bertha's fate Jane might have detected a premonition of her own if she were to succumb to Rochester's suggestion that they might live an adulterous liaison" (88). Ward's claim brings up a sinister power that Rochester could use over Jane. One could argue that Jane would lose any authority over her because she will be Rochester's mistress; she will be a fallen woman and financially dependent on Rochester. However, the personal agency Jane would sacrifice if she became Rochester's mistress differ to the personal agency she would sacrifice if she legally married him. While coverture is still in place, Jane would

retain more personal agency if she were Rochester's mistress rather than his wife. If Jane had agreed to live as Rochester's mistress, she would have lost her status as a moral, Christian woman, but she would have retained her legal freedom because she would have been able to leave Rochester if she ever felt the relationship was no longer fulfilling.

Because of her perceived insanity, and because of her race, Bertha would have been seen as a “semi-savage” (Ward, *The Law* 87), thus a strong candidate for institutionalization. However, Ward has not considered the ways that Bertha is under Rochester's power not because she is insane, but because she is his wife. Rochester has the legal authority, granted to him by coverture, to confine Bertha regardless of her mental state. Because of the difficulty of divorce, even in cases of insanity, Rochester would only be allowed a legal separation; he could not have remarried. Even if he had documentation of the men with whom he says Bertha has slept, Rochester's past mistresses would have complicated his supposed moral stance; thus, it is unlikely that he would have been granted a legal separation. Because of nineteenth-century marriage laws and Bertha's insanity, it is highly unlikely that Rochester would be able to divorce Bertha. While Ward argues that she is powerless because she is insane, I argue that she is equally powerless because she is his wife.

Under coverture, a husband can legally confine his wife, especially to keep her from disobeying him. If a wife acted in a way that would embarrass or harm the husband socially, he had the legal right to confine her. This is one reason why it is not suspicious that Grace Poole keeps Rochester's secret; he is within the law. Even though it is legal to confine Bertha, Rochester's hiding her, especially in the attic, seems to suggest that the action is immoral and should be illegal. He could keep her in one of the more comfortable downstairs rooms that could be secured if she tried to escape, but she is instead kept in the attic, a hidden

location that denies her existence to the world and allows him the freedom to pursue other women.

Bronte's use of Gothic settings calls attention to the realities of women's lives in coverture. Jane describes the location of Bertha's room as "like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle" (68). While Victorian audiences would have been familiar with "Bluebeard," Bronte's use of a tale where seven wives have been murdered by the same man because they disobeyed him has a particular relevance in *Jane Eyre*. Anderson argues: "The Bluebeard associations and the harem metaphor both indicate marital despotism" (116). The tale hints at the possibility that Bertha is confined and treated as if she has died because she disobeyed Rochester, not because she is insane. "Bronte thus suggests that this despotism is *not* something that only exists abroad, thereby reversing conventional Gothic distancing in her novel" (Anderson 116). Just as Eastern references remind readers that human rights issues in the East and the West are not so different, the attitudes toward marriage and gender relations in the East and West are also not so different.

Nineteenth-century insanity laws add another level of control that men could employ over the women in their lives. Bertha's insanity is particularly significant because insanity was a subject that was increasingly studied in the Victorian period. As Ward has demonstrated, there were nineteenth-century studies that examined circumstances of family members being confined or institutionalized because they were insane, because they were an embarrassment to the family. Bertha's situation sparked intellectual interest, even in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century writer John "Conolly actually cited the 'case' of Bertha Mason in his treatise, precisely to warn against such domestic confinement" (Ward, "Ghostly" 86). These are instances when society and the law approve of home confinement over institutionalization. However, there was growing concern about discontented husbands who wanted to be rid of their wives and accomplished this by placing their wives in an

institution. One a husband possessed a certificate declaring a family member insane, that individual could be placed in either “a public or a private asylum” (Ward, *The Law* 76).

While the necessity for a certificate seems to make such events legitimate, there were flaws in the system that families with financial and social status could exploit. According to Ward, “Up until 1853 . . . lunacy certificates could be issued on the evidence of just two medical experts . . . without any need for a personal examination of the alleged lunatic” (75). A certificate was not undeniable proof of insanity, and, in fact, a person did not even need to be medically declared insane to be confined.

The specifics of insanity laws are important because they reveal insight into one of the possible explanations why Rochester confines Bertha in the attic. He has the means and social status to have Bertha declared insane had he wished, thus the ability to send her away to an asylum. Instead, he hides her existence. This kind of domestic confinement was considered a private matter and did not require an insanity certificate, as did confinement in a private or public asylum. Domestic confinements were also preferable because they “evaded public embarrassment; and few ailments caused middle-class Victorians greater concern than family insanity” (Ward 76-7). Even British Parliament supported the confinement of mad people and the seclusion of them from the public eye.⁵ And because of the deplorable and often unregulated conditions of the madhouses, “it was always ‘preferable to leave’ lunatics ‘in the custody of their relations, than to lock them up in madhouses’” (Ward 77). The lack of regulations in domestic confinement left open the possibility of abuse. Domestic confinement left them imprisoned and completely vulnerable to their captors, a scenario disturbingly similar to coverture. Alarming, nineteenth-century courts, “consistently refused to intervene in cases where husbands were alleged to have committed acts of violence against supposedly lunatic wives confined in their private homes” (Ward 77). Based on these

legalities, Rochester's choice to keep Bertha confined at Thornfield was acceptable treatment for anyone he deemed insane.

Bronte seems to use Rochester's situation as an argument for allowing divorce in cases of spousal insanity. She portrays him as sympathetic in the scenes in which he talks about Bertha. Rochester admits to Jane, "I was wrong to bring you to Thornfield Hall, knowing as I did how it was haunted. I charged them to conceal from you, before I ever saw you, all knowledge of the curse of the place . . . my plans would not permit me to remove the maniac elsewhere" (Bronte 199). He could have placed Bertha in Ferndean Manor if he "had not a scruple about the unhealthiness of the situation [that], made [his] conscience recoil from the arrangement" (199). This statement evokes sympathy for him; he will not participate in causing her death, even though it is a thought he has clearly had, because he continues, "Probably those damp walls would soon have eased me of her charge: but to each villain his own vice; and mine is not a tendency to indirect assassination, even of what I most hate" (199). Rochester does not place her in an institution; he keeps her at Thornfield, which is safer than the other possibilities he has. He seems to think that his actions are upstanding, but his actions and his statement actually demonstrate that confinement can be seen as a form of psychological abuse and as representative of the inhumanity of the law of coverture and of marriage as an imprisoning institution. In fact, Rochester is actually more violent with Jane than he is with Bertha. Bronte portrays Rochester as a tortured Byronic hero who, like Bertha, is trapped by nineteenth-century marriage laws.

Bronte uses Mason to reinforce the ways that Rochester follows nineteenth-century insanity laws. Mason does not report Rochester for confining Bertha because Rochester acts within the law, but Mason still pleads with Rochester to "Let her be taken care of; let her be treated as tenderly as may be: let her---" he stopped and burst into tears" (142). Rochester replies, "I do my best; and have done it, and will do it" (142). Based on the law, Rochester is

actually being lenient. He has the legal right to use violence as a way to subdue and correct Bertha's behavior, an action he refuses to take. But his motive for subduing her might also be because Bertha has the strength and motivation to kill him, so he does what he can to avoid provoking her. In a statement that evokes both the legal situation of the insane and married women, Rochester tells Mason, "when you are out of the country: when you get back to Spanish Town, you may think of her as dead and buried---or rather, you need not think of her at all" (140). Bertha's treatment and Rochester and Mason's view of her reflect both the accepted treatment of the insane and of wives under coverture. Insane women and married women have no legal status and can be lost to their family, prisoners in their husband's house. Bertha is kept a secret from all of society; those who live at Thornfield act as if she does not exist, and those who are forced to see her, view her not as a woman but as an animal. Jane describes Bertha as resembling and behaving like "the foul German spectre—the Vampyre" (188). Mason describes Bertha's vampiric attack on him; "She sucked the blood: she said she'd drain my heart" (140). Brontë's vampire references are significant because "[v]ampires have a marginal status, for they are neither dead nor alive" (Reed, *Demon-Lovers* 57). This status applies here both to Bertha as a wife in coverture who has no legal status and as an insane person who has been hidden away as if she were dead.

Bertha's physical violence is grotesque and monstrous, but her violence is only directed at the men who confine her, Rochester and her brother Mason. Brontë's presentation of Bertha as animalistic is significant for a variety of readings—for the interpretation of Bertha as Jane's doppelganger, as the physical embodiment of Jane's rage (Gilbert and Gubar 359-60), and for the understanding of Bertha as an eastern 'Other' (Spivak 247). I argue that her depiction is also significant in relation to the doctrine of coverture. When women are treated as animals, they lose their humanity. They become animals, reminiscent of the dehumanizing names John Reed and Rochester call Jane. Coverture strips women of their

individual legal existence and rights. Jane describes Bertha's animalistic appearance and actions in their first formal introduction. "In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (194). Bertha is a "clothed hyena [who] rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet" (194), and she is "the wild beast or the fiend in yonder side den . . . [whose] snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan" (138) terrify Jane. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of Bertha as Jane's raging doppelganger is important in the light of my examination of coverture and divorce in the novel. Bertha can be viewed in two ways, one, as an illustration of the dehumanizing consequences of coverture, and two, that Bertha as "it" can also be read as a reminder of the horrifying spouse to which Rochester is bound for life.

Bronte presents Rochester, as well as Jane, as a victim of confining marriage laws that do not allow divorce. It is important to see that marriage not only imprisons women; it imprisons men as well, and Bronte seems to suggest that there are circumstances such as insanity, particularly violent insanity, when divorce should be an option. Nineteenth-century readers noted Rochester's plight and sympathized with him. Ward agrees "the audience is clearly supposed to sympathize with the incarcerator's predicament" (87). In fact, after George Eliot read the novel, she wrote, "the law which 'chains a man soul and body to a putrefying carcase' was indeed 'diabolical'" (qtd. in Ward, *Law and the Brontes* 74). Bronte's descriptions of Bertha suggest that Rochester is married to a monster who is destroying his life. Rochester describes a scenario that is applicable to both men and women, and reveals the cruelties of nineteenth-century marriage laws and the limitations of how one can escape an abusive marriage. He tells Jane,

Suppose you were no longer a girl, well reared and disciplined, but a wild boy indulged from childhood upwards; imagine yourself in a remote foreign land; conceive that you there commit a capital error, no matter of what nature or from what motives, but one whose consequences must follow you through life and taint all your existence. Mind, I don't say a *crime*; I am not speaking of shedding blood or any other guilty act, which might make the perpetrator amenable to the law: my word is *error*. The results of what you have done become in time to you utterly insupportable; you take measures to obtain relief: unusual measures, but neither unlawful nor culpable. Still you are miserable; for hope has quitted you on the very confines of life: your sun at noon darkens in an eclipse, which you feel will not leave it till the time of setting. (143)

Rochester describes an unhappy marriage, one with which the other women in this study could identify. They made an error in judgment in their youth, and are punished for this error, not for a crime, for the rest of their lives. It is a scenario that seems inhumane and cruel, but it is the law of the time. Through Rochester, Brontë seems to argue that no one should be punished with a life sentence of misery, for a youthful error in judgment. In a sinister twist, being bound to life in an unhappy marriage possibly makes it even more likely that violent abuse will occur. It is a situation that ties Rochester's situation to Isabella in *Wuthering Heights* and Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; however, Rochester is not also confined by coverture.

In Rochester's scenario, because of marriage laws that do not allow divorce for mental illness, marriage becomes a life sentence rather than an ideal reward. Rochester concludes his speech; "To attain this end, are you justified in overleaping an obstacle of custom—a mere conventional impediment which neither your conscience sanctifies nor your

judgment approves?” (144). Rochester’s solution is to ignore social custom. While he is referencing either bigamy or taking a mistress, Brontë’s use of the device of a mad wife draws nineteenth-century readers’ attention to an aspect of marriage laws that needs to be reconsidered, a release from marriage to a lunatic. Rochester asks Jane, “Is the wandering and sinful, but now rest-seeking and repentant, man justified in daring the world’s opinion, in order to” (144) marry the woman who makes him happy. Rochester’s situation challenges the law that maintains that he and Bertha remain married, thus condemned to a life of isolation and misery. It is an unjust sentence to an impossible situation, one that the law could rectify.

While Rochester is clearly monstrous, then—a quality Brontë wants us to recognize—he is also the victim of a monstrous marriage. In this situation, his experience parallels that of Elizabeth, Isabella, and Helen. Rochester, however, has a massive advantage over the women I have previously considered: he is a man, so he can confine Bertha, his abuser, for his own safety. Elizabeth cannot confine Victor; Isabella cannot confine Heathcliff, and Helen cannot confine Huntingdon. He is also a vulnerable, abused spouse in his marriage, marrying for financial security, being trapped in a marriage with an animal, living in hopelessness. While consent imprisons Bertha, the limitation of divorce imprisons Rochester as well. Brontë uses Rochester to reveal another version of a monstrous husband and to reveal that men, too, can be victims of marriage laws that do not address extenuating circumstances. Blackstone explains the limits of insanity to inform consent, but he does not address what should happen if a spouse goes insane after the wedding has taken place. According to the law, “Unsoundness of mind in one of the parties at the time when a marriage purports to be contracted is a ground on which the marriage may be declared null, either by the party himself (or herself) having recovered sanity, or by the guardian appointed by the Court at the instance of the next of kin” (Campbell 56). The law does not account for

instances such as Rochester's because "it might be difficult to prove the exact state of the party's mind at the actual celebration of the nuptials" (Blackstone 438). Insanity can void a marriage only if it can be proven that consent was given by a person who was classified as a lunatic at the moment of consent. Given the particulars of Rochester's situation, he would not benefit from this provision in the law because he has no way to prove Bertha was insane when she consented to marriage.

Rochester's descriptions of Bertha and his reaction to the law's lack of concern in cases of insanity when marriage becomes a dangerous and cruel punishment demonstrate the necessity of allowing spouses the right to divorce in extenuating circumstances. Rochester gives readers a glimpse into what it might be like to live with a lunatic; "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family;--idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad-woman and a drunkard!—as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points" (194). Bertha comes from a family of lunatics, but it cannot be proven that she was insane in the moment she consented to marry him. While the circumstances surrounding Rochester's marriage to Bertha describe a scenario that could be considered fraud, based on the law, not even fraud is applicable. According to the law, "Fraud will sometimes be a ground for annulling the marriage; as on account of banns having been published, or license obtained, under false names, . . . but unless the name was assumed for the purpose of defrauding the other party, or the parents, the circumstance of the marriage being in a fictitious name will not invalidate it" (Blackstone 438). Only misrepresentation about name is categorized as fraud, not the probability of insanity. The law is extremely strict. Not even dishonesty about finances can void a marriage; "Error about the family or fortune of the individual, though produced by disingenuous representations, will not all affect the validity of a marriage" (Blackstone 438). The law specifically addresses insanity in

connection to consent, and it addresses insanity that develops after the marriage. It reads: “Corporal imbecility may arise after the marriage, which will not then vacate the marriage, because there was no fraud in the original contract” (Blackstone 439). Based on this law, Rochester would not be able to void the marriage. He is manacled to Bertha until death.

The language Rochester uses to describe his marriage to Bertha is that which Isabella uses to describe Heathcliff and that which Helen uses to describe Huntingdon, and, interestingly, what Jane uses to describe Rochester. He is both victim and villain. Bronte uses Rochester’s perspective to propose yet another reason why divorce should be legalized in more cases. After Rochester and Jane’s wedding is cancelled, Rochester invites Jane and Briggs into the house to “see what sort of a being [he] was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not [he] had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human” (194). He calls himself “a defrauded wretch, already bound to a bad, mad, and embruted partner!” (194). His descriptions of Bertha do not fulfill the idea of marriage institutionalized in the law. Bertha creates for Rochester a domestic hell rather than a haven.

Rochester explains his situation in an effort to evoke sympathy for his plight. He says, “To tell me that I had already a wife is empty mockery: you know now that I had but a hideous demon” (209) and “For a wife I have but the maniac upstairs: as well might you refer me to some corpse in yonder churchyard” (210). Bronte again connects women under coverture to a kind of death, but in this scenario, it is a death that also traps Rochester. Rochester says, “That is *my wife*. . . Such is the conjugal embrace I am ever to know –such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours!” (195). Beyond lacking the ability to fulfill the role of an ideal wife, Bertha has become a threat to Rochester’s safety. Rochester believes that he should not be bound to Bertha because “*my wife* is prompted by her familiar to burn people in their beds at night, to stab them, to bite their flesh from their bones, and so on” (199). She is potentially lethal. Just as wives could not divorce or get any

legal protection from husbands who abused them, husbands could not divorce violent wives; however, husbands could confine them, under coverture, and husbands could have wives declared insane and either placed into institutions or keep them confined in the home. Therefore, husbands could take measures to protect themselves in ways that women could not.

Rochester's situation challenges inhumane and illogical marriage laws, but his mode of challenge is one that results in his victimizing Jane. He tries to reinvent the law, and to convince himself of its illegitimacy, so he can justify courting Jane. Rochester declares, "I know what my aim is, what my motives are; and at this moment I pass a law, unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians, that both are right" (90). He takes desperate measures in a situation where the law cannot help him. In a statement that reminds him that he cannot create his own laws of morality, Jane says, "They cannot be, sir, if they require a new statute to legalize them" (90). Jane reminds him and readers of the effort it takes to amend laws that no longer function in the best interests of people. Rochester explains, "they absolutely require a new statute; unheard-of combinations of circumstances demand unheard-of-rules" (90). But Jane is uncomfortable with his assertion of so much power; "That sounds a dangerous maxim, sir; because one can see at once that it is liable to abuse" (90). Critics seem to agree that Jane "is attracted by Rochester's strength of character, [but] she fears it in a world where men are encouraged to misuse their power" (Clarke 705). Despite Jane's protestations, Rochester convinces himself that what he does is right though the law does not condone it. His statements question the laws that require him to devise schemes by which to get around such restrictions. Rochester questions, "Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law—no man being injured by the breach? For you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need to fear to offend by living with me" (210). This is very calculating on his part; he challenges the purpose of marriage, whether its

concept or its feeling is what makes marriage. And as he, too, is trapped in a marriage from which he cannot escape, Brontë seems to use his dialogue to make an argument for the plight of wives.

In Rochester's case, statutory law denied cases when husbands attempted to divorce their wives because of insanity (Blackstone 438). The courts required proof of insanity at the moment of consent (438). Rochester's dialogue describing his marriage challenges readers to reconsider that limitation. He "was thrust on to a wrong track at the age of one-and-twenty, and [had] never recovered the right course since" (88). This statement is similar to Helen and Isabella's beliefs about marriage and the law that requires that they suffer a lifetime of misery. Rochester tells Jane: "I had determined, and was convinced that I could and ought [marry] . . . it appeared to me so absolutely rational that I should be considered free to love and be loved, I never doubted some woman might be found willing and able to understand my case and accept me, in spite of the curse with which I was burdened" (206). His reasoning is rational, but only insofar as he should be allowed to divorce Bertha and remarry, not that he should be allowed to trick Jane into becoming his mistress. Rochester and Bertha's situation exposes nineteenth-century readers to scenarios when it is irrational that the law does not have an amendment that frees spouses from violent maniacs, male or female.

Victorian society did not envision marriage as an institution that ruins lives, but Rochester shows that it can do just that. When contemplating his bigamous marriage with Jane, he challenges both religious and social law, saying, "God pardon me! . . . and man meddle not with me: I have her, and will hold her" (169). He convinces himself that courting Jane would not be a crime against God or society. His motive here seems to be more self-serving, but when Jane tells him she is happy and that she loves him, he uses this knowledge to convince himself that his actions will benefit her. He tells himself, "It will atone—it will atone. Have I not found her friendless, and cold, and comfortless? Will I not guard, and

cherish, and solace her? Is there not love in my heart, and constancy in my resolves? It will expiate at God's tribunal. I know my Maker sanctions what I do. For the world's judgment—I wash my hands thereof. For man's opinion—I defy it" (169). Despite his plans to be the ideal husband, his self-justification is still self-serving rather than philanthropic. When laws fail to evolve to address social problems, anarchy occurs. Society risks either mutiny against these laws, or it risks social stagnation. In his discussion about what defines marriage in *Jane Eyre*, Phillips argues: "What sustains marriage is conversation, not the sanction of the law or the blessing of the church" (210). Phillips places more weight on the private relationship between spouses, and I agree with Phillips that conversation and interactions between spouses is more important than whether the law or church recognizes the marriage. However, when the law grants husbands so much power over wives, the law absolutely becomes important. The doctrine of coverture governs the very conversations and interactions themselves. If the law of coverture continues to be upheld, husbands and wives cannot have equal conversation because husbands can discipline and confine their wives while wives have no such power. This law will certainly influence and limit the kinds of conversations spouses can have. Laws like this influence the power relations within marriage and cannot be ignored in any discussion about marriage in an era where coverture is still in place. To stay relevant, laws must continually be re-evaluated. In Rochester and Bertha's marriage, Bronte presents such an instance.

IV

Bronte's depiction of Jane's flight from Thornfield offers another way to discuss women's plight in coverture. Jane's escape from Rochester parallels Isabella's escape in *Wuthering Heights* and Helen's escape in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Although Jane has the

legal freedom to leave Thornfield, her dependence and subsequent experiences give readers insight into what an abused wife leaving her husband might face or a mistress deserted by her lover. Jane flees like a fugitive wife, though she is merely a servant and free to leave at will. While at Gateshead and Lowood, Jane obediently waits for permission from her guardians before leaving; however, at Thornfield, she flees without any thought or plan of action once she escapes. The road to freedom is not easy, especially since a woman traveling alone with no money or luggage would be suspected to be a wife illegally breaking coverture or of a fallen woman. When Jane leaves Thornfield, she has nothing. She has no money and no possessions when she forgets her luggage on the carriage. She is “absolutely destitute” (214), yet she still chooses the possibility of a physical death in nature over a moral death with Rochester. Because Jane is alone in a patriarchal world, she is suspect, whereas a solitary man would not be. Although she does not specifically reference coverture, Jane knows that a woman traveling alone suggests criminal activity or immoral behavior. She tries to hide on the moor because “strangers would wonder what I am doing . . . I might be questioned: I could give no answer but what would sound incredible and excite suspicion” (214). After Jane escapes, she is cognizant of her appearance and what the villagers likely think of her; “how doubtful must have appeared my character, position, tale” (217). It is especially important that she not look like a wife leaving her husband because villagers might report her to the authorities, and Rochester could find her. Even though he would have no legal authority over her, as long as she looks conspicuous, thus guilty, he will be able to hunt her down.

Readers witness the kind of treatment and questioning a wife leaving her marriage might face when Jane is at Moore House. When St. John and his sisters ask Jane about her past, their reactions are clearly guided by her status as an unmarried woman. “Here I saw his glance directed to my hands” (230) and he says, “You have never been married? You are a

spinster?” (230). Clearly, their reaction to her and treatment of her is conditional on whether she is breaking the law. If she were a wife who had left her husband, regardless of the reason, she is a criminal, and it is possible that they would cast her out or report her/expose her. Jane’s explanations to the Rivers for the circumstances of her escape are reminiscent of those that Isabella gives Nelly when she escapes *Wuthering Heights* and that Helen gives to Gilbert about why and how she leaves Huntington in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Jane says, “the catastrophe which drove me from a house I had found a paradise was of a strange and direful nature. I observed but two points in planning my departure—speed, secrecy: to secure these I had to leave behind me everything I possessed except a small parcel” (231). She hints at a traumatic situation so horrific that she risked everything to escape it. But even once she has escaped, she is continually haunted by the possibility that Rochester will find her.

To protect herself, Jane must live like a criminal, and she takes on an alias, Jane Elliot, in order to protect herself. Jane explains that she cannot give details about her past “without compromising [her] own peace of mind—[her] own security, moral and physical” (230). Although Jane’s situation is different from Isabella and Helen’s because she is not confined by coverture, the sympathy she evokes, the hardships she faces, and the horrifying discovery about the man to whom she bound her life, would be all the more terrifying for a woman who was trying to escape an abusive husband. Jane’s situation and ill treatment by strangers provokes sympathy for the plight of women for whom this is a reality. A wife’s choice should not have to be between misery and death. Bronte seems to be making a case for when allowances must be made for wives trapped in monstrous marriage. When St. John tells Jane what he learned about “Jane Eyre,” he reveals that all of Jane’s fears were well-founded. She discovers that after she left Thornfield, “every research after her course had been vain: the country had been scoured far and wide; no vestige of information could be

gathered respecting her . . . advertisements have been put out in all the papers” and letters sent (253). Rochester hunted Jane and used every resource at his disposal to do so.

Despite Jane’s sacrifice of everything she owned and loved to escape Rochester, scholars have condemned Jane for not helping Bertha escape Rochester. Killeen argues that when Jane “actually discovers an enslaved woman on the premises, rather than protest at what has been happening to her effective double, she allows that slavery to continue indefinitely” (Killeen 100). However, Jane is in no position to save Bertha. Bertha’s confinement is legal under coverture, and even if Jane disagrees with the morality of confining an insane wife, Jane is also vulnerable to Rochester. Because Victorian society viewed many women who rebelled against social ideals as inhuman or possessed, they locked these women away in insane asylums. Women who did not live by society’s standards were vulnerable. Even though Jane was not bound by coverture, she is still vulnerable to Rochester because he could have used the Victorians’ fear of the insane to have Jane declared morally insane and confined to Thornfield. Because no physician needed to examine her, because she had no family who knew where she was, and because of Rochester’s social status, it is likely that, had this been his plan, he would have succeeded.

V

The consequences for women who marry in *Jane Eyre* are variations of the consequences for women who marry in *Frankenstein*. While in *Frankenstein*, Caroline, Elizabeth, and the monstrous Eve all die, in *Jane Eyre*, newly married women disappear. The marriages that Jane witnesses are destructive to women. Aunt Reed is controlled by her husband from beyond the grave, still haunted by his presence in the house; Miss Temple disappears from the novel once she marries; and Bertha disappears within Thornfield when

Rochester incarcerates her. Proposed marriages also threaten to eliminate women.

Rochester's first idea of marriage with Jane would destroy her, and St. John's loveless and domineering idea of marriage would cause Jane to disappear to India. These marriages and proposed marriages all are male-dominated and oppressive. They are not literal deaths as the women in *Frankenstein* experience, but they are forms of death.

The need to control women's sexuality was one reason why divorce was so difficult to obtain. There was a belief that women would leave their husbands if and when they desired a new sexual partner. However, Bronte demonstrates that it is coverture and the level of control that husbands gain over their wives that is the bigger threat to marriage. After escaping Rochester, Jane regains her skepticism of the institution. When St. John proposes to Jane, she refuses him because he does not love her, and she now has the financial resources to live independently. Jane desires to maintain her self-sovereignty, and she tells St. John that she does not "want to marry, and never shall marry" (258). Her decision not to marry is an option unavailable to many nineteenth-century women who did not have the financial resources to support themselves. Jane establishes her own identity as an independent woman who stands apart from the feminine role that the nineteenth-century conduct books idealized. Even when St. John asks Jane to go to India with him she replies that she is "ready to go to India, if [she] may go free" (269). She does not want to live a life in which she has no agency. Jane claims that if she married St. John, "such martyrdom would be monstrous. I will never undergo it. As his sister, I might accompany him—not as his wife" (269). Jane's use of the word monstrous here is significant. She evokes images of Gothic villains and predicts the kind of monstrous husband St John would become. At this point in the novel, all marriage proposals have been monstrous. Jane even confronts St. John, telling him, "If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now" (274). Her language evokes the deaths of the married women in *Frankenstein* and Isabella's wishes for death in

Wuthering Heights. Marriage can be a death sentence for a woman if it takes place under nineteenth-century laws of coverture.

For all of Jane's bad experiences with marriage, she still weds Rochester in what has been argued as "one of the most hotly debated 'happy endings' in literary history" (Hoeverler 221). In defense of this marriage, Jane and Rochester's union keeps with literary tradition by fulfilling "[t]he last-chapter marriage (or marriages) [which were] a thoroughly accepted convention of Victorian literature" (Reed, *Victorian Conventions* 120). Jane's marriage to Rochester at the novel's end has been read both as reinforcing traditional gender roles and as offering a new version of marriage. Diederich argues that, "with Bertha's death and her destruction of Rochester's sight, she provides Jane with the opportunity to accept the position of wife and mother, to enter into a marriage that grants the second wife more agency than the first" (Diederich 3). This argument is supported by the famous scene in which Jane argues for gender equality, a scene that seems to suggest that she will not wed until she is granted this equality. In this scene, Jane says that "women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags" (70). She seems to suggest that she will not marry until she can express herself as freely as a man, until she has as much agency as a man. Jane believes that she can have all this if she has a marriage based on equality.

Jane desires equality in marriage and she tells Rochester that she will only marry him if he sees that they are "equal" (167). Hoeverler argues that Jane "has done what every gothic feminist has had to do: she has created a new family with herself in a matriarchal and unchallenged position of power" (205), and Tyson argues that, "winning against impossible

odds, [Jane] attains both marriage and emancipation” (104). This happy ending can be read as Bronte showing readers that marriage will not dissolve if women have more legal freedoms. Jane articulates this when she tells Rochester that she is “an independent woman now:” she is her “own mistress” (289). Jane’s financial, emotional, and intellectual independence, along with Bertha’s death and Rochester’s physical and emotional scars, seemingly enables Jane to marry Rochester without losing herself in his dominance. However, the patriarchal culture and the legal statutes remain the same. The equal marriage can never be equal while the doctrine of coverture is still in effect.

Through Jane and Rochester’s marriage, Bronte reassures readers that a new version of marriage does not disrupt or dissolve society; it improves it. It is the inability to rectify a youthful mistake that frightens people away from marriage, and it is the vast power that a husband has over a wife, her loss of legal identity, that frightens and women and makes them afraid of marriage. Such a reaction means the institution’s limits need to be re-evaluated. Having a more equal balance and an ability to escape from abusive or unhappy marriages actually make the institution less frightening.

While the plot of *Jane Eyre* ends in the expected marriage, Bronte presents her readers with a new, wholly unexpected union because the marriage does not take place until it is on Jane’s terms, until it provides her with the equality and love that she desires. Her marriage is something new for women because they were expected to marry, be financially dependent on their husbands and intellectually inferior to their husbands, in essence, to be wed into unequal relationships. However, scholars have also read the conclusion as bleak. Anderson writes, “a house is burned and a woman dead, as if she never existed; and the future promises nothing better for Jane, who refuses to learn from the all-too-visible examples of all her predecessors” (119). And for Clark, “at the novel’s conclusion, Jane has narrowed the field for *her* efforts to just one man—Rochester. Miss Temple has been

swallowed up by marriage. Mary and Diana Rivers visit Jane just once a year” (695).

Because Jane is independently wealthy with no legal guardian, she can live alone; she is freed from the confines of dependency, yet she still forgoes this freedom to marry Rochester.

Gothic Romances reinforced women’s submission to men when they entered marriages in which the women had little power, and domestic novels were “aimed at subordinating an already subordinate sex” (Armstrong 103). Even though the novel seems to celebrate Rochester and Jane’s marriage as it is now based on grounds of equality, in reality, this equality did not exist within the law because coverture continues to exist. Jane and Rochester’s marriage must be celebrated with reservation because Jane’s fate is all too similar to the conventional marriages she condemns. For example, Miss Temple establishes herself, becomes a respected superintendent of Lowood school, then abandons her students and disappears from their lives to become a wife. Sadly, Jane follows Miss Temple in that both disappear within marriage. When at Moore House, Jane “became a favorite in the neighbourhood” (244). She has been educating girls in the village school who would not otherwise receive any education, yet she abandons them to marry, disappearing from their lives, leaving them no way to escape their situation. Their fates are worse than Jane’s because at Lowood, Jane received enough of an education to allow her to financially support herself; these girls will not have the same opportunity now. Jane sacrifices these girls, with whom she should identify, to marry, and once she marries Rochester, Jane enters coverture and becomes his. Ultimately, if Jane and Rochester lived together, without marrying, they would be social outcasts and only as equal as Rochester allowed Jane to be. Yet Jane retains more power as a mistress than as a wife because she would have power over her finances and she would retain her legal rights as an individual. But instead the novel ends in marriage, which, because of coverture, ensures that Jane and Rochester are not equal and grants Rochester power and possession over Jane and her inheritance, power he has abused in the

past. Jane is vulnerable to him once again. Now that they are married, she is even more vulnerable than when she was a governess because he now controls her legal identity and her inheritance. There is hope for their marriage only because the characters themselves have changed, not because the law now protects Jane. Their equality in marriage is not a legal equality; it is a personally-granted equality, one that Rochester allows Jane to have, but one which the law does not recognize.

Chapter Four

Revising Gender Expectations and Defining Abuse

in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is one of the most realistic yet controversial Domestic Gothic novels in this study. Brontë dismisses any hint at the supernatural, or dreams, or visions.¹ Because of this, "This novel, difficult to classify generically, has troubled readers since its publication in 1848 with its frank depiction of brutality and domestic abuse" (Gruner 309). Although the novel does not supernaturalize its literary elements, it includes Gothic suspense, horror, and dread, a Gothic setting, and Gothic monsters in the form of brutal husbands. These particular conventions are significant as they recreate the experience of wives living in terrifying scenarios from which they cannot escape. Garrett Stewart argues that the novel "gothicize[s] both its morbid villain and its marital ordeal" (97). By using Gothic elements, this novel most directly exposes the ways that marriage endangers women. While *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has not shared the scholarly popularity or general readership of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, it includes the most controversial and open discussion about spousal abuse, the cruelty of gender expectations, and the insufficiency of divorce laws to protect women under coverture.

Brontë's preface to her second edition specifies her didactic purpose. She writes, "My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (Brontë 3). For Brontë, literature has a more profound purpose than mere entertainment. Critics do not dispute that Brontë uses the novel as a platform on which to discuss social ills. Lee Talley argues that Brontë "appears to use her protagonist as a mouthpiece for her own

views” (138). Critics of all methodological stripes support the conclusion that the novel is a call to attention about the plight of nineteenth-century women in marriage and in motherhood. Scholars most often write about a few concentrations: religion examined within the novel, woman as artists, privacy, motherhood, and its narrative frame.² Talley uses a discussion of religion in the novel to “disrupt perceived ideas about gender, education, the learning process and the sanctity of the domestic sphere” (127). And, in fact, motherhood and child custody are the most commonly discussed issues in the novel. Talley writes that the novel “can thus also be read as a nineteenth-century testament to the life of single, working mother” (137). Likewise, Elisabeth Gruner argues that the novel is “centrally concerned with what it means to be a mother” (309). Gruner makes this point because Helen Huntingdon’s maternal dedication, and the multiple scenes in which a mother’s role in her child’s life is discussed, contrast to “the mothers of *Wuthering Heights* [who] die young or give up their children” (309). Deborah Morse also argues that Helen is, above all her other roles, a mother. Morse makes this claim based on the pedagogical focus of male and female children in the novel. She argues that in Helen’s “maternal role, [she] fervently argues for a new mode of childrearing that acknowledges the minds and spirits of male and female children are equal, and equally susceptible to influences from the fallen world of experience” (Morse 113). While motherhood is an essential aspect of the novel, I argue that Helen’s role as a wife must take priority because it regulates the amount of authority she has as a mother. Maternal issues take second place to the more pressing issue of gender training, coverture, and imprisonment in abusive marriage.

Ian Ward, whose work I have referenced throughout this study, also examines law in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in his book *Law and the Brontes*. In his “Huntingdon vs. Huntingdon” chapter, he references abuse, specifically mental cruelty, but he concentrates his examination of legal issues in the novel on child custody and Helen’s battle for Arthur, which

bears a striking similarity to Caroline Norton's legal battles. It is necessary to perform a comprehensive examination of the novel as a warning against gender training that endangers women and as a call to consider mental cruelty a form of abuse. Bronte's Domestic Gothic uncovers the inadequacies of nineteenth-century matrimonial laws. Through the novel, Bronte reveals that the culture's ideals of marital domestic bliss mislead and entrap women and fail to protect wives from abusive husbands. Bronte addresses the flawed and idealistic social ideals in contrast to the realities of the law of coverture by expanding what constitutes abuse. While critics are beginning to examine the novel in connection to child custody laws and to the nineteenth-century marital reform advocate Caroline Norton,³ it is also important to examine its detailed account of the devastating effects of a woman torn between fulfilling social ideals and rescuing herself and her son. Bronte uses the novel, I argue here, to expose the conflicts between the social ideal and the reality of married life, with the goal of re-evaluating women's roles within marriage and reconsidering the ethics of coverture.

I

In the novel, Bronte incorporates repeated warnings against marriage, particularly because of marriage's indissolvability. These warnings were initially not seen as informative or beneficial to its intended audience. Charles Kingsley of *Fraser's Magazine* wrote that the novel was "utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls" (qtd. in Lamonica 134). Literary reviews in *Sharpe's London Magazine* declared the novel "unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be most useful, (namely, imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming a captivating rake,) owing to the profane expressions, inconceivably coarse language, and revolting scenes and descriptions by which its pages are disfigured" (qtd. in Lamonica 134). This is the very

audience that most needs the information that Bronte presents. Bronte also identifies one motive in writing the novel in the preface to the second edition. In response to the outcry against her immoral and brutal characters she writes, “I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (Bronte 4). Her purpose is not merely to entertain. She clearly understands the power of literature to inform and to participate in discussions about social issues. She confirms that, although some of the characters seem extreme in their villainy, in real life, such villainy also exists. Bronte also specifies:

When we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light, is doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience. (4)

Bronte clearly intended the novel to serve as a cautionary tale. Had she edited her villain's behavior or softened any scenes of abuse, the result would have been misleading and even, she argues, deceptive. Bronte's dedication to capturing the possibilities of what a woman may face in marriage is done with purpose. Therefore, it is important to examine the novel's cautions against marriage, both implicit and explicit.

The warnings are all the more real because they come from multiple sources and are told in a variety of forms. The advice against marriage is not one character's misguided and

biased opinion. All these cautions come from women who are or have been married, and the cautions are to both women and men. Helen receives the most warnings against marriage, not only in the novel, but more than any other character in this study. In fact, in an effort to highlight the dangers of marriage, Bronte titles the chapter in which Helen first meets Huntington, “The Warnings of Experience” (110), and the chapter in which they continue their courtship, “Further Warnings” (121). These are not subtle nuances. Bronte clearly wants readers to learn from Helen’s experience. One of the novel’s most significant warnings serves to dismantle a young upper-class woman’s idealized and romanticized view of marriage. Helen’s aunt advises, “First study; then approve; then love” (112). This formula is so important because it allows women to understand the true character of their future husbands, a course of behaviour that is all the more important given the power that coverture grants husbands over their wives. The aunt continues to de-romanticize marriage. She warns that matrimony “is a subject that demands mature and serious deliberation” (144) and that “*matrimony is a serious thing*” (112). While courtship novels and early Gothic Romances idealize marriage, Bronte disrupts this fiction. The legal consequences of marriage and coverture are, indeed, very serious and should not be trivialized. Although readers get very little insight into the aunt’s marriage, Helen observes that “she spoke it *so* seriously that one might have fancied she had known it to her cost” (112). Helen suggests that the aunt, too, is imprisoned within her own marriage and might have made a different choice had she been properly advised about the realities of marriage.

Bronte uses the conversations between Helen and her aunt to expose Helen’s naivety about matrimony and to warn readers against an imprudent marriage. Helen’s aunt specifies, “I want to warn you, Helen, of these things, and to exhort you to be watchful and circumspect from the very commencement of your career, and not to suffer your heart to be stolen from you by the first foolish or unprincipled person that covets the possession of it” (111).

The aunt's language reinforces the seriousness of matrimony. She uses "career" to describe the period in which Helen will search for a husband. This is not a romantic notion. It is a woman's job to marry, but given the legal consequences of that job, granted by coverture, it is a cruel profession. Her job is to find a man to whom she give up her legal rights as a *feme sole* and her already limited agency. Mrs. Maxwell also warns against the very situation to which Helen eventually succumbs: falling in love with the first man who courts her. Helen's aunt comforts her by adding, "You know, my dear, you are only just eighteen; there is plenty of time before you, and neither you uncle nor I are in any hurry to get you off our hands" (111). Ironically, this reassurance that Helen is not a burden actually serves to remind Helen that she is a dependent, but Helen's situation is still more favourable than that of Milicent or Esther. Although the aunt presses her into marrying Mr. Boarham, she stops short of forcing her into marriage as Milicent's family does, and as Esther's family later attempts.

Despite Mrs. Maxwell's warning to Helen, Helen still retains her romantic views of marriage. When Helen describes her ideal husband as one "I ought to be able to respect and honour. . . *as well* as love . . . , for I cannot love him without" (113), her aunt cautions, "they can all play the hypocrite when they want to take in a fond, misguided woman!" (149).

While Helen's expectations for marriage are not extreme, they surpass the expectations that the culture grants women. The aunt attempts to squash Helen's naivety by offering examples of what can happen when an innocent young woman is fooled by an immoral man. Sadly, the aunt's warning anticipates Helen's future. She tells Helen that some young women, "through carelessness, have been the wretched victims of deceit; and some, through weakness, have fallen into snares and temptations terrible to relate" (112). Her advice turns out to be Helen's exact scenario, and the scenario of the other women in this study. Elizabeth Frankenstein falls into a marriage that results in her death; Isabella Heathcliff consents to a marriage that

nearly destroys her; Jane Eyre, through entrapment, nearly becomes Rochester's' mistress, and Helen marries Huntingdon, a decision which ruins her life.

Sight and insight in marriage and in one's future spouse plays another role in the warnings about marriage. Bronte is clearly trying to shed light onto the institution for her readers who are ignorant about or who have been misinformed about Romantic love. Helen's aunt cautions, "Let your eyes be blind to all external attractions, your ears deaf to all the fascinations of flattery and light discourse.—These are nothing—and worse than nothing—snares and wiles of the tempter, to lure the thoughtless to their own destruction" (112). Helen's corporeal eye cannot be trusted to judge the character of a man, and she cannot be trusted to shift through flattery and identify worth. She is warned, "If you should marry the handsomest, and most accomplished and superficially agreeable man in the world, you little know the misery that would overwhelm you, is, after all, you should find him to be a worthless reprobate, or even an impracticable fool" (112). These cautions have merit, and again, turn out to be the exact scenario that Helen enters. There are no guidelines for how to deal with this misery; it is expected that Helen will suffer in silence for the rest of her life because the courts do not allow divorces for youthful mistakes. When Rachel warns Helen about Huntingdon's dubious past, Helen says, "I won't hear them . . . they tell lies" (170). Her refusal is a conscious one. Helen is blind and deaf to Huntingdon's faults and is going into the marriage not only because she refuses to see Huntingdon's true character but because she knows nothing of what marriage truly entails. She is determined to overlook his vices at a time when she would still have the freedom to escape him. Helen's culpability in giving consent is important because Bronte seems to suggest, through Helen's eventual escape, that even women who make imprudent matrimonial choices should not be condemned for life. After she is married, Helen admits, "To be sure, I might have known [Huntingdon], for every one was willing enough to tell me about him, and he himself was no accomplished hypocrite,

but I was wilfully blind” (171). Helen’s marriage, unlike that of Jane Eyre’s and Elizabeth Frankenstein, is no Bluebeard situation. She is warned about Huntingdon’s past but refuses to accept the extent of his crimes. Helen is not deceived; she is aware of the danger and believes that her role as the angelic reformer will save him.

Additionally, Bronte uses the novel to expose the temporality of Romantic love, which she repeatedly depicts as ending early in the marriage. In response to Gilbert’s ideal vision of a marriage of equality, Mrs. Markham attempts to correct his innocence, saying, “Oh! That’s all nonsense, my dear—it’s mere boy’s talk that! You’ll soon tire of petting and humouring your wife, be she ever so charming, and then comes the trial” (50). She gives Gilbert a similar message about marriage but there are more sinister consequences for women who marry because they are at the mercy of their husbands with virtually no legal recourse should their husbands become violent. Mrs. Markham uses her own life as an example. She tells Gilbert, “I’m sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, and after the first six months or so were over, I should as soon have expected him to fly, as to put himself out of his way to pleasure me” (50). Not only is this not an incentive for anyone to marry, but she reveals that she, too, had an unhappy marriage. She softens the example by saying, “He always said I was a good wife, and did my duty; and he always did his—bless him!—he was steady and punctual, seldom found fault without a reason, always did justice to my good dinners, and hardly ever spoiled my cookery by delay—and that’s about as much as any woman can expect of any man” (50). While Mrs. Markham still promotes marriage, her lack of self-evaluation reveals a view of the institution that is unsuccessful and needs to be revised. It is telling that Mrs. Markham never remarries after her husband dies. She perpetuates the socially acceptable view of marriage, but she has made a different choice for herself. The realities of wedded life and the fears that Romantic love is fleeting are Helen’s fears as well. She worries that Huntingdon’s love is like “a fire of dry twigs and branches

compared with one of solid coal,—very bright and hot, but if it should burn itself out and leave nothing but ashes behind, what shall I do?” (171). Her imagery is one of consumption that results in destruction, and that predicts her future if she weds. Huntingdon’s love will destroy her, yet the law of coverture prevents her from escaping this situation. While marriage is seen as the ultimate goal for women and is a highly valued institution, the realities of marriage leave much to be desired.

Bronte’s audience consisted of middle and upper-class women, many of whom would have shared the same ignorance about marriage as does Helen. Helen repeatedly demonstrates the limitations of this audience’s uninformed and naïve idea of matrimony. She thinks, “In all my employments, whatever I do, or see, or hear, has an ultimate reference to him; whatever skill or knowledge I acquire is some day to be turned to his advantage or amusement; whatever new beauties in nature or art I discover, are to be depicted to meet his eye, or stored in my memory to be told him at some future period” (128-9). She desires a man who will share his life with her, and she romanticizes devoting her life entirely for him, which is what the cultural expectations dictate. She assumes Huntingdon shares these same interests and that he would want to hear her stories and share her experiences. Helen writes, “I had all along been looking forward to this season with the fond, delusive hope that we should enjoy it so sweetly together; and that, with God’s help and my exertions, it would be the means of elevating his mind and refining his taste” (189). She has clearly planned not only to reform him, but to instruct him as well, and to shape his character and tastes to her own, which opposes what the cultural expectations dictate, yet it is a plan that most of Bronte’s readers would have shared. In a warning to specifically address this aspect of the misconceptions about women’s role in marriage, Helen, heartbreakingly too late, realizes that “it is not he that I loved; it is a creature of my own imagination” (129). This romanticised ideal about a love interest ties back to *Wuthering Heights* and Isabella’s imaginary creations

of the romanticized Heathcliff, only to realize that characterization was only in her imagination, as well.

Helen's naive view of marriage also specifically contradicts marriage laws, revealing that she is entering a lifetime contract of which she does not know the terms. When she tells her aunt that she will marry Huntingdon, she says, "[A]ll I have will be his, and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of us require?"(152). However, Helen clearly does not understand coverture or the legal changes that take place once she marries, an ignorance that should challenge her ability to consent. By English law, "A woman's personal property by marriage becomes absolutely her husband's, which at his death he may leave entirely away from her; but if he dies without will, she is entitled to one-third of his personal property, if he has children; if not, to one-half" (Blackstone 444n). This financial situation is not what Helen expects. She, like many nineteenth-century women readers, does not seem to be informed about the specifics of the law. It is situations like these that cause Ward to concentrate his study of the law in the novel on issues of inheritance and of custody. Ward argues, "the case for addressing the 'manifold evils' of matrimonial property law, which ran alongside that of infant custody, became a centerpiece of feminist agitation as the century drew on" (38). However, before child custody ever becomes an issue, the wife's loss of rights to her own self and to her own income is a more pressing issue that if addressed, would also help correct the child custody issues. Helen's statements reveal that women are not educated in the specific terms of marriage and coverture, a situation that fails them and that challenges the validity of their consent.

The novel most comprehensively challenges the motivation behind maintaining marriage as an indissoluble institution. This seemingly naïve law has sinister consequences. Divorces were so difficult to obtain because it was believed that “the general happiness of the married life is secured by its indissolubility” (Blackstone 440n). This attitude transformed marriage into an institution that imprisoned both spouses. And because of patriarchal values that fuel coverture, marriage became a life sentence that gave husbands legal power over their wives. Unfortunately, the courts did not anticipate the possible negative consequences of this action. It was believed that “When people understand that they *must* live together, except for a very few reasons known to the law, they learn to soften by mutual accommodation that yoke which they know they cannot shake off. They become good husbands and good wives from the necessity of remaining husbands and wives; for necessity is a powerful master in teaching the duties which it imposes” (Blackstone 440n). This was a false assumption. Prison inmates do not become upstanding citizens when they are incarcerated. Their confinement might limit their ability to commit crimes, but it does not transform their moral compass. Likewise, spouses who married under less than ideal circumstances and false ideals did not transform into a loving couple. The best they could do is maintain a level of civility in an effort to survive their lifelong sentence. Voiding the marriage or being granted a divorce *a mensa et thoro* was not an option in these situations. The courts justified its laws by saying “the happiness of some individuals must be sacrificed to the greater and more general good” (Blackstone 440n). But through multiple couples in the novel, most especially the Huntingdons, Bronte makes the argument that this to be too large a sacrifice.

In *Tenant*, Bronte challenges aspects of consent laws and gender training in submission and in reform. Ian Ward argues that the novel provides a “stark portrayal of a dysfunctional, abusive marriage, [and that it] shattered the pretenses of marital harmony so

cherished by the age. It displayed, in harrowing detail, the reality of marriage for many Victorian women; and not just any women, but middle-class bourgeois women, the kind of women who could, indeed, be expected to read a Bronte novel” (*Law* 25). Bronte criticizes the gender expectations that create environments where young girls are conditioned to be devalued and abused in marriage. This is especially sinister when those same parents and guardians force their daughters into marriage. Situations like these challenge consent laws and by exposing marriage as a prison-like environment, Bronte discourages women from entering the institution until wives are granted more personal agency.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall includes more didactic warnings about marriage than any of the novels in this study. Bronte incorporates multiple marriages and courtships in the novel to challenge nineteenth-century laws and social expectations that turn marriage an institution that victimizes women. Some of the male characters fulfil their expected social roles, but Bronte exposes their level of power as inhumane and as having the potential to transform them into monstrous husbands. Talley argues that Bronte is clearly “working to instruct her reader so that they can learn without having to experience first-hand what her protagonists do” (Talley 133). Anne Bronte seems to have a more concrete goal than either Emily or Charlotte. Anne uses the novel to argue that women’s expectation to be submissive specifically conditions them to live enslaved by their husbands, and their expectation to be the angelic reformer places wives in the precarious and impossible situation of a slave correcting her master. Because men’s primary roles were as family leader and disciplinarian to their wives, marriage became a prison in which women were vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse with no power to save themselves.

Bronte demonstrates that because of the level of authority coverture grants husbands, even men who act as a guardian can degrade and destroy their wives. Mrs. Maxwell specifies the qualities a wife should value in a husband as an assurance that she will find happiness in

marriage. She tells Helen, “Principle is the first thing, after all; and next to that, good sense, respectability, and moderate wealth” (112). These qualities seem to be those she finds in Mr. Boarham. However, Mr. Boarham, the man Mrs. Maxwell would choose for Helen also proves to be a man who will design and shape his ideal wife, employing emotional and physical discipline if necessary. In his proposal to Helen, Mr. Boarham reveals what kind of husband he will be. His attempts to assure her actually highlight the dangers she will face: “I shall not be severe to mark the faults and foibles of a young and ardent nature such as yours, and while I acknowledge them to myself, and even rebuke them with all a father’s care, believe me, no youthful lover could be more tenderly indulgent towards the object of his affections, than I to you” (119). While he embodies the ideals that Helen’s aunt describes, his promise is also insidious because it reveals that Helen will be “disciplined” according to law of coverture, which is largely unregulated. The law does not specify at what point discipline becomes criminal. If Helen marries Mr. Boarham, she could be condemning herself to a lifetime of abuse with a man whose very name seems to reflect his mild temperament. The pronouncement of Boarham is similar to the word “boring,” revealing the possibility of a dull life with him, but the spelling is that of a wild boar, an animal that is notoriously vicious. Mr. Boarham might not be the same kind of husband as Mr. Huntingdon, but Mr. Boarham, too, will discipline Helen until she conforms to his standards, regardless of what this transformation will do to her. While his discipline would be viewed as the cultural ideal, Brontë’s message is that most men, when granted such unregulated authority, have the capacity to become brutes.

Brontë uses Mr. Boarham, who is an upstanding gentleman, to demonstrate that marriage is an institution that will alter and potentially destroy women. When Mr. Boarham continues his proposal, he says,

I saw my sweet girl was not without her faults, but of these, her youth, I trusted was not one, but rather an earnest of virtues yet unblown—a strong ground of presumption that her little defects of temper, and errors of judgment, opinion, or manner were not irremediable, but might easily be removed or mitigated by the patient efforts of a watchful and judicious adviser, and where I failed to enlighten and control, I thought I might safely undertake to pardon, for the sake of her many excellencies. (120)

It is clear that in any relationship with Mr. Boarham, he would demand Helen's submission, and he would shape her into his ideal wife. His specific references to her faults mirror Helen's aunt's advice. He clearly views himself as a wise guardian, his language, and his plan to mitigate and control Helen hardly seems loving. In this view of matrimony, wives thus become their husbands' creations. Just as Victor designs the monstrous Eve specifically for the creature, so Boarham would mold Helen into his ideal partner, experimenting with different types of discipline until he achieves his desired results. This marriage would be as sinister and damaging as Helen's later experiences with Huntingdon.

Mr. Boarham's closing statement reveals the extent of the gender inequities in marriage. He tells Helen, "Therefore, my dearest girl, since *I* am satisfied, why should *you* object" (120). This sentiment reflects the nineteenth-century attitude that wives must submit to and adopt their husband's taste and values.⁴ This sentiment also is repeated through out the novel by both men and by women. After Huntingdon and Helen are married, Huntingdon asks Helen, "[W]hy do you cry? you know that I love you . . . and what more could you desire?" (190). Helen exposes this sentiment as false because women need more in life than the assurance of their husband's affection. It is not only men who expect these expectations; women perpetuate them as well. In dialogue that parallels Mr. Boarham's and Huntingdon's statements to Helen, Mrs. Markham advises Gilbert, "[Y]ou must fall each into your proper

place. You'll do your business, and she, if she's worthy of you, will do hers; but it's your business to please yourself, and hers to please you" (50). The overall message is that women are expendable; they are less-than, and only the husband's interests and comfort matter, a sentiment that the law perpetuates via coverture.

Bronte exposes the misery that submission can create for women and how it can lead to increased vice and violence in the marriage. It is a small but significant distinction because it devalues women and positions them as a slave or child. If a husband's needs counter social rules, a wife is placed in an impossible situation. Wives will be torn between social morals and marital expectations. Helen cannot fulfil the role of submissive wife and the angel-in-the-house reformer because her husband expects her to condone his vices. Her situation ties to Jane Eyre's who will support Rochester, but only in what is moral, a choice she can make while she is a governess but would be stripped from her if she was his wife. Marriage denies wives the ability to adhere to their own sense of morality. Hattersley claims that his idea of a good wife is one "that will let me have my own way in everything" (187) and who will be "some good, quiet soul that will let me just do what I like and go where I like, keep at home or stay away, without a word of reproach or complaint; for I can't do with being bothered" (187). This power dynamic is unlikely to lead to a fulfilling marriage for the wives. When an immoral man desires a submissive, that wife will be torn between her gender expectations of reform and submission, between living up to social morals or submitting to her husband's desires, however repulsive they may be.

Through her use of monstrous men, Bronte seem to suggest that many immoral men specifically desire submissive wives. Huntingdon describes Milicent as the ideal spouse. He tells Helen,

[S]he's quite a pattern to her sex, Helen; [Hattersley] had her with him in

London all the season, and she was no trouble at all. He might amuse himself

just as he pleased, in regular bachelor style, and she never complained to neglect; he might come home at any hour of the night or morning, or not come home at all; be sullen sober, or glorious drunk; and play the fool or the madman to his own heart's desire without and fear or botheration. She never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, so what he will. He says there's not such a jewel in all England, and swears he wouldn't take a kingdom for her. (281)

Huntingdon's description of Hattersley's life, one he clearly wishes to emulate, and his clear desire for Helen to adopt Milicent's behavior reinforces Brontë's warnings about women's powerlessness in marriage. While Huntingdon would enjoy this kind of wedded bliss because he would not have to alter his values or lifestyle, readers learn that Helen and Milicent do not view this description in the same light. Milicent and Hattersley's marriage is an example of how conforming to submission robs wives of their ability to live in a moral household. They become complicit in their husbands' debauchery despite their own beliefs.

While in *Frankenstein*, Elizabeth dies before she has the chance to decide whether to be complicit in Victor's plot, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane leaves before she can be persuaded to be Rochester's mistress, and in *Wuthering Heights*, Isabella becomes coarsened as a survival mechanism. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Brontë reveals the very real possibility that a husband can manipulate his wife into changing the core of her being and her moral compass. Because Helen is religious, his transformation is a frightening proposition because it threatens her eternal life in Heaven. She does not just endure abuse; coverture forces her to become immoral. Drew Lamonica argues that Brontë "clearly hoped that *Wildfell Hall* would benefit the young of both sexes, insisting that characters like Huntingdon and his profligate companions 'do exist'" (135). Indeed, this description of Huntingdon's marriage is

disturbingly realistic. Men like Huntingdon exist, and it is necessary to warn women about the possible ramifications they may face if they marry while coverture is still in place.

This truth telling is an important aspect of the novel. Lamonica writes that for Bronte, “moral education was best served by an absolute commitment to truth, by revelation and acknowledgment of the ‘facts’” (135). The opposing expectations of submission and reform, and women and men’s contrasting ideas about marriage show the need for clarifications to be made. As it stands, Helen and Huntingdon’s marriage illustrate how nineteenth-century ideas about gender contribute to marriage becoming an institution that traps women in impossible moral dilemmas. Helen complains that Huntingdon’s “notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not my notions” (206). Helen and Huntingdon hold opposing views on their roles, but the law does not allow differing values as a reason for divorce or separation. Strikingly, Helen’s language directly contradicts the social ideal that wives adopt their husband’s tastes and values. She asserts that her tastes and values also have merit. Helen’s statement challenges the entire concept that women should submit and relinquish their sense of self in marriage. Bronte presents an environment of mental cruelty as a form of spousal abuse that the law should consider as a cause for divorce.

Helen and Huntingdon’s marriage disputes the theory that matrimonial bonds will automatically generate ideal spouses. When Helen is submissive, she, through her silence, condones Huntingdon’s sins. She becomes more miserable and he more depraved. Helen illustrates the dire consequences when women fully embrace these expectations. In attempts to be the ideal submissive wife, and in an effort to survive, Helen resolves

to love [Huntingdon] when I can; to smile (if possible) when he smiles, be cheerful when he is cheerful, and pleased when he is agreeable; and when he is not, to try and make him so—and if that won’t answer, to bear with him, to excuse him, and forgive him, as well as I can, and restrain my own evil

passions from aggravating his; and yet, while I thus yield and minister to his more harmless propensities to self-indulgence, to do all in my power to save him from the worse. (228)

What she calls her “evil passions” is her morality, her desire to reform him. But she recognizes that when she performs the role of the ideal submissive wife, she actually encourages and supports his vices. Her entire life is a battle between service to herself and to her husband. As a wife, she has so few rights and so little agency; submission is her only resource. This dynamic is an issue Helen describes repeatedly through her marriage. As the submissive wife, Helen assists Huntingdon’s degradation rather than inspiring him to reform. Helen does not attempt to improve Huntingdon because she is afraid of driving him away again. She can tempt him to stay home only if she supports his vices; therefore, it is impossible for her to fulfil both social expectations of submission and reform. The two ideals contradict each other. Helen is miserable when her submission supports Huntingdon’s sins, which is what he desires, and when she attempts to reform him they are both unhappy because he refuses to reform, and he resents her constant criticism. Because an indissoluble marriage is expected to improve both spouses, Helen cannot use this failure to acquire a divorce *a mensa et thoro*. She is trapped for life in this purgatory.

Life with a monstrous husband destroys Helen’s ingrained social values. This revolt is contrary to what the law predicts will happen when women marry. Helen writes, “I must be and I am debased, contaminated by the union, both in my eyes, and in the actual truth” (222). She recognizes that this marriage is tarnishing her morality. She sees herself as degraded and corrupted by the union. Helen details these changes in herself: “Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God’s word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which was given me by nature, or instilled into me by the

precepts and example of my aunt” (222). The use of ‘horror’ and ‘repulsion,’ two qualities that are associated with Gothic fiction. Typically, in Gothic novels, these emotions cause the protagonist great distress. However, Bronte complicates this simple convention. Helen becomes so accustomed to living in an abusive marriage that she becomes conditioned to her situation and acts that should inspire horror and repulsion no longer have the same effect. Such conditioning is the true horror and repulsion.

While marriage laws are an effort to ensure that husbands and wives will commit to the union, Bronte reveals that being forced to live with a villainous husband can have other consequences. Helen writes, “I am so determined to love him—so intensely anxious to excuse his errors, that I am continually dwelling upon them, and labouring to extenuate the loosest of his principles and the worst of his practices, till I am familiarized with vice and almost a partaker in his sins” (222). At this point in the novel, Helen is still attempting to adopt, or at least overlook his tastes and values so that their marriage can survive. In her effort to be the good wife she becomes an accomplice to his sins. The law was written in a way that imagined husbands as living up to their ideal; it is an oversight that the novel points out needs to be rectified. Once they have been married for three years and have had little Arthur, Helen has given up any attempt to reignite her love for Huntingdon; however, she still attempts to follow the courts’ dictate by attempting to live amicably with Huntingdon, even if she cannot love him: “As far as in me lies, I endeavour to live peacefully with him: I treat him with unimpeachable civility, give up my convenience to his, wherever it may reasonably be done, and consult him in a business-like way on household affairs, deferring to his pleasure and judgement, even when I know the latter to be inferior to my own” (272). Helen’s actions are those of the ideal submissive wife, but they lead to further abuse. Helen makes these revelations in her diary. Her private enterprises to maintain the illusion of a happy marriage is not anything she can share, even with Milicent or Esther.

The novel also reveals what can happen when wives attempt to reform their husbands. Bronte suggests, through Helen and Huntingdon, that a marriage in which one party needs to be reformed could be disastrous. Marianne Thormahlen addresses the religious aspects of the novel, but her argument about reform and redemption is also applicable to marital expectations for women. She argues that “*Tenant*, in its entirety repeatedly asserts the need for the sinner to repent, freely and wholeheartedly, and no human persuader can bring him/her to that state” (Thormahlen 157). It is a role that gives women more status within the marriage, but only if the husband wants to be reformed. In the novel, if Huntingdon rejects reform, Helen will be married for life to a degenerate sinner. When Helen tires of supporting Huntingdon’s vices, she resolves to embrace the other female ideal, reforming her husband, by becoming the household’s moral guide.

Helen more readily adopts an attitude of reform than she did of submission. When asked if Huntingdon is “a man of *principle*” (126), Helen tells her aunt, “Perhaps not, exactly; but it is only for want of thought: if he had some one to advise him, and remind him of what is right[...].” (126). Helen clearly idealizes Huntingdon’s motives in courting her, and her role within the marriage. Being the domestic angel-in-the-house is a role that Helen would be drawn to because it gives her an active purpose and value within the marriage in a way that passive submission does not. Helen’s aunt attempts to caution her against putting her hopes on Huntingdon’s willingness to reform. Mrs. Maxwell says, “He would soon learn, you think—and you yourself would willingly undertake to be his teacher? But, my dear, he is, I believe, full ten years older than you—how is it that you are so before-hand in moral acquirements?” (126). Her questions challenge Helen’s romanticized version of marriage and any marriage in which it is necessary for a wife to reform her husband. Women who have been denied access to information and experience cannot be expected to reform men who hold all the power in the marriage. “Wife as reformer” is an especially tenuous role because

husbands can use violence to correct and punish their wives, so attempts at reform could lead to abuse. Helen's aunt points this out, saying, "Do you think you have enough for both; and do you imagine your merry, thoughtless profligate would allow himself to be guided by a young girl like you?" (126). Her questions challenge reform as a viable gender expectation and as a principle that governs spousal interactions.

Brontë uses Helen's idealization of a wife's authority in marriage to expose spousal reform as an expectation that is just as degrading and devaluing as submission. Helen is dedicated to improving Huntingdon, and she repeatedly claims her life will have meaning if it is at his service. She embraces reform as women's purpose in the marriage where wives exist to serve their husbands. Statements like "my sense and my principle are at his service!" reflect this ideal (126). However, she does not consider that Huntingdon might reject this service. Helen's dialogue reveals her continued determination to adhere to social expectations. She says, "I should not wish to guide him; but I think I might have influence sufficient to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction" (126-7). Her purpose concentrates on moral guidance. She does not yet see this expectation as being more dependent on the reformed than on the reformer. Helen only views it as giving her life meaning. Mrs. Maxwell recognizes this drive and replies, "To be sure, my dear; and the worse *he* is, I suppose, the more you long to deliver him from himself" (149). Her only value comes from reforming him, so the further he must develop, the more credit she will get for performing her duty. However Huntingdon's traits should warn readers given that, based on coverture, these men will have legal power over and the right to physically discipline their wives.

The expectation that wives must be an angelic moral guide, like submission, requires that she sacrifice herself to the care of her husband because he is more highly valued than

she. Helen's dialogue with her aunt reveals that she has embraced this role as a servant to her husband:

I have such confidence in him, aunt, notwithstanding all you say, that I would willingly risk my happiness for the chance of securing his. I will leave better men to those who only consider their own advantage. If he has done amiss, I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue.—God grant me success! (128).

Helen claims she is willing to sacrifice her happiness but these claims are spoken in ignorance, whereas her aunt has experienced enough of marriage and life to understand the realities of the institution. Once wed, Helen cannot legally escape, so if the reform is unsuccessful, she will have sacrificed her life for nothing and will be bound to a monstrous husband.

Helen also overestimates a wife's influence and importance in a marriage. Under coverture, wives lose their legal identity and are incorporated into their husband, but Helen still believes she has the authority to reform Huntingdon. When she learns that Huntingdon's friends are a bad influence, Helen says, "Then, I will save him from them" (128). She sees herself as a saviour, as an angel, but it is a role that unwittingly reduces her to living completely for him. Her success is also completely dependent on whether he is as dedicated to reform as she. Helen tells her aunt, "When Mr. Huntington is married, he won't have many opportunities of consorting with his bachelor friends;--and the worse they are, the more I long to deliver him from them" (149). She believes that he will sacrifice them for her; again, Helen assumes that Huntingdon aspires to undergo such a transformation. Helen cannot reform him, but it is an idea that Huntington uses to court her. Huntington tells Helen, "The very idea of having you to care for under my roof, would force me to moderate my

expenses and live like a Christian---not to speak of all the prudence and virtue you would instil into my mind by your wise counsels and sweet, attractive goodness” (147). He calls Helen his “patron saint” (175) and his “household deity” (227). Huntington promises her, “I will do my utmost . . . to remember and perform the injunctions of my angel monitress” (169). However, the expectation of reform only offers women the illusion of value and authority. Helen idealizes such power, saying, “I will shame him into virtue if I can, and I will never let him leave me again” (190). Helen vastly overestimates her influence over Huntingdon; she has no power to stop him from leaving. She does not seem to understand that, under coverture, she is his now his property, and that he lacks the mentality to be shamed into becoming virtuous.

Milicent also reveals the shortcomings of the consent laws and the consequences of women’s financial dependence. Mary Shanley writes, “material necessities of so many women's lives make them ready to accept almost any man who may offer himself” (61). This vulnerable position impacts women’s marital consent. One of the qualifications for a valid marriage is consent, and one “incapacity arises from want of consent of parents or guardians” (Blackstone 436). The law here does not address parents or guardians who manipulate or force a daughter into marriage. However, this is Milicent’s fate. She tells Helen, “Our dear mamma is very anxious to see us all well married, but she means it all for the best. She says when I am safe off her hands it will be such a relief to her and; and she assures me it will be a good thing for the family as well as for me” (188). While she is not literally a slave, she has no other option but to marry and enter an institution that dehumanizes her. She is essentially sold into an institution that guarantees she will never have any freedom or ability to develop her own sense of self. Milicent discusses her situation in detail with Helen. She tells Helen that she was not aware that she had accepted Hattersley’s proposal and that she had no intention of doing so. Once he and her mother begin making arrangements without her, she

admits, “I had not courage to contradict them then, and how can I do it now? I cannot; they would think me mad. Beside, mamma is so delighted with the idea of the match; she thinks she has managed so well for me; and I cannot bear to disappoint her” (188). Milicent’s situation is an example of the marital pressure Shanley discusses. While the consent seems to be a misunderstanding, Milicent’s mother shames her into giving away her life for a miscommunication rather than bear a momentary embarrassment. Relieving herself of the burden of providing for Milicent is more important than Milicent’s life. It is an example when the parents and guardians do not behave in the best interests of the child. Here, the guardian’s consent actually entraps the women. Milicent’s training in suffering in silence and in quiet submission leave her vulnerable to parents and lovers who treat her as a possession. Her fiancé even settles matters with Milicent’s mother, not with her. She is denied a voice in an institution that will imprison her for life.

Suffering in silence is a sinister aspect of submission because it suggests that women deserve any misery they endure. Not until 1857 would abused wives have the legal capacity to divorce. The women in this novel, which is set in the 1820s, still live under the cult of silence, which prohibits Helen from warning other women about the realities of marriage. When Helen attempts to break this code to warn Milicent against marrying Hattersley, Milicent says, “Don’t attempt to dissuade me, for my fate is fixed” (188). Milicent’s proposal is hardly ideal and it exposes the reality of marriage versus its romanticized version. She tells Helen, “If I *am* to be Mr. Hattersley’s wife, I must try to love him; and I do try with all my might; but I have made very little progress yet; and the worst symptom of the case is, that the further he is from me, the better I like him: he frightens me with his abrupt manners and strange hectoring ways, and I dread the thought of marrying him” (188). Milicent does not love him, but she will force herself to. Her language evokes the law that forbids divorce, believing that it will inspire both spouses into committing to the union. Here, Milicent

attempts to fulfil that role, but she also acknowledges that she is, so far, unsuccessful, and they are not yet even married. This forecast for their wedded bliss is not promising. She must marry a man who frightens her.

Milicent, like many of the women in this study, fears marriage, but still weds because it is expected of her. Helen realizes that Milicent has “chosen to consider herself the victim of fate, or of her mother’s worldly wisdom, [and] she might have been thoroughly miserable; and if, for duty’s sake, she had not made every effort to love her husband, she would doubtless have hated him to the end of her days” (192). Helen understands that Milicent must attempt to find happiness with Hattersley because she has no other option; Milicent will have to endure his abuse, and the law will do nothing to reprimand him. Helen wishes she could alert Milicent and thinks, “Alas! Poor Milicent, what encouragement can I give you or what advice—except that it is better to make a bold statement now, though at the expense of disappointing and angering both mother and brother and lover, than to devote your whole life, hereafter, to misery and vain regret?” (189). Helen feels powerless to help Milicent because she that Milicent has adopted of the code of silence, so Helen cannot use her own experience to prevent Millicent from making a similar mistake. However, Bronte can use Helen’s internal discourses to warn nineteenth-century readers about the realities of marriage in a way that real-life friends and family may not. In this way, the novel becomes a public service announcement against imprudent marriage.

Bronte uses Esther Hargrave as another example of how marriage is destructive to women. Because Esther speaks about love with less restraint, she and Helen share a more open discourse, and Helen is able to caution Esther more directly than she does Milicent. Helen tells Esther, “You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life” (317-8). These very words are reminiscent of the

warnings Helen received before she married Huntingdon, but she did not heed them. Her warnings to Esther are more specific, and she is clearly speaking from experience, but the expectation to suffer in silence has forbidden Helen from explicitly detailing her own experiences in marriage. It is this kind of silence that allows the misconceptions to continue. Helen cautions Esther, “though in single life your joys may not be very many, your sorrows at least will not be more than you can bear. Marriage *may* change your circumstances for the better, but in my private opinion, it is far more likely to produce a contrary result” (318). Her advice specifically contradicts the cultural ideals of marriage as women’s ultimate goal, and of marriage as an institution that offers women protection, security, and happiness. Instead, Helen reveals the ugly truth about marriage: it may destroy a woman’s life. And once entered, it is nearly impossible to escape. Esther shows that her views of marriage are naive and that she, too, is uninformed about the terms of marriage and coverture when she says, “I shall expect *my* husband to have no pleasures but what he shares with me; and if his greatest pleasure of all is not the enjoyment of my company—why—it would be the worse for him—that’s all” (319). Helen corrects her: “If such are your expectations of matrimony, Esther, you must indeed, be careful whom you marry—or rather, you must avoid it altogether” (319). Helen’s advice that a woman is better off as a single woman than a married is again radical given the culture of marriage that has been ingrained in the society. All women need to hear such advice before they marry because it is the only way they can have a measure of control over their lives. Because of coverture, entering marriage requires that women sacrifice their legal identity, so women whose parents force them into marriage and who live in a society where they cannot adequately support themselves means that women are, in essence, forced into an institution that debases them.

Helen recognizes that the deteriorative effects of marriage on women is, sadly, not isolated to her experience. She has witnessed them in Milicent, and she fears that marriage

will destroy Esther Hargrave as well. Helen recognizes her younger self in Esther, whose “speculations on the future are full of buoyant hope—so were mine once. I shudder to think of her being awakened like me to a sense of their delusive vanity” (238). Esther’s situation most closely resembles Millicent’s because Esther’s parents also violate consent laws by attempting to force her into marriage. Unfortunately, it is not the institution of marriage that damages Esther; it is the version of marriage that her parents attempt to force on her that is damaging. She refuses to wed a man who does not meet her standards of an ideal husband. Helen witnesses this transformation in Esther; “her blithe spirit is almost broken, and her sweet temper almost spoiled, by the still unrelenting persecutions of her mother, in behalf of her rejected suitor—not violent, but wearisome and unrelenting like a continual dropping. The unnatural parent seems determined to make her daughter’s life a burden if she will not yield to her desires” (370). Because of social codes, upper and middle class women cannot financially support themselves; they must marry, and until they do, they are a burden on their parents. Yet women become property when they marry, so they are always dependent, and Esther’s parents repeatedly remind her of this.

Esther’s situation reveals what some young women might encounter, a situation that violates consent laws. Rather than helping Esther choose a husband who will value her, they seem more concerned with easing their financial burden of feeding and housing her. Because she is under the age of twenty-one, the age when she no longer needs a guardian’s approval to wed, their attempts to pressure and even threaten her into matrimony subvert the law’s purpose in protecting young women from marrying against their family’s wishes. Brontë has created in Esther a character who has evolved, but the culture and the law have not, so she is trapped until England becomes a country where women are not forced to be dependents.

III

The details that Bronte provides about Helen and Huntingdon's abusive relationship expose the atrocities that can occur within marriage. While newspapers documented spousal assaults in the lower classes, "many of Bronte's Victorian readers would have liked to believe that the types of abuses she documents did not occur in 'proper' English families" (Talley 137). Bronte demonstrates that they do. The relationship between the readers and the text is important because "The narrative frame of *Wildfell Hall* implicitly calls all readers as witnesses" (Morse 105). Morse writes that witnessing "good and evil played out in the domestic sphere" is an important function of the novel (103). One function of this witnessing could be to begin a conversation about what constitutes cruelty and what actions would allow a divorce *a mensa et thoro*. The details are particularly important because they bypass the legal constraints that an actual abused woman would be bound by. A wife "may present a petition against the husband for dissolution of the marriage on the ground of incestuous adultery, or bigamy with adultery, or adultery with cruelty or desertion, or of rape or certain infamous crimes" (Campbell 68). The law does not, however, specify what constitutes cruelty, a term that, left undefined, allows husbands to commit horrific crimes against their wives. Morse argues that *Wildfell Hall* "provides the evidence that a married woman could not give in a court of law, since she would be femme covert or 'covered by' the body of her husband, subsumed in his identity" (Morse 104). Bronte uses Helen and Milicent's marriages to reveal the devastating consequences of spousal abuse, and to expand what the law considers grounds for divorce. While coverture allows husbands to discipline their wives, readers witness the effects of this spousal discipline on Helen and Milicent. The abuse does not serve to correct their behaviour; it only further damages them. Bronte also details

different kinds of abuse, suggesting that physical, verbal, and emotional abuse and neglect are valid reasons for legal separation or divorce.

It is important to note that, even during Helen and Huntingdon's courtship, Huntingdon demonstrates his tendency to be physically and emotionally abusive. When trying to convince Helen to confess her love, "he seized [her] hand and held it, much against [her] will" (133). This is a relatively minor infraction, but it reveals Huntingdon's lack of respect for Helen; his own desires take precedent. His action is also a form of control because she cannot escape his grip. Readers witness this again during Huntingdon's proposal. Helen remembers that he "nearly squeez[ed] me to death in his arms" before getting consent from her guardians (143). Huntingdon also physically imprisons Helen to the point that she tries to get away, "not knowing whether to laugh or to cry, or to break out into a tempest of fury" (133). Her reaction angers Huntingdon, who says, "Go then, you vixen! . . . but the instant he released my hand he had the audacity to put his arm around my neck and kiss me" (133). Not only is his behaviour not in keeping with the romantic courtship Helen imagined, the exchange is nearly a sexual assault and hints at his view of her as a sexual object to be used, even by his friends.

The novel also criticizes gender-biased laws that fail to account for situations like those that Helen endures. Much of Huntingdon's abuse can be categorized as emotional abuse. But again, "Mental cruelty . . . was not recognized as grounds for abuse" (qtd. in Ward, *Law* 34). According to the law,

What merely wounds the mental feelings is in few cases to be admitted where they are not accompanied with bodily injury, either actual or menaced. Mere austerity of temper, petulance of manners, rudeness of language, a want of civil attention and accommodation, even occasional sallies of passion, if they do not threaten bodily harm, do not amount to legal cruelty: they are high

moral offences in the marriage state undoubtedly, not innocent surely in any state of life, but still they are not that cruelty against which the law can relieve.

(qtd. in Ward, *Law* 34)

Bronte however, uses Helen and Huntingdon's marriage to demonstrate the devastating effects of mental cruelty. Huntingdon displays a bad temper, rudeness, foul language, and incivility, which add up to creating a horrifying environment for Helen. Throughout their marriage, Huntingdon verbally abuses Helen. He calls Helen a "witch" (155), a "tigress" (177), a "she tiger" (217), a "confounded slut" (180), a "little exorbitant tyrant" (198), a "pretty tyrant" (218), and "heartless" (249). He tells Helen that she has a "marble heart" and a "brutal insensibility" (273); yet the law does not recognize his treatment as a violation of any code of conduct.

According to English law, "It may be doubted whether ill temper alone is a ground for a divorce *a mensa et thoro*: the policy of the law is to consider marriage indissoluble, and the court is slow to interfere, except where something appears which renders cohabitation unsafe or is likely to be attended with injury to the person or to the health of the party applying" (Blackstone 442). Helen's experience in marriage illustrates the need to add mental cruelty to this list of offences. She recounts that Huntingdon's "favourite amusement is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa and tell me stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl or the cozening of some unsuspecting husband; and when I express my horror and indignation, he lays it all to the charge of jealousy, and laughs till the tears run down his cheeks" (176). Some of his emotional and verbal abuse is so cruel that Helen cannot even reveal it to readers. This unspoken abuse recalls the unspoken abuse that Isabella endures at Heathcliff's hands. The most significant difference between Isabella's experience and Helen's is that Heathcliff's unspeakable abuses are physical. But clearly, mental cruelty can also create a monstrous marriage.

Just as Isabella refrains from many of the details of Heathcliff's abuse, when Helen has angered Huntingdon, she refrains from exposing readers to the specifics: Huntingdon, "addressing me in a low voice, scarcely above his breath, poured forth a volley of the vilest and grossest abuse it was possible for the imagination to conceive or the tongue to utter" (304). This description of Hunting's treatment of Helen ignites the darkest regions of the readers' imagination. Bronte seems to argue that it should be illegal to force a woman to live with a man capable of this kind of cruelty. Ward argues that this kind of abuse "is all the more terrifying for its spasmodic and unpredictable nature, and which moreover, leaves its victim in a state of perpetual anticipatory fear" (Ward, *Law* 32).

Although the courts dictated that spouses learn to live together comfortably, Helen and Huntingdon's marriage demonstrates that this expectation is irrational. When Lady Lowborough, with whom Huntingdon is having an affair, asks whether he loves Helen, Huntingdon replies, "Not *one bit*, by all that's sacred!" (258). Huntingdon's declaration confirms that love cannot exist where cruelty exists, and his claim serves as an example of a scenario in which the courts should release wives from abusive marriages. Huntingdon also offers Helen to his friends as a prostitute, giving them permission to rape her. He tells them, "My wife! what wife? I have no wife. . . or if I have, look you gentlemen, I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome—you may, by Jove and my blessing into the bargain!" (301). Because Helen does not fulfil his notion of the ideal wife, Huntingdon does not consider himself to be bound by marriage. He denies that he has a wife, disowning her, but in the same breath, displaying the authority that coverture grants him husbands over their wives by objectifying her. Even when he is on his deathbed, and Helen comes to nurse him, he is still abusive, crying, "My wife! . . . For Heaven's sake, don't mention her!—I have none.—Devil take her" (360). He, too, feels as if the marriage does not exist. All of these scenes serve to dismantle the ideal that an

indissoluble marriage will improve the lives of both spouses. Instead, they serve as examples of what can happen when divorce *a mensa et thoro* is nearly impossible to obtain.

Based on the nineteenth-century domestic ideal of marriage and women's role as the angel of the house, the institution should be a haven for women who can flourish within it. However, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, marriage becomes not only a prison, but a hell that destroys women. Elisabeth Gruner argues that "Bronte focuses less on the legal oppression suffered by Helen than on the difficulty of establishing and maintaining her multiple identities—wife, mother, friend, sister—under Arthur's tyrannous rule" (310). However, once ruled by coverture, a woman's identity is restricted to her duties as a wife.

Through Helen, Bronte documents the evolution from the promise of an ideal marriage to the realization of the stark truth about marriage with an abusive husband. Helen writes, "I cannot shut my eyes to Arthur's faults; and the more I love him the more they trouble me. His very heart, that I trusted so, is, I fear, less warm and generous than I thought it" (157). Helen's excuses for his behaviour are no longer valid, and she begins to see the realities about the man to whom she is bound for life. This revelation occurs quite quickly. Helen writes, "I have had eight weeks' experience of matrimony. And do I regret the step I have taken?—No—though I must confess, in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning, as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him, and if I had loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him" (171). The timeline here is significant. In two months, she now sees that her marriage was imprudent. While Helen has not shared the same violent experience as Isabella Heathcliff, these women quickly realize that they are tied to their husbands for life. Helen will not allow herself to admit that she would make a different choice now that she is more knowledgeable, if she had studied and then loved, as her aunt recommended.

Only after they are married does Helen come to the conclusion that she should not have wed. When Huntingdon brags to Helen about his past sexual conquests, she thinks, “Helen, what have you done?” (176). When asked if she is happy, she says, “Could I be so, with such a husband?” (290). She tells Huntingdon, “If you had told me these things before, Arthur, I never should have given you the chance” (177), and thinks, “for the first time in my life, and I hope the last, I wished I had not married him” (177). Her comments are radical and scandalous, and they shatter the romantic illusion that marriage is a haven for women and that it should be women’s ultimate aim. Helen breaks the code of submission; she articulates her feelings, and, most importantly, she admits them to herself. Her detailed understanding of her situation is one of the most powerful examples to warn readers against the dangers of marriage.

Beyond coverture, Helen’s experiences expose matrimony as a potentially damaging rather than fulfilling institution. Helen writes: “Last Christmas I was a bride, with a heart overflowing with present bliss, and full of ardent hopes for the future—though not unmingled with foreboding fears. Now I am a wife; my bliss is sobered, but not destroyed; my hopes diminished, but not departed; my fears increased but not yet thoroughly confirmed” (202). In less than a year, she reveals that she is no longer happy but that all her happiness has not yet been destroyed. Disturbingly, her description of her life shows that her marriage is slowly destroying her. Helen recognizes that marriage has damaged her, and, she is “no longer the happy, lively girl [she] used to be” (238). She, like Milicent, and like Isabella Heathcliff, has deteriorated during the course of marriage, and it is a deterioration that the law fails to acknowledge.

Bronte uses Helen to demonstrate what can happen to wives who attempt to conform to the courts’ expectations that spouses who stay married will find happiness. The ideal is

not always the reality. While Helen continues her attempts to fulfil nineteenth-century marital expectations, it is clear that the consequences are too dire. She writes,

I love him still; and he loves me, in his own way—but oh, how different from the love I could have given, and once had hoped to receive! how little real sympathy there exists between us; how many of my thoughts and feelings are gloomily cloistered within my own mind; how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried—doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to quite degenerate and fall away for lack of nutriment in this unwholesome soil! (206).

Her uninformed view of marriage, one that she was socially conditioned to accept, proves to be far different from the realities, yet she is still imprisoned with it. Because she is bound by coverture and expected to be submissive, she must also repress her feelings. Her earlier ideas of sharing in emotional and intellectual development with Huntingdon are sadly dispelled. She finds herself withering in marriage rather than blossoming in it. Even though they are rarely together, as he travels for months at a time, the consequences are dire. After only three years of marriage, they live “with the mutual understanding that there is no love, friendship, or sympathy between them” (272). Only nine weeks after having baby Arthur, Helen is expected to spend the rest of her life, not only without the romantic love for which she naively hoped, but without any respect, kindness, or even basic civility.

Marriage has damaged Helen, who cannot peacefully coexist with Huntingdon. In a statement that challenges the legitimacy of coverture and divorce laws, Helen warns him “take care you don’t rouse my hate instead. And when you have once extinguished my love, you will find it no easy matter to kindle it again” (198). The courts maintained that marriage’s indissolvability would encourage a harmonious union, but Helen reveals that marriage can also become completely unharmonious. Helen references this aspect of the law

again when she asks Huntingdon, “Will you go on till I hate you, and then accuse me of breaking my vows?” (199). She is in an impossible situation from which she cannot escape, and it is English law that participates in this abuse because it imprisons her with her tormentor. He accuses Helen of breaking her marriage vows: “You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and accuse me and call me worse than a highwayman” (199). Even more disturbingly, according to the law and to social expectations of marriage, Helen is the guilty party.

Because Helen is Huntingdon’s property, she is expected to fully commit to her new role and fulfil his expectations. He has the legal right to discipline her for any disobedience. Helen documents the impact of living in an abusive marriage:

When [his friends] *are* gone how shall I get through the months or years of my future life, in company of that man—my greatest enemy—for none could injure me as he has done? Oh! when I think how fondly, how foolishly I have loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I have laboured, and studied, and prayed, and struggled for his advantage; and how cruelly he has trampled on my love, betrayed my trust, scorned my prayers and tears, and efforts for his preservation—crushed my hopes, destroyed my youth’s best feelings, and doomed me to a life of hopeless misery—as far as man can so it—it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband—I HATE him! The word stares me in the face like a guilty confession, but it is true: I hate him---I hate him! (263).

Legally bound to a villainous husband, her confession is scandalous because it contradicts women’s expectation to suffer in silence, and it dispels the myth that marriage will inspire spouses to love each other. Her words express the reality of matrimony for women whose situations are not accounted for by the cruelty clause in marriage laws. Her language in this

scene parallels that of Isabella Heathcliff, the only other wife in this study who comes to hate her husband. Forcing a wife to be under the legal control of a man she hates is a most cruel punishment, and that it is legally sanctioned, makes it all the more sinister.

Helen's escape from the marriage is triggered by child abuse in which even the Infant's Custody Act would have been ineffective. Helen's home becomes a battlefield in which Huntingdon becomes a "villain" (295), and she feels as if she is "a slave, a prisoner" (312). Helen finally considers leaving Huntingdon once Huntingdon becomes "his child's worst enemy" (298). Huntingdon succeeds in teaching little Arthur to hate his mother, so that Arthur begins asking Helen, "Mamma, why are you wicked?" (307). When Huntingdon's behaviour begins to affect her son, Helen is no longer willing to abide by the law and reside with her husband: "But this should not continue; my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father" (298). Helen's comment is one that speaks to the situation of abused women who might break the law and escape with their children.

Through Helen's language, Bronte directly challenges the court doctrines that systematically deny mothers legal rights to their children and that uniformly support fathers. In a statement that reflects the insidiousness of women's submission, Helen writes, "I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer: the world's opinion and the feelings of my friends must be alike unheeded here, at least, alike unable to deter me from my duty" (298). Helen is willing to allow herself to be abused if Huntingdon is a good father, but she is not willing to allow Huntingdon to corrupt his son. The corruption of a child is a new form of abuse that the courts had considered but which offered women few opportunities to protect their children. In 1839, The Custody of Infants Act "allow[ed] mother to petition Chancery for custody of children under seven" (Ward, *Law* 19). This act also allowed mothers to petition for visitation rights, but they were still systemically denied custody once

the child was older than seven (19). The Custody of Infants Act would not have offered Helen much relief. Because Huntingdon confiscated all her money, she could not have had the financial resources to take him to court. But even if she borrowed the money and won, the law would have permitted Helen to have custody of Arthur until he was seven at which point he would have been returned to Huntingdon, and she could petition to have periodic visits with Arthur. These visits would become increasingly torturous because she would be witness to Huntingdon's corrupting influence on Arthur. Ultimately, the Infants Custody Act would not have helped Helen save her child from Huntingdon.

Bronte includes multiple married couples and various kinds of spousal abuse to address the variety of scenarios that the law ignored. Milicent's consent situation is different from Helen's. Milicent is pressured consent to a marriage that becomes abusive, and this abuse is directly connected to both Milicent's submission and her suffering in silence. Milicent's abuse is far more physical than Helen's. At the Huntingdons' when Hattersley grabs her and injures her, she tells him, "Do let me alone Ralph! remember we are not at home" (236). Her words suggest that abuse is acceptable, if done privately. Her warning serves to keep the abuse secret, thus more likely to continue. In this same scene, Hattersley reveals the extent of his abuse: "No matter: you *shall* answer my question! exclaimed her tormentor; and he attempted to extort the confession by shaking her and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the gripe of his powerful fingers" (236). This image is one that aligns the readers' sympathy with Milicent. When Hattersley gives Milicent "another shake and a squeeze that made her draw in her breath and bite her lip to suppress a cry of pain" (236), the cruelty of allowing such behaviour to continue in a marriage, evokes the reader's sympathy. This scene is especially disturbing because this level of abuse occurs in the presence of others; therefore, it is easy to imagine that Milicent endures even harsher abuse in private. Only when Helen intervenes does Hattersley stop. Helen tells Hattersley, "She was

crying from pure shame and humiliation for you; because she could not bear to see you conduct yourself so disgracefully” (236).

Helen’s declaration not only offers the point of view of an abused wife, but it also calls into question the law that views a husband’s disciplining his wife as a social necessity. Her comment is enough to stop him, but he first tells Milicent, “Curse you for an impertinent huzzy then! . . . throwing her from him with such violence that she fell on her side” (236). The law would not interfere in such a scenario. Coverture granted a husband the authority to discipline his wife, and that right created the potential for abuse. Milicent’s brother tries to intervene; “He made an effort to unclasp the ruffian’s fingers for her arm, but was suddenly driven backward and nearly laid upon the floor by a violent blow on the chest accompanied with the admonition, [with Hattersley telling him] ‘Take that for your insolence!—and learn not to interfere between me and mine again’” (236). Hattersley’s warning represents the law’s stance. Milicent’s brother has no legal standing, and her husband is within the law, a legal right which Hattersley evokes, saying, “You wanted to interfere between me and my wife” grumbled Hattersley, ‘and that is enough to provoke any man’” (248). Women’s lack of legal identity and their position as their husband’s property is clearly detrimental.

Hattersley once desired a submissive wife but shifts his view of marriage and of what constitutes an ideal spouse once he is actually married, demonstrating the need to rethink women’s roles in marriage. He initially desires a wife who fulfils traditional expectations of submission and suffering in silence, but is frustrated when Milicent exhibits those very traits. Hattersley says that Milicent is “An excellent little woman . . . but a thought too soft—she almost melts in one’s hands. I positively think I ill-use her sometimes, when I’ve taken too much—but I can’t help it, for she never complains, either at the time or after. I suppose she doesn’t mind it” (245). Again, Hattersley accuses Milicent of provoking his violence. He seems to desire that she confront him and that she would not submit so willingly. Because

she suffers in silence, she conceals her pain from him; therefore, he does not seem to think that he is damaging her with this treatment. His comments also suggest marital rape, which was a legal impossibility at the time because in the nineteenth-century, husbands had the legal right to their wife's body. Rape is the ultimate act of violence against women, and marital rape would be especially horrific because the women continued to live with her attacker. Hattersley's comments expose an ignorance about the gender expectations that contribute to this cycle of abuse. He also faults the cultural values that created these ideals in men and in women, saying, "How can I help playing the deuce when I see it's all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or like a scoundrel such as nature made me?—and how can I help teasing her when she's so inviting meek and mim—when she lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that's enough?" (245-6). Just as Huntingdon blames Helen's attempts at reform for instigating his monstrous behaviour, Hattersley blames Milicent's submission for instigating his violence. Brontë uses these opposing claims of women's expectations that incite a husband's immoral behaviour as a way to condemn both codes of conduct. Neither can guarantee happiness in a marriage, and both can actually be a source of unhappiness.

Hattersley also challenges coverture by questioning the expectation that husbands must protect and cover their wives. He complains, "I *don't* oppress her; but it's so confounded flat to be always cherishing and protecting; --and then how can I tell that I am oppressing her when she 'melts away and makes no sign?' I sometimes think she has no feeling at all; and then I go on till she cries—and that satisfies me" (246). He finds her submission a quality that renders her subhuman because it represses true human feelings. While Hattersley's complaints do not excuse his treatment of Milicent, they spotlight an issue with women's submission and silent suffering. Hattersley says, "I don't like that way of moping and fretting in silence, and saying nothing—it's not honest. How can she expect me

to mend my ways at that rate?" (246). He views women's suffering in silence as manipulative.

Because Milicent has no one to whom she can apply for help, Helen assists her. When Helen tries again to intervene for Milicent, she tells Hattersley, "Should you wish your wife to be ready to sink into the earth when she hears you mentioned; and to loathe the very sound of your voice, and shudder at your approach" (320). Although he has expressed weariness for always being required to protect and cover Milicent, Helen appeals to his emotions by suggesting that he could not possibly wish that his presence would terrify her and incite her hate. It is the first time he is made aware of the effect his treatment has on his wife. Because of Milicent's silent submission, Hattersley believes "she likes [him] all the same, whatever [he does]" (320). Milicent's suffering in silence has created an environment where Hattersley has no check on his violence.

Hattersley seems to genuinely believe that Milicent's has no hostile feelings toward him. But Helen explains Milicent's behaviour as the cause of this misunderstanding, telling him, "Impossible, Mr. Hattersley! you mistake her quiet submission for affection" (320). She tells Hattersley, "if you behave better, she will love you more, and if you behave worse, she will love you less and less til all is lost in fear, aversion, and bitterness of soul, if not in secret hatred and contempt" (321). Helen offers Hattersley practical advice that he can easily apply and that he does not have to translate from Milicent's quiet self-sacrifice. This seems to be the very kind of advice that he needs. Helen asks him if he wants "to be the tyrant of [Milicent's] life—to take away all the sunshine from her existence, and make her thoroughly miserable?" (321). Helen continues, "Think of what she was five years ago, when you married her, and what she is now" (321). Helen's questions challenge the cultural standard and force Hattersley to acknowledge the damaging effect he has had on Milicent. He replies, "I know—she was a little plum lassie then, with a pretty pink and white face: now, she's a

poor little bit of a creature, fading and melting away like a snow-wreath—but hang it!—by Jupiter, that’s not my fault!” (321). While he has witnessed Milicent’s transformation, he is not willing to take the blame for being the source of it. But his description of her is one of a woman who is slowly dying. A snow wreath will eventually disappear into water that will evaporate as if it never existed. It is an image of women disappearing in marriage that has been repeated throughout this study.

One quality that differentiates *Tenant* from the other novels in this study is the number of married couples who illustrate similar legal issues but experience different outcomes. By portraying such variety, Bronte prevents the novel from being perceived as a manifesto against all marriage. Disturbingly, through Milicent and Hattersley, Bronte reveals that when wives commit to reform, it can save marriage. Readers witness how reform can work once Hattersley knows, through Helen’s intervention, that Milicent wants to change him. He still blames Milicent when he finally learns that she is unhappy in the marriage, telling her, “You never tried me, Milly” (323). His comment suggests that he would have responded to any efforts Milicent would have made to reform his behaviour. The fault still lies with women, but the idea of reform is reinforced, if wives make the appropriate effort. Again, it is important to note that in this instance, the husband has to want to change. If that desire is not present, Milicent’s and Hattersely’s marriage could become a Milicent’s death sentence.

IV

Bronte uses two couples to expose the inadequacies of the legal limitations attached to separations or divorces. Lord and Lady Lowborough represent a case in which the husband uses an unconventional separation without legal assistance. Helen and Huntingdon’s

marriage reveals the ways that these laws are dangerous for women. Like the presence of a successfully “reformed” marriage in the novel, the Lady Lowborough character shows that Bronte was aware that not all wives were innocent victims. Some lived up to the fears that the courts had about women’s sexuality. Ward argues, “It was for this reason, troubled by the thought that reform might encourage sexual impropriety on the part of women, that Parliament enacted a notorious legislative double standard, allowing husbands to petition for divorce on the grounds of adultery alone” (*Law* 31). These two characters function as counter examples. Not all men will turn monstrous under the power the law grants them as husbands, and not all wives are submissive angels in the house. It is important to remember that “Lord Lowborough reforms because he is determined not to sink under vice and disgrace,” while Huntingdon is determined to do so despite Helen’s efforts (Thormahlen 157). These characters keep the novel from becoming a manifesto or diatribe. Bronte acknowledges that for some couples, coverture and the inability to divorce will not affect them as negatively, but for others, these laws contribute to their misery.

Through Lord and Lady Lowborough, Bronte exposes the double standard of the separation laws. Lady Lowborough has been verbally abusive to her husband and has committed adultery. According to the law, “the case of adultery of the wife was an action for criminal conversation against the seducer if he could be discovered. Now, under the above-mentioned Acts, a husband may present a petition to the Court saying that his marriage may be dissolved on the ground of the adultery of the wife” (Campbell 68). Based on this law, Lord Lowborough could legally separate from or even divorce Lady Lowborough for her actions. Helen advises Lord Lowborough that his wife “is a wicked woman . . . She has basely deceived and betrayed you. She is as little worthy of your regret as she was of your affection. Let her injure you no farther: abstract yourself from her, and stand alone” (289). Even though Huntingdon has been as cruel to Helen, Helen advises Lord Lowborough to

leave Lady Lowbrough, in effect revealing the actions she would take if she were a man, and actions she eventually takes despite the law. Helen even specifies the gender bias by pointing out, “You are a man, and free to act as you please” (290). Her words point out the gender discrepancies; she has endured much more hardship than Lord Lowborough, but she cannot legally divorce Huntingdon. In the case of Lord and Lady Lowborough, “they keep entirely separate establishments; [] she leads a gay, dashing life in town and country, while he lives in strict seclusion at his old castle in the north” (295). He is alone and must finance her immoral lifestyle.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is the only novel in this study in which separation is openly discussed as a viable option in an unhappy marriage. And scenes where men, not women, identify these issues offer powerful support to women’s cause. Hargrave tells Helen:

You tell me you owe no allegiance to your husband; he openly declares himself weary of you, and calmly gives you up to any body that will take you; you are about to leave him; no one will believe that you go alone—all the world will say, ‘She has left him at last, and who can wonder at it? Few can blame her, fewer still can pity him; but who is the companion of her flight?’ Thus you will have no credit for your virtue (if you call it such): even your best friends will not believe in it; because, it is monstrous, and not to be credited—but by those who suffer from the effects of it, such cruel torments that they know it to be indeed reality. (302)

His language is noteworthy. The law and the culture that would bind a wife to a cruel and abusive husband are unreasonable, as are the expectations of submission and suffering in silence. Hattersley imagines that the rest of society will support Helen, and it is a prediction that will eventually be proven true. While his motives are selfish because he is trying to convince Helen to enter an illicit romance with him, one that would give Huntingdon legal

authority to divorce her, Hargrave's comments about Huntingdon are correct. Hargrave tells Helen, "By *all means*, leave him!" (302). Gilbert, too, is guilty of the same self-serving conduct, telling her, "But Helen . . . that man is *not* your husband: in the sight of Heaven he has forfeited all claim to—" (340). That men also believe that Helen deserves better treatment and should be allowed to leave their abusive husband gives Brontë's argument even more credibility. Even though these men are acting in their own self-interests, their words still carry more weight than a wife's testimony in a court of law.

To bypass the act of parliaments that a divorce *a mensa et thoro* would require, Helen attempts a private separation like the Lowboroughs. According to English law, private separations could be arranged. Blackstone writes, "The husband and wife may live separate by agreement between themselves and a trustee; and such agreement is valid and binding, and may be sued upon, if it be not prospective in its nature as for a future separation, to be adopted at the sole pleasure of the wife, the parties being, at the time of making the agreement, living together in a state of amity" (Blackstone 440n). Helen repeatedly asks Huntingdon for a separation once it is clear that they cannot be peacefully cohabitate. When Huntingdon leaves Helen alone for months at a time and continues to commit adultery she asks, "Will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune and go? . . . where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and I shall be delivered from your presence—and you from mine" (260). But she is repeatedly denied. He answers, "No—by *Jove* I won't" (260). Helen does not ask for a legal separation which would require an act of parliament and a public hearing; she merely requests a consensual private agreement to live separately, a situation, she argues, that will benefit them both.

Even when Helen renegotiates in a way that financially benefits Huntingdon, asking, "Will you let me have the child then, without the money?" she is denied (260), he says, "No—nor yourself without the child. Do you think I'm going to be made the talk of the

country, for your fastidious caprices?” (260). Despite his apathy about his extramarital affairs, he draws a line at being labelled a husband whose wife cannot live with him. Every time she asks, he rejects her request. She writes in her diary, “Again I proposed a separation, but it would not do: he was not going to be the talk of all the old gossips in the neighbourhood: he would not have it said that he was such a brute his wife could not live with him;—no; he must contrive to bear with me” (272-3). It is social acceptance that motivates Huntingdon to deny her. She must be imprisoned for the rest of her life, so her husband will not be socially humiliated, despite his ambivalence at his causing her humiliation for years. While he does not mind his reputation as a cad, a separation from Helen carries too much social stigma, yet Helen still appeals to him; “You have it in your power to raise two human beings from a state of actual suffering to such unspeakable beatitude as only generous, noble self-forgetting love can give . . . but you will not do it! you choose rather to leave us miserable; and you coolly tell me it is the will of God that we should remain so. *You* may call this religion, but *I* call it wild fanaticism!” (284). Not only does Helen question the law about separation, she also questions religious ideals that forbid divorce under any circumstances. Her statement reveals the level of her desperation, and she questions the religious backing upon which the law depends.

Helen also resorts to threats, exposes the depth of her misery, especially since she values her morals and reputation so highly that she would risk it all to escape Huntingdon. She tells him, “Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised.—But henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name” (260). Her statement directly contradicts the courts’ belief that being required to stay married will increase the happiness and compatibility of both spouses. The life she will now lead, does not reflect the domestic bliss of social expectations. The one aspect over her life in which Huntingdon allows her some agency is defining their roles within the marriage. Helen asserts this authority when she tells him, “I

am your child's mother, and *your* housekeeper—nothing more" (261). In a statement that questions the validity of coverture reducing women to the property of her husbands, she tells Huntingdon, "I must contrive to bear with *you* you mean . . . for so long as I discharge my functions of steward and housekeeper, so conscientiously and well, without pay and without thanks, you cannot afford to part with me. I shall therefore remit these duties when my bondage becomes intolerable" (273). This threat is particularly important because she calls her marriage and her coverture a bondage, likening it to torture and imprisonment. And unlike the court's position that if divorce were more accessible spouses might separate or divorce at the first sign of discomfort, Helen believes that she must stay until marriage becomes intolerable, not just uncomfortable.

Bronte illustrates the depth of the legal power husbands had over their wives when Huntingdon attempts to prevent Helen from leaving him. Before they wed, Helen naively remarks that all her belongings will be his and his belongings hers. However, Huntingdon asserts his authority over Helen's most basic possessions. When he suspects that Helen is plotting to leave him, he evokes coverture and demands the "keys of [her] cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else [she] possess[es]" (309). Once he goes through her possessions, he tells her, "'Now then,' sneered he, 'we must have a confiscation of property'" (310). His legal terminology serves as a cruel reminder of Helen's lack of legal status. Not only does she have no property, she is property. Huntingdon establishes his authority when he orders all her painting materials be destroyed, and he takes all her possessions (311). Once he suspects that Helen might leave him, he evokes the authority of coverture by controlling the minutia of her life, and his statements highlight Helen's lack free agency. He is disengaged from the marriage and allows Helen to run the house more to remove the burden from himself than to practice gender equality. When it appears that Helen may actually flee, however, he limits her power, infantilizes her, and reminds her that as a wife in nineteenth-century

English, she has few legal rights. He uses coverture to confine her, and his actions are entirely within the law. When Huntingdon takes these steps to prevent Helen from leaving him, he tells her, “you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself by the labour of your hands, forsooth? And you thought to rob me of my son too, and bring him up to be a dirty Yankee tradesman, or a low, beggarly painter?” (311). His focus is on how her actions will impact his reputation and the negative consequences of raising their son without him. He does not seem to consider the destructive impact his actions have on his reputation and his son.

V

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is the only novel in this study that details, in depth, a married woman’s escape, the lengthy suffering that led her to such a choice, as well as her life after the escape. It is important to see Helen’s escape in comparison to the flights of Jane Eyre and Isabella Heathcliff. The most profound difference is Helen’s ability to plan in advance and the fact that she escapes with her child. While Isabella escapes in the turmoil of an abusive episode, and Jane, who is unmarried, makes a quick escape but is still able to pack her belongings, though she quickly loses them, Helen plots her escape for months. Like Isabella and Jane, Helen must also enlist the help of others. Isabella relies on Nelly and the servants at Thrushcross Grange to pack her luggage and transport her to her new home, and she relies on Edgar to financially support her once she flees. Isabella also receives assistance in her initial escape and later in her fugitive life. Jane, however, has no assistance in her initial escape, but she is only able to live on her own with the help of St. John and his sisters. Helen is the most dependent upon others and can only leave with their assistance. She writes, “I have devised another scheme that might be resorted to in such a case, and if I could but

obtain my brother's consent and assistance, I should not doubt of its success" (314). Helen is also the only woman in this study who must get consent to leave from her brother, a reminder of women's position in the social hierarchy.

Once Helen's first scheme to flee is thwarted by Huntingdon, she must rely on her brother, Frederick Lawrence. Her plan is to live at her childhood home, the abandoned and deteriorated Wildfell Hall, but she cannot reside there without Frederick's permission. She details her strategy: "Now if I could persuade him to have one or two rooms made habitable and to let them to me as a stranger, I might live there, with my child, under an assumed name, and still support myself by my favourite art. He should lend me the money to begin with, and I would pay him back, and live in lowly independence and strict seclusion" (314). Her plan hinges on receiving permission from her brother, and it is a plan that will only succeed if she has help, not just from Frederick, but also from servants who will aid in her escape, putting themselves at risk. It is also an arrangement that only an upper-class woman could attempt. Helen details her plan: "I have arranged the whole plan in my head; and all I want, is to persuade Frederick to be of the same mind as myself. He is coming to see me soon, and then I will make the proposal to him, having first enlightened him upon my circumstances sufficiently to excuse the project" (314). Although her future depends upon Frederick's approval, she still adheres to the code of silence, which hinders her escape because Frederick cannot know the extent of her suffering unless she informs him. Suffering in silence protects the abuser, not the victim. But Helen knows that she will have to confess her miserable circumstances because she must give her brother a "good" reason for leaving.

Even when Helen breaks women's social code of silence, she does not fully disclose the degree of her abuse to Frederick. Because she has withheld the full extent of her suffering,

Frederick was exceedingly indignant against Mr. Huntingdon, and very much grieved for me; but still, he looked upon my project as wild and impracticable; he deemed my fears for Arthur disproportioned to the circumstances, and opposed so many objections to my plan, and devised so many milder methods for ameliorating my condition, that I was obliged to enter into further details to convince him that my husband was utterly incorrigible, and that nothing could persuade him to give up his son whatever becomes of me. (316)

These disclosures notwithstanding, Helen's plan is nearly unsuccessful. Because she has not disclosed the full extent of her abuse, Frederick assumes she is exaggerating and is not willing to assist her. His resistance seems to be guided by nineteenth-century laws, which do not specify what constitutes cruelty. Helen is in a situation where she must depend on a man outside the marriage to save her. However, Frederick also demonstrates a shift away from this confining law because "he at length consented to have one wing of the old Hall put into a habitable condition, as a place of refuge against a time of need; but hoped I would not take advantage of it, unless circumstances should render it really necessary" (316). While his support is necessary, and he finally agrees, it is clear that only the most extreme, brutal circumstances can excuse a wife abandoning her marriage. He will not renovate the home, or even one wing of the home for her; Helen will be moving into a barely habitable wing of a decaying home. The setting is a domesticated Gothic convention. Even Gilbert's family describes Wildfell Hall as a ruin (13). Wildfell Hall's decaying state comes to represent the state of living in an abusive marriage.

Once Helen has permission to leave Huntingdon, because Huntingdon confiscated Helen's painting materials and money, she must enlist the help of servants, thus risking the chance that one of them will inform Huntingdon about her plans. She laments, "I can ill afford to leave anything behind, since I have no money, except a few guineas in purse; --and

besides, as Rachel observed, whatever I left would most likely become the property of Miss Myers, and I should not relish that” (328). The servants’ willingness to help is a powerful commentary on Helen’s decision. They have witnessed first-hand the abuse she has endured, and they assist her even though they chance being dismissed if Huntingdon learns about their actions. Their complicity speaks to a shift in cultural beliefs that precedes changes in the law.

The length of time Helen attempts to stay in the marriage is also meaningful. While Isabella leaves Heathcliff after a mere two months, Helen suffers for five years. Helen devotes vastly more time to the marriage and works tirelessly to try to live with Huntingdon. She also leaves in an effort to protect Arthur. Despite all this, according to the law, she will still become a fugitive if she leaves, with or without her son. Ian Ward points out that Helen “was taking a huge chance. Whilst she might have been confident in her moral duty, Helen had no legal entitlement to her child” (34). Even when the Custody of Infants Act of 1839 was passed, “child custody provisions were still written in deference to the same principle of coverture” (Ward, *Law* 19). Because coverture reduces wives to their husband’s property, they had no custody rights to their children. If a wife did run away with her child, “Fathers simply had to issue a writ of habeas corpus in order to secure judicial approval for such seizures” (Ward, *Law* 34).

In cases of child abuse, there were paths wives could take to protect their children. Helen might “have been able to petition in Chancery for custody of her son. But she would have needed to show that his father was an inappropriate guardian, and she would have needed the money to mount the action in the first place” (Ward, *Law* 35). This option was a provision of the 1839 Custody of Infants Act, which was publically criticized as being the “Robbery of Father’s Bill” (qtd. in Ward, *Law* 35). Because coverture strips wives from having money or of testifying against their husband in court, this option is nearly impossible. Even if Helen were granted custody, it would be temporary. Once Arthur turns nine,

Huntingdon would legally regain custody. Helen again illustrates married women's lack of understanding of the law and the lack of agency they had over their children. When she takes actions to gain custody of Arthur even after Huntingdon's death, Helen tells Huntingdon "you will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please, if I should hereafter judge it necessary to remove him again" (363). When Huntingdon hesitates, she asserts herself and insists, "I cannot trust your oaths and promises: I must have a written agreement, and you must sign it in presence of a witness" (363). However, this document is not legally binding.⁴ One could read Helen's return to care for Huntingdon purely as her fulfilling her Christian wifely duties. In fact, Berry writes that Brontë "makes it clear that no matter how humanely concerned with his fate Helen might be, as long as Huntingdon lives, she cannot lead a completely fulfilling life . . . suggesting that Helen's emotional entrapment is related to his continual manipulation of her maternal Christian feelings" (Berry 79). More likely, Helen returns to insure that Arthur will remain in her care.

Because the law did not allow women to escape abusive marriages, women had to behave like criminals in order to save their own lives and the lives of their children. Brontë gives readers a detailed account of the night Helen escapes to reveal the extremes to which she must go to do what the law will not. Much of the novel's Gothic suspense is in this scene. Helen recounts the day's events: "Early we rose, swiftly and quietly dressed, slowly and stealthily descended to the hall, where Benson stood ready with a light to open the door and fasten it after us. We were obliged to let one man into our secret on account of the boxes" (329). Helen's language evokes suspense: the swift and slow, the quiet and stealthy escape, and the secret conspiracy. Along with the stealthy departure, Helen also must disguise herself, Arthur, and Rachel to conceal their identity from anyone who might see the carriage pass and inform Huntingdon. Helen's choice of clothing for herself, Arthur, and

Rachel is important as it not only contributes to their escape, it signifies the transformation they are undergoing. Helen dresses herself, Arthur, and Rachel as working class, and she takes on the costume of a widow to protect her reputation from being branded as a fallen woman (330). All three dress as people who have suffered a tragedy, and their clothes reflect their new social standing as poor fugitives. They live in a decaying estate with meagre means.

Helen's decision to disguise herself as a widow is significant not only because it offers her a protection from social suspicion of being a fugitive wife or a fallen woman, her disguising herself as a widow is also a symbolic statement about the state of her marriage. She has no husband. This reversal from the rest of the situations in this study in which wives die in marriage speaks to a shift in values; women deserve a life after an imprudent marriage. Helen is also haunted by the social expectation of widows. One of the questions the townspeople want to know is "who was her husband; or if she ever had any?" (69). The question is, is she a widow, thus honourable, or is she a fallen woman with a bastard child. The possibility that she is a fugitive wife is never explicitly considered, which demonstrates how rare the event is. However, Rose comes the closest to suspecting Helen's secret. When Rose informs Gilbert about the gossip concerning Helen, she says, "Mamma says, if she were a proper person, she would not be living there by herself" (81). In a culture where women are expected to live for their husband, a young single woman with a child raises suspicion. There is the understanding that if she were worthy, she would have a husband. This kind of expectation, limits the possibilities for women to escape dangerous marriages.

Once the escape is underway, Helen's language demonstrates her moral certitude, and her euphoria demonstrates the extent of the abuse from which she is escaping. She says, "Thank Heaven, I am free and safe at last!" (329) and "What trembling joy it was when the little wicket closed behind us, as we issued from the park!" (330). She continues, "Oh, what

delight it was to be thus seated aloft . . . a prison and despair behind me, receding farther, farther back at every clatter of the horses' feet,—and liberty and hope before! I could hardly refrain from praising God aloud for my deliverance, or astonishing my fellow passengers by some surprising outburst of hilarity” (330). Her prayer-like exclamation of gratitude suggests that she has God's approval. Furthermore, she feels no guilt for leaving Huntingdon. She writes, “As I bade farewell for ever to that place, the scene of so much guilt and misery, I felt glad that I had not left it before, for now there was no doubt about the propriety of such a step—no shadow of remorse for him I left behind: there was nothing to disturb my joy but the fear of detection; and every step removed us farther from the chance of that” (330). Guilt would suggest that Helen is making a mistake, therefore, her lack of guilt and her conviction that she has made the right decision offers insight into scenarios when escape is the only possible solution.

In Helen's life after her escape, Bronte again evokes Gothic conventions of fear and suspense. She imagines Helen's life, isolated, shrouded in secrecy and paranoia. Despite this change in status and financial stability, their circumstances are much improved. Like Jane Eyre, who changes her name to conceal herself from Rochester, Helen changes her name to “Mrs. Graham, which appellation I mean henceforth to adopt. My mother's maiden name was Graham, and therefore I fancy I have some claim to it, and prefer it to any other, except my own, which I dare not resume” (329). In addition to altering her name to conceal her identity, this act is also an act of agency; she determines her own character. In attempts to conceal her identity and location, Helen also modifies the names of her paintings. Gilbert notices that Helen mislabelled her painting, writing “Fernley Manor, Cumberland, instead of Wildfell Hall, -----shire” (40). She explains, “Because I have friends—acquaintances at least—in the world, whom I desire my present abode to be concealed . . . I take the precaution to give a false name to the place also, in order to put them on a wrong scent, if

they should attempt to trace me out by it” (41). While this disclosure creates mystery about her situation, it also reveals the extent to which she must isolate herself and distrust any inquiries because the questioner could turn her into to the authorities. Helen lives haunted by her husband who, according to coverture, can have her returned to him and keep her imprisoned in the house. She writes, “but for one disturbing care, the haunting dread of discovery, I am comfortably settled in my new home” (333). Helen’s language ties back to the novel’s Domestic Gothic roots. Despite having taken on a new identity, a new wardrobe, and a new profession, she is still haunted by her monstrous husband. She must rid herself of every vestige of her past life, save her talent for painting, her servant, and her son; she sacrifices everything to escape him. These tactics are necessary because Huntingdon is hunting her. Readers learn that he travelled the countryside searching for her, even deceiving her family and friends and tarnishing her reputation in an effort to discover her location (334).

Even in Huntingdon’s search for Helen, he continues to subject her to a kind of mental cruelty. He destroys her reputation with her friends and family. Because she has suffered in silence and not shared her hardships with anyone, he is able to falsify a scenario that places himself as victim, and his deceit is so convincing that he turns her own uncle against her. It is only her aunt who cannot be fooled. The combination of the gender expectation of submission and the law that privileges men places women in situations from which it is unlikely they will ever escape.

VI

Bronte documents the deterioration of the marriage and of Helen and Milicent, which are direct results of the coverture-condoned abuse. There are scenarios where marriage

becomes a living hell, where husbands destroy their wives. The novel shows that neglect, emotional abuse, and substance abuse are circumstances in which wives should be allowed to escape their marital prison. Through Helen's and Millicent's experiences, readers witness the cruelty that occurs in abusive marriages; wives' choices are to submit and thus condone and participate in their husbands vices or to reform them, which sometimes is not possible and could chance wives being physically abused even further. The idea that being imprisoned together will force the husband and wife to fulfil their gender ideals is illogical at best. It is a reasoning that might be applied in scenarios with different power dynamics, such as colleagues or neighbours, but the gender hierarchy and the women's loss of legal status make this scenario improbable. It is also a logic that depends upon both husband and wife being their best self, which history and human nature counters. People do not always do what is right or honourable or moral. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Bronte reveals the need to reconsider marriage's finality in instances when a spouse fails to fulfil these behavioural expectations and when women's gender expectations prepare them to be vulnerable.

Just as there are disputes about the happy ending in *Wuthering Heights* and in *Jane Eyre*, there are also conflicting ideas about the conclusion to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Talley writes, "her novel is ultimately a project of hope . . . By ending not just with the marriage of Helen and Gilbert, but also with happy marriages for the other female characters as well, she tries to signify the possibility of transcendent fulfilments through modest and very earthly change" (Talley 146). However, Elizabeth Langland writes that, "Within a traditional narrative analysis, then, Bronte's *Tenant* may tell an untraditional tale of a fallen woman redeemed, but it tells it in such a way that reaffirms the patriarchal status quo of masculine priority and privilege, of women's subordination and dependency" (*Gender and Discourse* 111). Bronte has established through the various men in the novel, that having such a degree of power can corrupt even the most moral of men. Gilbert violently attacks

Lawrence out of jealousy, and he tells Helen, “you must—you shall be mine!” (88). He, too, is capable of the kind of ownership and violence that the law would grant him over Helen once they marry.

Helen’s marriage to Gilbert occurs when coverture is still in place, so she is again, legally, her husband’s property; therefore, she is again vulnerable to abuse. The novel concludes with Helen’s Aunt offering Gilbert her blessing, but she confesses, “Could [Helen] have been contented to remain single, I own I should have been better satisfied” (416). Mrs. Maxwell’s admission reveals her lack of confidence in the institution. She knows that, even though Gilbert is more suited to Helen than was Huntingdon, Helen is yet again under coverture and at the mercy of a man who has demonstrated his capacity for jealousy and violence and who now has the legal authority to discipline and punish her.

Despite some of the happy marriages in the novel, the novel overall serves more to warn readers about the danger and realities of marriage than to be a blind advocate for it. Lamonica writes that “Anne’s commitment to representing truth for moral and didactic ends—particularly those ‘unpalatable’ truths of domestic life—defines her works” (119). Indeed, Brontë’s incorporation of a variety of wedded couples and outcomes, including some happy marriages, makes the novel more realistic than if every marriage ended in misery. But the truth of the couples who are unhappy is a truth that needs to be told, and it is a truth that Brontë ensured her readers will be exposed to so they can make more informed choices when they are faced with a proposal. While she cannot amend the law, she can amend the cultural attitude toward what constitutes mental cruelty and the conditions that the law considers for a divorce *a mensa et thoro*.

Epilogue

In Britain, the early-to-mid nineteenth century was a time of self-examination and of reform (Gilmour 8). Legal acts amending labor and poor laws demonstrated a growing awareness of social problems and were indicative of a society that was undergoing self-scrutiny. For example, “The parliamentary and institutional reforms of the 1830s—the Reform Act of 1832, the Factory Act of 1833, the New Poor Law Act of 1834, the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 . . . are important indications of a changed climate” (Gilmour 8). Some of the reformation acts illustrate another growing awareness in the era: the private becoming public. Marriage, an institution that melds the private and the public, was also being re-evaluated in the period.

One focus of my study is the way nineteenth-century Gothic fiction written by women conveys dissatisfaction with women’s legal limitations and with women’s entrapment in marriage. Through Gothic literature, these issues were becoming a part of the social consciousness in a new way. The novels in my study allowed discussion of fictional scenarios about marriage to occur in nonthreatening ways; as readers discussed the ideas in these novels and formulated solutions for the heroines, they were also vicariously discussing gender and marriage in nineteenth-century England. Thus, women’s Gothic fiction offered another channel through which political criticism of women’s legal inequality and progressive ideas on women’s equality were voiced. Once Wollstonecraft aligned the Gothic with social discourse, Mary Shelley and the Bronte sisters followed suit. They reinvent the Gothic romance, embedding it with subversive yet extreme scenarios that challenge readers to redefine their ideas about marriage laws. The Brontes rewrite the Gothic romance, but it is a revision that might not have occurred had Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley not used the Gothic as a means to highlight

the inequity of the law.

Feminist scholars have analyzed women's Gothic novels, with much of the scholarship focusing on generalized claims about the oppressive patriarchal system. While this scholarship is persuasive, it has not fully explored these novels, especially insofar as they respond to each other. I address a gap in how scholars have examined Gothic romances into the mid-nineteenth-century. Psychoanalytic readings and interpretations of Gothic conventions, settings, and characters as metaphors for women's experience in a patriarchal society are extensive and thorough, but psychoanalytic approaches overlook one of literature's most important functions, its response to a crisis in culture. Approaches that focus on the text's interactions with social issues offer a more comprehensive understanding of literature as a reflection of the society in which it was written and its participation in the discussions that expanded and advanced cultural attitudes and beliefs. While feminist examinations of the female characters are extensive and insightful, the marriage laws that dictate women's oppression have largely been overlooked, especially examinations of monstrous marriages as Gothic devices constructed by female authors to discuss women's marital rights. Without an analysis of the novels' treatment of the marriage laws, the cultural implications of these novels have only been partially explored.

An understanding of consent, coverture, divorce, and gender expectations in relation to marriage is crucial because this focus offers a new perspective on nineteenth-century women's understanding of the potential dangers they faced once they married. With so much scholarly focus on the broad idea of a patriarchal society, these novels need to be re-evaluated with a focus on the specific laws that dictate patriarchal values. An examination of the ways in which these novels incorporate and comment on matrimonial laws will widen discussion about women's understanding of their lives after marriage; focusing on the law will also deepen our awareness

about the consequence of uncompromising marriage laws and show how Gothic novels participated in the movement to increase readers' social awareness.

Feminist scholarship on all of these novels deals with women's issues in a patriarchal society. This kind of critical examination of patriarchal values and institutions that oppress women criticizes the masculine social values that perpetuate women's expectations to be submissive, domestic, and suffer in silence are all a part of the discourses about these novels. These kinds of discussions about the patriarchy are abstract though. None get to the concrete source of women's social oppression. Broad statements about women's position in society and in marriage do little to expose or to improve their situation. My examination details the law's failure to include amendments that would protect women and reveals the detrimental situation into which marriage laws forced women. The closer one examines these laws, the more dire women's situation becomes because women's inability to protect themselves or be protected by the law becomes more apparent. Cross-disciplinary examinations in relation to the law are critical to understand the significance of the situation into which women were forced.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, eras noted for their political unrest and pursuit of social reform, the issue of marriage, coverture, and women's financial dependence becomes a part of the discussion. This change in the Gothic novel's form and aesthetic expands social awareness to the devastating effects of women's gender oppression in nineteenth-century England, especially in terms of women's self-sovereignty, opportunities for education, personal growth, and financial independence, but most importantly, their ability to have the legal right to save themselves from abusive husbands. My study is crucial because it reveals the power of popular literature to act as a catalyst for social change and political reform, a recognition that should also inspire readers to pay closer attention to today's popular culture and literature and to

be involved in the discussions that will continue to advocate social advancement.

End Notes

Chapter One Notes

1. *Frankenstein* has been labeled as the first “science-fiction horror” novel (Crook 61).
2. For scholarship on Gothic elements in the novel, see Peter Garrett *Gothic Reflection*, see E. J. Clery *Women’s Gothic* 117-46, see Heiland *Gothic and Gender* 98-113; For scholarship on feminism in the novel, see Diane Hoeveler “*Frankenstein*, feminism, and literary theory,” see Vanessa Dickerson “The Ghost of a Self: Female Identity in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” see Anne Mellor *Romanticism and Feminism* 220-232; For scholarship on education and parenthood see Alan Richardson *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* 203-12, see Sandra Gibert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic* 213-47; For scholarship on psychoanalysis and of sexuality in the novel, see Arlene Young “The Monster Within: The Alien Self In *Jane Eyre* and *Frankenstein*,” see Botting *Making Monstrous* 90-138, see Susan Wolstenholm *Gothic (Re)Visions* 37-56
3. “But Mary’s notion of the social system—the legal, financial, class, religious, and educational superstructure that undergirded nineteenth-century British culture—was finally codified and symbolized by her in the patriarchal bourgeois family [in which men] are representatives of a larger oppressive patriarchal system” (Hoeveler 159).
4. When women married, “the very being or legal existence of the woman [was] suspended during the marriage, or at least, [was] incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she perform[ed] every thing” (Blackstone 441).
5. “Shelley’s political critique of a society founded on the unequal distribution of power and possessions is conveyed not only through the manifest injustice of Justine’s execution and of France’s treatment first of the alien Turkish merchant and then of the De Lacey family, but also

through the readings in political history that she assigns to the creature. From Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans* and from Volney's *Ruins, or Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires*, the creature learns both of masculine virtue and of masculine cruelty and injustice” (Mellor 222).

Chapter Two Notes

1. For scholarship on marriage-see Joseph Allen Boone "Uneasy Wedlock and Unquiet Slumbers," see Judith Pike "My Name was Isabella Linton: Couverture, Domestic Violence, and Mrs. Heathcliff's Narrative in *Wuthering Heights*," see Juliet McMaster "The Courtship and Honeymoon of Mr and Mrs. Linton Heathcliff"; For scholarship on the psychological, see Barbara Schapiro "The Rebirth of Catherine Earnshaw: Splitting and Regeneration of Self in *Wuthering Heights*," see Samantha Przbylowicz "(Dys)Function in the Moors: Everyone's a Villain in *Wuthering Heights*," see Moussa Pourya Asi, "The Shadow of Freudian Core Issues in *Wuthering Heights*: A Reenactment of Emily Bronte's Early Mother Loss"; For scholarship on the law, see Ian Ward *Law and the Brontes* 48-70 and Ward *Bronte's in Context* 290-295, see Kristen Kalsem *In Contempt: Nineteenth-Century Women, Law, and Literature* 28-32, see Laura C. Berry "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*"; For scholarship on Religion/Hell see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic* 248-310, see David Punter *Gothic Pathologies* 121-137, see Kay DuVal "The Physical and Spiritual Geography of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*," see Lonora Rita Obed "There are Many Mansions in My Father's House: *Wuthering Heights* as God's Celtic, Supernatural Abode"; For Scholarship on Gender and Feminism in *Wuthering Heights*, see Andrew Abraham "Emily Bronte's Gendered Response to Law and Patriarchy," see Jamie S. Crouse "This Shattered Prison: Confinement, Control and Gender in *Wuthering Heights*," see Abbie L. Cory "Out of My Brother's Power": Gender, Class, and Rebellion in *Wuthering Heights*, see Regina Barreca "The Power of Excommunication: Sex and the Feminine Text in *Wuthering Heights*," see Drew Lamonica "*We Are Three Sisters*": *Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontes* 95-146, see Diane Long Hoeveler *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from*

Charlotte Smith to the Brontes 185-242; For scholarship on Imperialism/Race, see Susan Meyer “‘Your Father Was Emperor of China, and Your Mother an Indian Queen’: Reverse Imperialism in *Wuthering Heights*,” see Elsie Michi “From Simianized Irish to Oriental Despots: Heathcliff, Rochester, and Racial Difference, see Ayu Utami Saman “Postcolonial Life and Death”; For scholarship on Gothic elements in *Wuthering Heights*, see Rena-Dozier Emily “Gothic Criticisms: *Wuthering Heights* and Nineteenth-Century Literary History,” see Donna Heiland *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* 114-120, see George E. Haggerty *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* 65-80, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 97-139

2. “Emily Bronte, it is clear, was just as well versed in both the weakness of humanity, and the weakness of the laws that were devised to refine it” (Ward, *Law* 58).
3. “Isabella is perhaps the most striking of these parallel figures, for like Catherine, she is a headstong, impulsive ‘miss’ who runs away from home at adolescence” (Gilbert and Gubar, “Looking Oppositely,” 66).
4. Pike, who focuses on Isabella’s transformation, cites this passage as significant, but she argues that Isabella’s “emphasis on “*was*” also shows her awareness of the grave loss of her former identity” (360).
5. “*Wuthering Heights* is the account of the decent of a soul to Hell” (Punter, *Gothic Pathologies* 133). In going from Thrushcross Grange to Wuthering Heights, Isabella falls “from ‘heaven’ to ‘hell’”(Gilbert and Gubar, “Looking Oppositely,” 66).
6. “Given their appearances, Heathcliff’s air of respectability would have greater credibility, and no doubt his confinement of his slatternly wife would be looked upon by the courts as justified” (Pike 348).

7. Once Heathcliff rules Wuthering Heights, he describes Isabella as “‘slavish,’ the reversal is accomplished and his imperialist power over her is complete” (Meyer, “Your Father,” 176).
8. “For whilst Heathcliff’s strategy still incorporates all the darker arts of deception, intimidation and violence, it will also make much of the law’s apparent preference for men like him (Ward, *Law* 58).
9. “Bronte may be suggesting here that the clinging of her wet, silk dress was indecorously revealing, making her appearance, with the absence of a proper bonnet, shockingly unrefined” (Pike 370).

Chapter Three Notes

1. For scholarship on *Jane Eyre* and marriage, see Godfrey “*Jane Eyre*, from Governess to Girl Bride,” Phillips, “Marriage in *Jane Eyre*: from Contract to Conversation,” Tyson, “Altars to Attics: The State of Matrimony in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*,” for scholarship on *Jane Eyre* as a Gothic novel, see Milbank, *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, 76-114, Killeen, *History of the Gothic 1825-1914*, 91-123, see Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*, 185-241, see Smith, *Gothic Literature*, 75-86, see Miller, “Haunted Heroines: The Gothic Imagination and the Female Bildungsroman of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and L.M. Montgomery,” see Wolstenholme, *Gothic (Re)Visions: Writing Women as Readers* “Charlotte Bronte’s Post-Gothic Gothic,” 57-78; for scholarship on identity/self/ psychology, see Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, see Young, “The Monster Within: The Alien Self in *Jane Eyre* and *Frankenstein*,” for scholarship on fairy tales, see Anderson, “Investigating the Third Story: Bluebeard and Cinderella in *Jane Eyre*,” see Ralph, “‘Beauty and the Beast’: Growing up with *Jane Eyre*,” for scholarship on race, imperialism, Empire, Post-Colonial Studies, see Ward, “The Gospel According to *Jane Eyre*: The Suttee and the Seraglio,” Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*,” Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts: a Critique of Imperialism,” for scholarship on madness and disability studies, see Bolt, *The Madwoman and the Blindman*, Ward, “Ghostly Presences: The Case of Bertha Mason,” Beattie, *The Mystery at Thornfield: Representations of Madness in Jane Eyre*, Donaldson, “The Corpus of the Madwoman,” for scholarship on *Jane Eyre* and Religion, see Griesinger “Charlotte Bronte’s Religion: Faith, Feminist, and *Jane Eyre*,” see Gallagher, “*Jane Eyre* and Christianity,” see Peters, “‘We Stood at God’s Feet, Equal’: Equality, Subversion, and Religion in *Jane Eyre*,” see Franklin, “The

merging of Spiritualities: *Jane Eyre* and *Missionary of Love*,” see Jenkins, “*Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë’s New Bible”

2. The story explains how “A servant of Abraham was instructed to find a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac” (120). It is a story where a woman is objectified and treated as a gift to be awarded.
3. Two famous examples are Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* in which ghosts act as agents to warn and or guide protagonists.
4. Brontë writes, “The character is shocking, but I know that it is but too natural. There is a phase of insanity which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seem to disappear from the mind and a fiend-like nature replaces it. The sole aim and desire of the being thus possessed is to exasperate, to molest, to destroy, and preternatural ingenuity and energy are often exercised to that dreadful end” (qtd. in Ward 83).
5. “In 1860, a Parliamentary Select Committee on the Care and Treatment of Lunatics sympathized that ‘insanity under any shape is so fearful a malady, that the desire to withdraw it from the observation of the world is both natural and commendable’” (Ward 77).

Chapter Four Notes

1. “This Bronte novel contains no supernatural elements, no character who recounts extraordinary dreams or nightmares, and no character who radically challenges in any way the recognizable parameters of Englishness of the mid-nineteenth century” (Talley 129).
2. For scholarship on religion, see Lee A Talley “Anne Bronte’s Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 127-52, see Melody J Kemp “Helen’s Diary and the Method(ism) of Character Formation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 195-212, see Elizabeth Hollis Berry “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: From Hearth’s ‘Desperate Calmness’ To Heath’s ‘Loftiest Eminence’” 71-107, for scholarship on narrative, Garrett Stewart “Narrative Economics in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 75-102, see Elizabeth Langland “The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 111-23, see Maria H. Frawley 117-39; for scholarship on marriage and relationships see Lisa Surridge 72-102, see Deborah Morse “‘I speak of those I do Know’: Witnessing as Radical Gesture in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 103-26, see Marianne Thormohln “Aspects of Love in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 153-72, see Laura Berry “Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 32-55, see Meghan Bullock “Abuse, Silence, and Solitude in Anne Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” 135-41, for scholarship on motherhood, see Elisabeth Rose Gruner “Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and Isabel Vane” 303-25, see Drew Lamonica *We are Three Sisters* 118-46; for scholarship on art/the artist, see Garrett Stewart *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction*, 90-126, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic* 80-3
3. Elisabeth Rose Gruner, “Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and Isabel Vane” 303-25 and Mary Poovy “Covered but Not Bound: Caroline Norton and the 1857 Marital Causes Act” 467-85

4. “The agreement has no legal force; though the illusion that it might was common, as Caroline Norton attested. It is not clear whether Helen is aware of this. Perhaps more importantly, it could have represented a testamentary statement granting custody to Helen. As the law stood, the dying Arthur might have bequeathed his son away to anyone else, perhaps a relative, perhaps not. He does not. And so, again, in this at least Helen Huntingdon could count herself luckier than some” (Ward 36).

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