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"I Could Do with Less Caressing"

Sexual Abuse in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Andrew Doub

Anne Brontë's 1848 novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, has long been called a seminal text in the feminist literary canon for its scathing portrayal of marital dysfunction. Lisa SurrIDGE, who has written extensively on this work, extols it as "[forming] part of an emergent feminist critique of marriage and marital violence that arose in the late 1840s," one which anticipated issues that would rise to prominence during the second-half of the nineteenth century (*Bleak Houses* 83). Although *Tenant* has received much less critical attention than the novels written by Anne's sisters, scholars seeking to codify and define early fictional accounts of spousal abuse have cited heavily from it. Unlike other writers, who situated wife battery as a problem of the lower-classes, Brontë used *Tenant* as a place to imaginatively record domestic violence in an upper-class setting.

Previous explorations into the abuse of Helen Huntingdon at the hands of her detestable husband Arthur have mostly focused on symbolic interpretations. For instance, both SurrIDGE and Maggie Berg have delved deeply into Brontë's association of animals with women and the parallels between male maltreatment of both in the story. This animal substitution is as far as they are willing to go because, as SurrIDGE notes, "the text stops short of depicting violence between Helen and her husband," in the same physical way that it

does with Millicent and Ralph Hattersley (“Dogs’/Bodies” 5). After all, even in their most angered and intense moments, the novel describes a door slammed in Arthur’s face and a book thrown at a dog near Helen at the extreme end of acts committed. Making a claim of actual physical assault would go beyond the textual evidence Brontë provided.

However, in limiting themselves to physically injurious spousal abuse, previous scholars have glanced over what I propose is truly the most “controversial and provocative” aspect of the novel, one which has yet to be the subject of serious study: the descriptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment found within *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This type of physical abuse, suffered by Helen at Arthur’s hands, is, in fact, explicitly stated in her personal narrative. I contend here that accounts from Helen’s diary clearly indicate that a non-consensual sexual relationship exists between herself and her husband. In it she describes a number of situations in which Arthur’s sexual advances are seen by her as a violation of her body and of her rights as an individual. This makes *Tenant* an early definer of the crime of spousal sexual abuse, long before that term or its meaning were recognized by Victorian society.

First, the cultural space into which *Tenant*’s depictions of sexual abuse entered should be described. Research conducted into this area reveals that discussions on sexuality and marital violence were expanding as a direct result of the narratives being published about these subjects. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault observes that, contrary to misconceptions about Victorian prudishness, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a “discursive explosion” took place on the subject of sex (38). Standards of acceptable sexual behavior were undergoing modification in public discourses, including a “setting apart of the ‘unnatural’ as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality” (39). “Rather than a massive censorship” of discussions on sexual issues, “what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse” (34). Foucault notes that rape was always on a cultural list of “grave sins,” but as broadening discussions about sex provided new conceptual definitions, the idea of what constitutes sexual abuse and who could commit it evolved likewise.

It is true that at the time Anne Brontë penned *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the term “marital sexual abuse” did not exist. Perhaps this is why previous scholarship has been reluctant to address this aspect of the novel. Marital rape and sexual abuse within marriage were not recognized as “unnatural” crimes in British law until long after *Tenant*’s publication, and in the years prior to this debate, many judicial scholars argued that they could never occur. The

origins of this standard date back to 1736, when prominent legal theoretician Sir Matthew Hale wrote in his *Historia Placitorum Coronæ* that after a marriage is consummated, “the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given herself up in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract” (628). This legal precedent carried well into the Victorian period, reinforced by the law principles of coverture, which “explicitly subordinated wives to husbands” in both material and physical spheres (Hasday 1389). By initially assenting to marriage, a wife had “given up her body to her husband” for his sexual use (Hale 628).

As a result of the legal ignorance of this offense, Jill Elaine Hasday writes in “Contest And Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape” that “scholars have frequently assumed that marital rape was a private concern that nineteenth-century feminists feared discussing in any public or systematic way” (1378). On the contrary, she claims that “the historical record makes clear that these advocates not only publicly demanded the right to sexual self-possession in marriage, they pressed the issue constantly, at length, and in plain language” (1378–9). In other words, the terms used to describe sexual abuse within marriage were the only thing absent from Victorian consciousness at the time of *Tenant’s* publication; the acts themselves were present in the proliferation of discourses on sexual matters described by Foucault, moving Western culture closer to the legal and moral challenges that would take place in the late-1800s.

The definitions of sexual abuse and harassment were being constructed by writers throughout the nineteenth-century. Brontë’s inclusion of sexual abuse in a fictional narrative may have been fairly unique at the time, but the idea that wives could be sexually violated by their own husbands was not. In his historical inquiry into the sexual experiences of women in the nineteenth century, Jesse F. Battan notes that from the 1850s to the early 1900s, “the vivid portrayal of passive, innocent wives who were sexually brutalized by their husbands . . . was a staple of the literature written by feminists and moral reformers who attacked the patriarchal ideal of marriage” (168). Advocacy groups like the Free Lovers published “story after story, and letter after letter” in pamphlets and newspapers written by women who were documenting “a lifetime of [sexual] mistreatment” starting in the 1850s (Battan 169). Wives were confiding their distress in these matters to “traveling lecturers, counselors, physicians, midwives, legal advisers, and confessors” who published their accounts of sexual trauma in a variety of public fora (Battan 167–8).

Finding the right to sexual self-possession addressed in Brontë's fictional work places it at the vanguard of this discussion. The idea that Brontë would be in the avant-garde on such an issue at a time when few others were fits with Jessica Cox's estimation that *Tenant* has much more in common with the radical New Woman fiction of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries than it does with the feminist literature of the 1840s (31). She cites a number of patriarchal issues addressed in *Tenant* that are in line with much later challenges to male sexuality in feminist fiction (31). Thus, adding sexual assault into her novel would not be out of place considering Brontë's broad vision.

After acknowledging this, readers only have to become aware of how Brontë described the issue. As Joanna Bourke suggests, these early definitions simply "have to be made visible in order to [analyze them] historically" (419). Like sexual harassment, the term "domestic violence" was also absent from the Victorian vocabulary, yet its culturally understood definitions were being written in abundance by both male and female authors in period literature. *The Oxford English Dictionary* identifies Mary Russell Mitford's collection, *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (1830), as responsible for originating the colloquial term "wife beating" in one of its short stories, thirty to forty years before its common use among feminist activists (Lawson and Shakinovsky 159). Early Victorian fictional narratives were instrumental in moving the public discourse on the abuse of women, and although *Tenant* did not supply its audience with a specific term, it certainly provided the situations, actions, and violations women endured in their marital relationships.

Having established the context in which *Tenant* was published and the cultural awareness of the act, I will now examine the textual evidence of marital sexual assault that Helen's diary provides. Each explicit instance of abuse and their attendant descriptions anticipate those accounts that would be discussed more openly in later nineteenth century dialog, and other symbolic representations reinforce the concept of female sexual violation. A study of *Tenant* through this lens shows that Helen's initial reaction in the weeks after her marriage, Arthur's expectation of sexual satisfaction on demand, and Helen's eventual assertion to the right to control her own body are all reflective of accounts given by Victorian women who suffered from sexual abuse.

In Helen's initial diary entry following her marriage, entitled "First Weeks of Matrimony," she reveals that her physical relationship with Arthur includes, at least, unwanted physical contact. The early disappointments both Helen and Arthur share about their physical and emotional evolution were common at the

time Brontë wrote *Tenant*. The change in relationship from chaste courtship to the intimacy of marriage could be an uncomfortable one for the bride, and the bridegroom was often frustrated by his wife's trepidations. Mary Roberts Coolidge describes the lack of preparation a young Victorian couple had before their wedding night and the resultant complications. She writes:

To many a man there must have been a shock of astonishment, if not dismay, on discovering that his wife was afraid of him, and had only the vaguest notion of their inevitable marital relation. The convention of absolute ignorance in which the young girl had usually been brought up, made of the sex relation an experience scarcely less terrible than bodily assault. (qtd. in Battan 176)

Helen's thoughts on this event do not specifically indicate what her wedding night experience was, but she does suggest that she dislikes certain developmental aspects of their early physical relationship:

He is very fond of me, almost too fond. I could do with less caressing and more rationality. I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend, if I might choose; but I won't complain of that: I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ardour. I sometimes liken it to 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? (Brontë 188)

Here, Arthur's deficits in emotional engagement are reported along with his "ardour" for fiery passionate embrace, something commonly reported as an issue by new wives of Victorian husbands. Feminist-anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre blamed the post-wedding remorse of women like Helen on the "inconsiderate brutality" of new husbands who, by their lack balance between physical desires and intellectual and emotional assurance, "spoiled more honeymoons than it would be easy to count" (qtd. in Battan 169). For Arthur's part, he indicates that he is "not quite satisfied" with his wife's attempts to return his sustained affections (Brontë 189).

As Helen continues to consider her new situation, she grapples with her disappointment at Arthur's behavior but concludes with a statement of marital duty:

But Arthur is selfish; I am constrained to acknowledge that; and, indeed, the admission gives me less pain than might be expected, for, since I love him so much, I can easily forgive him for loving himself: he likes to be pleased, and it is my delight to please him. (Brontë 188–9)

Jesse F. Battan's study of marital sexual dysfunction in the Victorian period includes numerous mentions of this concept of "wifely duty" and how women saw submitting to their husbands' most extreme sexual needs as a marital obligation, regardless of their own emotional or sexual desires (166). Battan suggests that the Victorian male's ability to lovingly court and wed an eligible woman did not extend into the bedroom, where he saw himself as exercising his marital rights with his wife and her performing what was required of her (176). Helen's thoughts are congruent with this view.

Helen's second diary entry, written about one month after the first, contains the most convincing and blatant example of Arthur's transition from husband to sexual abuser. This comes in her description of his behavior when he attempts to resolve their quarrels which contains clear instances of emotional and physical sexual assault. Helen reports that Arthur's "favorite amusement" in his leisure time "is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa and tell me stories of his former amours," revealing the details of his numerous sexual exploits (Brontë 193). When Helen "[expresses her] horror and indignation" about these forced conversations, Arthur "laughs till the tears run down his cheeks" and "delights" in her discomfort. Then, Helen explicitly indicates that Arthur compels her to engage in involuntary physical intimacy in an attempt to resolve their arguments: "[When fears of my displeasure] become too serious for his comfort, he tries to kiss and soothe me into smiles again—never were his caresses so little welcome as then!" At this point, Arthur crosses a boundary in the relationship with his wife, the fact of which she tries to suppress in true, dutiful Victorian fashion: "I well know I have no right to complain. And I don't and won't complain. I do and will love him still." Indeed, in the eyes of the law and by cultural norms, she had no right to complain about Arthur's use of emotional and sexual coercion. The extent of his "caresses" is not clear, but Arthur's actions at least included forced kissing, physical contact, and intimate advances at inappropriate or unwanted times. All of these acts are signature traits of a sexual assault.

After establishing this as a problem in their marriage, Brontë's feminist statement on sexual assault begins to develop, declaring that women have the right to sexual self-possession. This is another point where Cox begins to see

Helen as a character who “pre-empts” the much later responses to male sexuality and sexual domination found in New Woman literature (31). In her book, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, Lisa SurrIDGE writes that, after this incident, “Helen’s diary records a series of challenges to her husband’s legal, moral, and sexual control over her mind and body” (92). SurrIDGE finds, “in defiance of the law of coverture,” that “Helen asserts what she perceives as her right to make moral decisions on her own behalf” (92). This begins about a month later in Helen’s diary with the infamous door-locking episode. When Arthur attempts to engage his wife in yet another forced sexual discussion about his previous affairs, instead of allowing him to smother her with caresses and undesired kisses, Helen writes: “Without another word, I left the room, and locked myself up in my own chamber” (Brontë 194). In doing this, SurrIDGE writes that Helen “effectively denies Arthur his conjugal rights” by refusing to sleep in the same bed (*Bleak Houses* 92). SurrIDGE omits, however, that Helen has already pointed out that any intimacy shown to her after arguments like these would be nonconsensual. By locking the door, Helen separates herself from the sexual abuse Arthur typically committed to conclude their arguments. She refuses to submit to further harassment.

In Helen’s final statement on the sexual relationship between herself and Arthur, she totally denies him any sexual rights to her body, even though, by law, “a woman was obligated by her marriage vows to accept sexual relations with her husband” (92). After discovering his philandering with Lady Lowborough, she declares to Arthur that their own sexual relationship has ended:

So you need not trouble yourself any longer to feign the love you cannot feel:
I will exact no more heartless caresses from you—nor offer—nor endure them
either—I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments,
when you have given the substance to another! (Brontë 268)

Brontë’s word choice here is of particular interest. Not only are Arthur’s caresses described as “heartless,” but Helen indicates that she is forced to “endure” them (268). She has come to perceive her husband’s physical intimacy as a “mockery” of love. Any further contact between the two, she asserts, would be a violation of her moral and individual rights, whether he admitted it or not. SurrIDGE suggests that this violation of coverture and conjugal rights causes Arthur to perceive Helen as a marital outlaw, which is why he cries “My wife! What wife? I have no wife” when Helen returns to care for him (*Bleak Houses* 90).

Aside from these explicit depictions of sexual abuse between Arthur and Helen, Brontë reiterates the concept of rape or violation symbolically as well. One scholar has even gone so far to say that Arthur's "'assault' on Helen's diary and the vandalizing of her painting equipment is rape-like" (qtd. in Berg 31). One of the most interesting statements Brontë makes about masculine sexual ownership comes through Arthur's dialog, however. Right after his aforementioned disavowal of his wife, Arthur loudly announces to the members of his party: "any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her" (Brontë 302). Since Helen would undoubtedly object to being given away to Arthur's male friends, any sexual relationship that would result from this transfer would be initiated without Helen's consent. Essentially, Arthur offers Helen up for his friends to rape.

As these examples have demonstrated, Helen's lived experience of sexual abuse evolves from her recognition of unwanted physical and intimate contact shortly after her wedding to her eventual assertion of ownership of her own body. She identifies herself as an individual with rights, rather than a woman who concedes to her husband's continuous physical desires. Regardless of her subordinate position in their household, Helen's steadfast principle and willingness to break free prevented her from being further abused by Arthur, and in that same spirit she also refused the sexual advances of Arthur's guests. It is this aspect of Helen's character and Brontë's daring willingness to challenge prevalent concepts of sexual ownership that make *Tenant* an important record of feminist resistance. Far from being a simple novel of didacticism, Brontë's text not only shows what sexual abuse looks like, but she also provides her readers with a role model for feminine resistance to it.

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