"A Creature of My Own Imagination": Artistic, Maternal, and Sexual Desire in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Abstract: This paper examines how sublimated, repressed desires can be grasped through literary representations of artwork as an extra-linguistic mode of social intercourse in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Engaging with previous scholarship that considers the role of maternal desire in the novel, I argue that Brontë subverts the traditional courtship plot by proposing dangerous ideas of maternal sexuality and desire that the text, radical as it may be, cannot entirely contain. Accordingly, Brontë's protagonist's artwork comes to stand in metonymically for her desire and her sexuality.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anne Brontë's protagonist, Helen Graham, meets her second husband when she is already a married woman and, crucially, already a mother. Here, Brontë subverts the traditional courtship plot through the introduction of a heroine who is in no way virginal, proposing dangerous ideas of maternal desire and sexuality that the text—radical as it may be—cannot overtly put into words. Far from reaffirming domestic ideologies, however, this maternal narrative demonstrates the complex status of desire in the maternal plot. Accordingly, Brontë invokes Helen's art to communicate sentiments—whether romantic, desirous, violent, or fearful—that she cannot freely commit to language. Rather than directly acknowledging the extent of Helen's passions, Brontë gestures toward their erotic nature through Helen's own descriptions of her artwork, as well as other characters' perceptions of and reactions to her art; as a result, Helen's artwork comes to

stand in metonymically for her desire and sexuality. Moreover, Brontë deliberately parallels scenes in which Helen's artwork forms the basis of her interactions with both the father of her child and her second husband, respectively, refusing to sublimate the sexual to the maternal and suggesting that Helen's desire and existence as a sexual being remain unchanged after the birth of her child.

Brontë's novel, like the 1839 Infant Custody Act and the broader child custody debates that raged at the time of its publication, raises the issue of sexual desire in mothers. Some critics, including Elizabeth Gruner and Kristin Le Veness, argue that motherhood, particularly when sexualized, is often cast as demonic in Victorian literature (Gruner 325, Le Veness 345); Gruner argues that, in *Tenant*, motherhood "is simply cleansed of its sexual aspects and recast in purely moral terms" (325). In other words, Brontë ultimately "sublimate[s] the sexual to the maternal, finally reinscribing domesticity as the only legitimate locus of woman's desire" (Gruner 319). However, Brontë complicates this standard courtship plot by introducing us to Helen much later in her life: Gilbert, Helen's second and final husband, first encounters her when she is already married and, most importantly, already a mother.

In fact, Helen's first words to her future husband—"Give me the child!" (52)—cement her in this maternal role from the moment of her introduction. Motherhood is "particularly problematic" when it comes to the traditional courtship plot, for, as Marianne Hirsch notes, "the multiplicity of 'women' is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter and often wife and/or lover as well" (qtd. in Gruner 12). Helen's tale of her first marriage, relayed through her diary to Gilbert Markham, allows Brontë to parallel and contrast the two disparate courtship plots, granting us access to Helen's sexuality before and after she becomes a mother.

As both a painter and a mother, Helen assumes the role of creative producer; however, as a Victorian woman and potential love interest, she is equally an aesthetic object. Helen's artistic production places her outside the "male

viewer/female object" binary (Clapp 14), frequently offering a physical buffer behind which Helen can hide from a suitor's gaze. It is equally true, however, that Helen's artwork often communicates her unspoken romantic and sexual desires. As Melissa Maunsell rightly points out, the Victorian "need to legislate tactile contact through etiquette" reveals larger anxieties about "the erotic potential inherent in such extralinguistic modes of communication" that "require discursive control" both in fiction and in life (43). Maunsell points to Foucault's Victorian repressive hypothesis: "because carnal indulgences," like non-procreative sex and women's sexual desires, were frequently "unspeakable," Victorians "sublimated and converted their more hedonic desires into socially acceptable discourses" (qtd. in Maunsell 45). Whereas Foucault focuses on language-based discourse and Maunsell focuses on physical touch, I assert that these sublimated, repressed desires can likewise be grasped through literary representations of artwork as an extra-linguistic mode of social intercourse.

During Helen's initial courtship with her first husband, Arthur Huntingdon, Helen's determination to reproduce Huntingdon's exact likeness makes the connection between art and courtship explicit, revealing the extent to which painting has become an expression of her desire. Although Helen is also pursued by both Mr. Boarham and Mr. Wilmot, Helen expresses her own desires by sketching Arthur Huntingdon's visage on the backs of other sketches: "There is one face I am always trying to paint or sketch, and always without success" (Brontë 131). Huntingdon's superficial charm and beauty compel Helen to attempt his face's reproduction several times. While these sketches remain in her possession covertly, they grant her a sense of power over her suitor, whom she dubs "a creature of my own imagination" (149). However, Huntingdon reverses this power dynamic at a dinner party when he discovers these tokens of Helen's infatuation: "I looked up, curious to see what it was, and, to my horror, beheld him complacently gazing at the back of the picture—It was his own face that I had sketched there and forgotten to rub out!" (151). Although

Helen "attempt[s] to snatch it from his hand," Huntingdon "prevent[s]" her forcibly and "gather[s] all the drawings to himself," examining them at his leisure, thrusting one under his coat, and "button[ing] his coat upon it with a delighted chuckle" (151). In this first and telling interaction with Helen's art, Huntingdon reacts with fervor and physical domination, illustrating his vanity and controlling impulses, as well as the bodily subtext of the scene. As Helen reflects upon this instance, she regards the incident as deeply humiliating—but only because Huntingdon turns out to be abusive and undeserving of her love, not because Helen's desire is something to be ashamed of. Here, Helen's art has been reduced to what Alisa Clapp refers to as "erotic stimulus" for an undeserving Huntingdon (12).

After Huntingdon takes control of his own image, and therefore the knowledge concerning Helen's secret desires, power is transferred from artist to subject by force. Shortly thereafter, Huntingdon attempts to recreate his previous conquest, snatching Helen's portfolio of work to "examine its contents" (Brontë 155). This time, Helen tries to fight back by placing her hand on the portfolio "to wrest it from him; but he maintained his hold … and just as [she] wrenched the portfolio from his hand, he deftly abstracted the greater part of its contents" (156). Therein, Huntingdon "gleeful[ly]" discovers "a complete miniature portrait" of himself (156). Once Helen retrieved the portrait, she recalls that "to show him how [she] valued it, [she] tore it in two, and threw it into the fire" (156). In this struggle for the upper hand, Huntingdon loses a symbol of his power and control, and Helen destroys the image that has made public her secret desire. This fraught exchange establishes Huntingdon's dismissive attitude toward Helen's art, and by extension her personhood, foreshadowing the later abuse that she endures at the hand of her first, unsuitable husband.

The next day, Huntingdon finds Helen in the library, working on a painting that she hopes will be her masterpiece. She describes the painting in her diary as follows:

> Upon this bough, that stood out in bold relief against the sombre firs, were seated an amorous

> pair of turtle doves, whose soft sad coloured plumage afforded a contrast of another nature; and beneath it, a young girl was kneeling … , her hands clasped, lips parted, and eyes intently gazing upward in pleased, yet earnest contemplation of those feathered lovers. (Brontë 154)

Huntingdon, "after attentively regarding" the painting "for a few seconds," dismissively assesses the painting as "Very pretty, i'faith! … and a very fitting study for a young lady" (Brontë 155). He devotes special attention to the young girl in the painting who sits observing a pair of turtledoves, stating, "I should fall in love with her, if I hadn't the artist before me" (155). Implicitly associating the beautiful young woman in the painting with the artist herself, and then sexualizing her, Huntingdon exclaims, "Sweet innocent! she's thinking there will come a time when she will be wooed and won like that pretty hen-dove, by as fond and fervent a lover" (155). Although Helen finds this hasty and surface-level analysis of her art insulting, an element of truth belies Huntingdon's interpretation: Helen paints this classical, romantic scene because she fleetingly finds Huntingdon's gaze—and her existence in his eyes as an aesthetic object—both flattering and titillating.

While Helen's artwork primarily belies the nature of her own desires, Brontë establishes that art can also stand in metonymically for the desire felt by her suitors. In the chapter entitled "Further Warnings," Brontë emphasizes the depiction of art as a tool of courtship when Huntingdon invites Helen to look at a painting by Vandyke as a ploy to get her away from Mr. Wilmot's unwanted attentions. Whereas Helen expresses eagerness to discuss the painting itself, Huntingdon quickly dismisses the painting in favour of "pressing [her hand]" and blatantly professing his love for her (143). Correspondingly, after Helen and Huntingdon are married, Helen fights off the advances of an unwanted suitor, wielding her palette knife as a weapon: "I never saw a man so terribly excited. He precipitated himself towards me. I snatched up my palette-knife and held it against him. This startled him: he stood and gazed at me in astonish-

ment; I dare say I looked as fierce and resolute as he" (305). Here we can see that, as Antonia Losano asserts, "scenes of painting," as well as other scenes concerning art, are "miniature cultural dramas" illustrating the role of women in society; such scenes become spaces within which writers can work "through issues of courtship, desire, and social gender roles" (16).

While scenes of painting involving Helen and Huntingdon establish the nature of Helen's sexual and romantic desire, scenes of painting involving Helen and Gilbert Markham, her second husband, suggest that Helen's existence as a sexual being remains unchanged despite the birth of her child. This is a controversial assertion on Brontë's part, as other contemporaneous courtship novels, and the Victorians at large, were often hesitant to cast the mother in a sexual light (Le Veness 346). Tellingly, Brontë frequently mirrors extradiegetic interactions between Huntingdon and Helen as recounted in Helen's diary with diegetic interactions between Helen and Gilbert, drawing parallels between Helen's first and second courtships. Huntingdon's comments about the female subject in Helen's "masterpiece" invite comparison to one made by Gilbert while watching Helen paint: "if I had but a pencil and a morsel of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers, admitting I had the power to delineate faithfully what is before me" (Brontë 85). In these interactions involving Helen and Gilbert, the language of painting still articulates female desire; however, Helen has matured since her first failed relationship with Huntingdon (though she has fled his home, they are still legally married) and thus remains more subdued than her younger self.

Although Helen paints scenes of nature rather than loving miniature portraits during this phase of her life, desire nevertheless remains a product of her artistic endeavours. When a group of Gilbert's friends and family go together on a picnic to the seashore, Helen attempts to paint in solitude, but Gilbert feels himself "drawn by an irresistible attraction to that distant point where the fair artist sat and plied her solitary task and not long did [he] attempt to resist it"

(84). Watching her paint, Gilbert initially describes Helen as though she were an aesthetic object: "[She] sketched away in silence. But [he] could not help stealing a glance, now and then, from the splendid view at [their] feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over the paper" (85). Once again, Helen's body is conflated with her artwork, as her curls, dropping onto the paper, seem to become one with the scene she draws.

In a similar interaction, as Gilbert watches Helen sketch, he embarks upon an erotic evaluation of her body: "I stood and watched the progress of her pencil: it was a pleasure to behold it so dexterously guided by those fair and graceful fingers" (74). Crucially, Helen does not ignore Gilbert's presence this time: "erelong [Helen's fingers'] dexterity became impaired, they began to hesitate, to tremble slightly, and make false strokes, and, then, suddenly came to a pause, while their owner laughingly raised her face to [Gilbert's], and told [him] that her sketch did not profit by [his] superintendence" (74). When Helen "raise[s] her face" to Gilbert's, the intimation seems to be that a kiss might follow, rather than the dismissal that ensues; the trembling and hesitation imbue the scene with an erotic register, suggesting that Helen is equally affected by this tension. Helen's young son plays nearby throughout this exchange—an uncomfortable reminder of Helen's maternal status that may have imbued the scene with another layer of tension for Victorian readers.

A final illustration of Helen's artwork assuming the role of a proxy for desire comes when Gilbert watches Helen paint in the privacy of her own home. In this scene, Gilbert recalls how Helen "resumed her place beside the easel, not facing it exactly, but now and then glancing at the picture upon it while she conversed, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to wean her attention entirely from her occupation to place it upon her guests" (69). Helen deliberately focuses her attention on the easel, rather than Gilbert, much in the same way that the easel was "the first object that met [Gilbert's] eye" (69)

when he entered the room. Whereas the palette knife, as previously mentioned, was once used to put distance between Helen and an unwelcome suitor, the easel claims the attention that Gilbert feels should be focused upon himself and therefore becomes a proxy for Helen's admiring gaze. Dissuaded from staring at Helen by the physical barrier of the easel, and by Helen's unwavering sense of propriety, Gilbert turns his gaze toward the picture of Wildfell Hall that Helen is working on, surveying the picture "with a greater degree of admiration and delight than [he] cared to express" (69). At the same time, the artwork becomes an extension of Helen herself, absorbing the majority of Gilbert's own unspoken "admiration and delight" and therefore operating as an extra-linguistic mode of social intercourse. Helen, having told Gilbert in an earlier scene that she has "often wished in vain … for another's judgment to appeal to when [she] could scarcely trust the direction of [her] own eye and head" has made her desires known explicitly (86). As a result, this interaction establishes Gilbert as a partner who takes Helen's artwork seriously—and therefore as an appropriate sexual partner for her.

Ultimately, Helen's artwork comes to stand in metonymically as a proxy for her sexuality in both of the novel's courtship plots, and her artwork both conceals and reveals desires that cannot be articulated. Moreover, Brontë parallels scenes in which art forms the basis of Helen's interactions—first with the father of her child and then with her second husband—resulting in the implicit assertion that Helen's existence as a sexual being remains unchanged after the birth of her child. Accordingly, the undeniable presence of Helen's desire indicates Brontë's unwillingness to sublimate the sexual to the maternal, as well as her rejection of domesticity as the only legitimate locus of woman's desire.

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