

**"... REMEMBER: YOU ARE BOUND TO YOUR
HUSBAND FOR LIFE". THE TENANT OF WILDFELL
HALL AND THE CONDITION OF MARRIED WOMEN
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND**

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By Gabriella Giugliano

Submitted in Application for the Degree of M. Phil

University of St. Andrews

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Abstract

The legal and economic position of women within marriage caused the indignation of the first English feminists around the middle years of the 19th century. The reason of this anger lay not only in the loss of legal and economic identity for married women, but also in the lack of separation or divorce laws which could allow women to end unhappy marriages. Practically married women were 'the nearest approximation in a free society to slaves'. The weight of the question was such as to force a debate in Parliament between Conservatives and Progressives aimed at finding a solution to the problem. The question, however, was not limited to the political sphere; other spheres of culture attempted to find their own solution to the problem. The world of letters seemed to be particularly concerned with the condition of married women. If we consider that the majority of mid-Victorian writers were women, this is not surprising by any means. Among the contemporary novels on the subject, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Anne Brontë is probably the work that mostly exemplifies this involvement. The second and last novel of the youngest Brontë not only focuses on the injustices inherent in mid-Victorian marriage, but also offers a critical reading of the question that evidently betrays feminist influxes. My thesis, which starts from the analyses of the contemporary laws of separation or divorce and of the 'Woman Question' in general, is aimed at determining through the study of the novel the extent of Anne Brontë's involvement in the 'question' and, consequently, at highlighting those elements that reveal a connection between Anne Brontë's literature and the first echoes of English feminism.

I, Gabriella Giugliano, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, that is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous applications for a higher degree.

April 1998.....

I was admitted as a research student in April 1996 and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. in June 1997; the higher study of which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1996 and 1997.

..... April 1998

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I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of M. Phil in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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Introduction

During the reign of Queen Victoria the 'Woman Question' was one of the main topics at issue. The growing discontent with the condition of women led exponents of different spheres of reality to reconsider the role of women within Victorian society. The contemporary legal and economic position of women within marriage was certainly the main target of the attacks of Victorian feminists. According to the Victorian matrimonial code, in fact, wives were 'the nearest approximation in a free society to slaves'. They were considered property of their husbands, along with their belongings and their earnings, and they were not allowed to ask for divorce or separation. In other words, according to the Victorian code of marriage married women did not have an economic and legal identity.

This point and the 'Woman Question' in general are discussed more fully in chapters I and II below.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall¹ is a novel written in this particular period of the English history and is the story of a wretched union between a selfish and arrogant man and a strong-minded woman and of the consequent decisions the latter has to take. For this reason, an accurate reading of the work cannot ignore what was happening in the middle years of the Victorian world. The 'progressive' message the second and last work of Anne Brontë conveys could not be perceived without considering the effect the

¹ The second and last novel by Anne Brontë.

underlying ferments caused by the 'Woman Question' had produced on the author's mind. The conflict between conventionality and unconventionality, between traditional values and progressive ideas which the author deals with along the novel exactly mirrors the verbal battles between opposite points of view on the rights and duties of women which disturbed the apparent calm of nineteenth-century England. The legal and economic situation of married women in this period is the background of the novel. It is against this background that Anne Brontë develops her concepts of marriage and education, which, as I will point out in this thesis, can be considered 'progressive'.

Having said this, it is quite obvious that this study of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall must have both as its starting point and as its reference an analysis of the main issues which formed the 'Woman Question'. It is only by confronting the novel and the mid-Victorian reality that it is possible to define the nature of the author's involvement in the 'Question' and of her handling of it. What this study aims at showing is that the ideal of education and marriage the novel conveys not only reveals a feminist approach on the part of the author to the 'Question' of women, but also anticipates ideas and values supported few years after the publication of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by famous feminist minds, like Florence Nightingale and Harriet Taylor. Nevertheless, it is not straightforward to determine the feminist nature of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. What disturbs a feminist reading of the novel is the fact that Helen Huntingdon, the heroine of the novel, after her flight from a disastrous marriage returns to her husband and that, after her husband's death, she decides to marry again with another man. In fact, one could think that Anne Brontë by making her heroine opt for a life committed to marriage accepted the

conventional idea of marriage as the only place where Victorian women could fulfil themselves. On the other hand, however, one cannot fail to notice the emphasis laid by the author on the fact that the union between Helen Huntingdon and her second husband is the union of two equals. Therefore, this analysis will also verify the coherence of Helen Huntingdon's second marriage with the rest of the novel. These issues form the subject of chapter IV.

I thought it useful to a better understanding of Anne Brontë's attitude towards the 'Woman Question' to add a chapter about her first novel, Agnes Grey. In this novel, which is centred round the difficult condition of a governess within Victorian society, it is already possible to trace Anne Brontë's progressive point of view on the role women had to play in her contemporary society.

Main bibliographical source of this thesis has been the University Library of St Andrews. Here, in fact, thanks to a well-equipped section about the different aspects of the 'Woman Question' and to likewise sections about the history of divorce and the literature of Anne Brontë, I could easily and punctually carry on my work.

I. A Brief History of Divorce and The Legal and Economic Condition of Married Women from the Romans to the Victorians

..woman was born in chains and, behold, now on every side she is free...the alternative in status to which I allude has taken place, almost in its entirety, during the reign of our gracious Queen Victoria...the Victorian epoch may claim with justice the gratitude of enfranchised womanhood; a gratitude, moreover, that will at least be leavened by a lively sense of favours to come ¹

This passage was written by J. E. G. Montgomery in 1897 when much had already changed in England in the attitude towards married women and their rights. By this time, in fact, not only had they succeeded in leaving the 'sanctity' of their domestic sphere and entering the corrupting world of men ², but they had also succeeded in being considered no longer their husbands' property. The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1874 and 1882 had undoubtedly been decisive in this sense; but, the long struggle of English women for independence and equality of rights is also related to another important event of English history: the passing of the first English Divorce Law. It was only in 1857 that this law was passed through the House of Commons and the House of Lords, whereas in

¹ Lawrence Stone, Road to Divorce, England 1530-1987, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 389

other countries, either Protestant or Catholic, up to date and more equal divorce laws had already been passed in the previous centuries. The reasons for this delay should be found both in the strong influence of the Canon law's doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and in the practice of private acts of divorce from 1660 to 1857. Moreover, since most 19th century English thinkers feared the ruinous effects of divorce upon the family that was thought to be a sacred institution fundamental to the maintenance of the social order, few pressed for the legalisation of divorce in England up to the 1830s.

I am going to divide this chapter in two main sections. In the first section, I am going through the history of divorce since the Romans as it would be impossible to understand wholly the legislative developments of the Victorian period without considering Roman law, the Catholic Church, Reformation and French Revolution's attitude towards divorce. Furthermore, this excursus in the history of divorce will also give a picture of the condition of women in different times and cultures. In the second section, instead, I am going to deal with the English legislation over divorce from 1660 to 1857 and its effects on English women's legal position. What I am going to explain is whether the first English law of divorce did actually put an end to the legal discrimination between men and women or was it just the means used by the secular power to weaken the control of the Catholic Church over secular matters by transferring the jurisdiction over marital matters from ecclesiastical courts to special civil ones.

² I will discuss the theory of 'separated spheres' in the second chapter.

I.

Romans are said to have made the marriage and divorce laws of the civilised world. Their legislation over these matters, in fact, was mainly based on the principles of equality and freedom. Needless to say, this 'progressive' attitude towards the making and breaking up of marriage was the result of a long struggle mainly fought by women seeking for equal rights. In fact, there were striking differences between the condition of Roman women at the time of the foundation of Rome and that during the Republic and the Empire.

In the early days of Rome a woman was nothing but her husband's property. She had no property of her own and she could not take decisions for her children's future. As the years went by, her condition did not really improve, 'she came to be regarded not as his property but as his child.'³ A husband was allowed by law to kill her because 'he had the power of life and death over her'.⁴ For example, if a wife was guilty of a 'crime' known as perversity of morals⁵, a man could legally kill her. Fortunately, 'at an early date'⁶, Roman women were relieved from this terrible fate by a law permitting a husband to divorce his wife if he was not satisfied with her or if she refused his potestas on her. However, he was allowed to kill her if he found out that she had committed adultery.

³ S.B. Kitchin, A History of Divorce, London: Chapman & Hall, LTD, 1912, p. 1

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁵ The following misconduct could be considered perversity of morals:

- 1) a woman going out without a veil;
- 2) a woman guilty of drinking wine;
- 3) a woman speaking in the street with women of inferior rank;
- 4) a woman going to place of amusement without the consent of her husband.

⁶ S. B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 2

After divorcing, he had to pay maintenance to her, unless she was guilty of perversity of morals and, in that case, it was 'a portion of her dowry'⁷ that had to be forfeit to her husband 'as a sort of consolation for him'⁸

Divorce, therefore, though invented for the protection of women, was for a long time the sole prerogative of men, who made the laws and called the woman's conduct perverse just as it suited them⁹

The emancipation of Roman women took place in the first two centuries of the Republic. By this time, a woman was not seen as her husband's property any longer. She had acquired an independent legal status, the right to own property of her own and to sue her husband for divorce. Moreover, she was even allowed to refuse her consent to divorce. According to the new Roman law, marriage was a partnership based on the affection and the consent of the two spouses and, when the affection died, the marriage had to be dissolved. Both marriage and divorce were considered private matters. In fact, there was no ceremony of marriage and no judge granting divorce, unless the two spouses failed to reach agreement on the future of their children or on the division of their property.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

II.

The Roman law spread all over the Empire but its procedures and rules were threatened by the development of Christianity and its doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage. Actually, the Fathers of the Early Church seem to have had no jurisdiction over divorce; they were only asked to grant their blessing to two former spouses who wanted to remarry. The rejection of the Roman law took place only in the 9th century when Charlemagne wrote in his 'Capitularies' that divorce had been abolished and replaced by the imperial legislation according to which two spouses had to remain celibate or try to reconcile if their marriage was not very happy. Anyway, before Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Sacred Roman Empire and made effective use of the Imperial legislation ¹⁰, the Fathers of the Early Church, St Augustine, Tertullian and many others, fought against the too liberal attitude of the Roman law towards marriage and divorce in order to assert the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and the absolute jurisdiction of the Catholic Church over marital matters. Their views on these matters were based on the Scriptures and, more precisely, on the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians. According to St Paul, marriage was provided for women and men with an active sexual life, for people who could not 'remain sexually continent' ¹¹; in other words, marriage was thought to be a 'refuge from fornication' ¹² (Actually, this was only the second

¹⁰ The imperial legislation was proposed during the Council of Mileve in 416 but became operative only under the Empire of Charlemagne.

¹¹ Roderick Phillips, Untying the Knot-a short History of Divorce, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 7

¹² S.B. Kitchin, op. cit., p. 21

purpose of a marriage for, according to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, procreation was the main goal of two spouses entering a marriage). As far as divorce was concerned,

The theories of the Fathers upon the subject of divorce [were] as uncertain and as conflicting as the well-known texts upon which they [were] based... While none of them doubted that "fornication" was the principal ground for divorce... they differed considerably as to what that word meant, interpreting it to mean variously - adultery, suspicion of adultery, spiritual adultery, heresy, blasphemy, unlawful desires or worldly views, or some other criminal or immoral act; while some of them doubted whether the Church should extend its blessing to one or both the parties upon a second marriage, and some again made a distinction between the rights of husband and of wife ¹³

St Augustine, for example, justified his indecision about the question whether two spouses entering a second marriage committed adultery or not as resulting from the obscurity of the passage of the scriptural text where the matter was discussed. Nevertheless, he remained loyal to the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and admitted adultery as a sole ground for divorce for either men or women. Adultery, in his opinion, was a crime, and crime was the only way to escape the prison of an unhappy marriage. However, ill-treatment by a husband could not be considered as a crime,

therefore, a woman could not sue her husband for divorce on such grounds, on the contrary, she had to bear up against her husband's violence without uttering a word of protest.

III.

The practice of divorce was quite common under the Christian Emperors, and, though 'they began interfering in the law of divorce by applying the prevailing ecclesiastical opinions to it, restricting the rights of the wife'¹⁴, they still considered it as a private matter between the two parties. That is why most of them allowed divorce by mutual consent (under Justinian divorce was granted on this ground only if after divorcing the two former spouses spent the rest of their life in a monastery and left all their properties to their children). Apart from mutual consent, in this period divorce was allowed also on other grounds; either men or women could obtain a divorce for impotence, the taking of monastic vows and mistake in marriage¹⁵; furthermore, a woman could also divorce her husband if she found him committing adultery with a married woman, if he was guilty of other crimes or if he had been cruel to her, while a man could obtain a divorce for suspicion of adultery¹⁶, abortion or adultery. A wife guilty of adultery was condemned to a five-year celibacy because 'she had shown herself unworthy

¹³ Ibid., p. 23

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 32

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 34 : 'If the wife who had been thought to be free turned out to be a slave, the marriage was regarded as never having taken place at all'

of marriage'¹⁷, and if she had divorced her husband without a reasonable cause, she was compelled to enter a convent, spend the rest of her life there and forfeit all she owned to her children or to the bishops. On the contrary, a man guilty of the same crimes was neither condemned to chastity nor forced to take the vows. Given this, it is clear that contemporary women were not considered as free and equal as women were under the Roman law; their powers and faculties had been largely restricted by the Catholic Church that firmly maintained that women were nothing but inferior creatures whose sole role was that of the submissive, faithful and obedient wives.

IV.

As the authority of Emperors declined in Italy, a succession of strong Popes, who were monks and lawyers, made effective use of the prevailing anarchy by consolidating their power. They issued Decretals, in which they gave their decisions upon all kinds of spiritual and temporal matters which had been referred to them by the faithful for their spiritual advice, and these Decretals soon came to take the place of Imperial laws and to be observed as binding

¹⁶ An adultery was presumed whenever a woman did something without her husband's permission. For example, if she went to the theatre, the circus without her husband and so on.

¹⁷ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 35

upon all Christians, being considered by the subordinate ecclesiastics as “of greater weight than Scriptures”¹⁸

By the 13th century the Catholic Church had asserted its authority over marriage and divorce all over Europe. The means by which it exercised its jurisdiction over these secular matters was the Canon law and its system of ecclesiastical courts. According to this law, marriage was indissoluble because it was a sacrament representing the ‘indissoluble union between Christ and the Church’¹⁹; thus, under no circumstances were two spouses allowed to divorce. Under the Canon law the only way of dissolving a marriage was either annulment or separation. But, before going through the list of grounds allowing separation and annulment according to the Canon law, it is important to define the exact meaning of the words ‘divorce’, ‘annulment’ and ‘separation’. Divorce usually dissolves a marriage and allows two former spouses to remarry. Separation, as the word itself says, separates a couple but does not allow them to remarry. Annulment, finally, declares null a marriage according to different grounds.

Under the Canon law ‘divorce’ was the word used to indicate both annulment and separation. Annulment could be obtained only if there were impediments to the marriage. The most common impediments were consanguinity and affinity and they had been taken from the Bible. Other impediments were made up by the Catholic Church. For example, if a boy was not twelve and a girl fourteen, they could not get married; or if one of two future spouses had already made a prior matrimonial engagement to another, the marriage

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 59-60

could not take place. Nevertheless, these impediments could be overcome by the purchase of dispensations from the Church.

As far as separation²⁰ was concerned, at the beginning of the Canon law it was obtainable only if 'the principles of true religion were threatened'²¹ or if 'the physical well-being of one of the spouses was at risk'²²; later, two spouses could separate on the ground of adultery, heresy and cruelty.²³ Nevertheless, separations were not easy to obtain and once obtained, on no account should the two spouses have sexual intercourse with others. As I stated before, by the beginning of the jurisdiction of the spiritual power over marriage and divorce the position of women had completely changed. Under the Canon law a woman was entirely subjected to the control and decisions of her husband. What she had to do was obey him without questioning his decisions and wishes. She was even refused separation on the ground of adultery 'for the wife had no right to inquire into the conduct of her superior'²⁴. Moreover, she had to keep her virginity before marriage, whereas a man could have as many sexual relationships as he liked²⁵.

The strict provisions of the Canon law did not meet the approval of the majority of the European population, that is why under its jurisdiction many people preferred to go to their locally elected judges to obtain a divorce either by mutual consent or for adultery,

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 64. This was the explanation given by the canon lawyers in order to explain the sacred nature of marriage.

²⁰ Separationes ab mensa et thoro (separations from table and bed)

²¹ Roderick Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 6

²² Ibid.

²³ Very often ecclesiastical judges did not concede separation on the ground of excessive cruelty because they believed that the ill-treatments of a husband was aimed at "redeeming" his wife from errors.

²⁴ S.B. Kitchin., *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78

²⁵ These differences between women and men as far as sex was concerned were based on the theory of double standard that will be explained in the second chapter.

cruelty and desertion instead of leaving their marital cases in the hands of the severe ecclesiastical courts.

V.

By the beginning of the 16th century the 'golden age of the Canon law'²⁶ had come to an end. This, however, does not mean that the strict marital laws of the Canon law had fallen into oblivion; in fact, as we will see later in the chapter, Canon law's provisions for divorce and marriage will still influence the 19th century marital legislation of some European countries. Anyway, going back to the 16th century, Reformers, who by this time had begun their struggle for the legalisation of divorce, started to attack the severe legal procedures of the Canon law. They were convinced that marriage was a secular matter and the evidence of this secular character was the practice of a public wedding ceremony held before a marriage officer. Therefore, divorce was a secular matter too and could be granted only by the officer who had previously joined the two spouses into marriage. Luther and Calvin, the two main voices of the Reformation, completely rejected the Catholic doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and laid down their set of marital rules. According to Calvin²⁷, one of the grounds for divorce was desertion, whereas Luther accepted desertion as a ground for divorce only according to the Pauline Privilege²⁸.

²⁶ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 85

²⁷ John Calvin's 'reformation' spread in Switzerland, Netherlands and Scotland.

²⁸ The Pauline Privilege, according to St Paul, was the only exception to the catholic doctrine of indissolubility of marriage. This privilege allowed a Christian deserted by his or her non-Christian spouse to remarry.

Moreover, he also included in his list of grounds impotence, while Calvin did not. Nevertheless, they both agreed on the fact that adultery was the first ground for divorce and on the fact that emotional incompatibility was not a sufficient ground to sue a spouse for divorce. Husband and wife should try to live together and bear each other's faults. However, if they kept on finding their relationship unbearable, in Luther's opinion, they were allowed to separate but not to remarry, whereas, for Calvin, they were not allowed to separate and they had to keep on living together until one of them died. In spite of these Reformers' attempts to liberalise divorce, the condition of women did not change at all during the Reformation. Their legal and economic position was still inferior to men's. In many Western European countries women had to keep on bearing their husbands' cruelty and adultery because they were still considered the heads.

‘The wife was legally a minor and had no legal personality or any right to the children, whom she had borne, until the death of her husband or until she sued him for a divorce or a separation’²⁹

However, she was allowed to divorce her man only if she could prove that he had been a malicious deserter, and, if she left a too cruel husband, she was forced to return to his authority, and if she refused to do it, she could be punished and she could lose a part of her property and the custody of her children. As we can see, though they claimed to have tried to overcome the restrictions, the limitations of the Canon law, the Reformers were

²⁹ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 119

still highly influenced by it; in fact, 'the use which [they] made of the Canon law surpass[ed] that which the Canonists had made of the Roman law'.³⁰

The effect of the Reformation upon the Canon law of divorce has been seen to have been very slight...All that the Reformation achieved was, by splitting up the power of the Churches and making religious toleration possible at a future time, gradually to secularise marriage and divorce³¹

The majority of the Protestant countries replaced the Canon law with the reformed legislation. The sole Protestant country that did not reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of marital indissolubility was England.

This was ironic because the catalyst for the breach between the English church and Rome was the Pope's refusal to allow King Henry VIII to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. Henry's matrimonial trials, in fact, ...were the backgrounds to the history of divorce policy and law in England'³²

³⁰ Ibid., p. 110

³¹ Ibid., p. 122

³² Roderick Phillips, op. cit., p. 20

In order to understand why Henry's matrimonial trials have been the background to the history of divorce law in England it is necessary to summarise briefly the most important moments of his 'matrimonial career' ³³. The marriage of Catherine and Henry was decided in the interest of the nation. In fact, since Catherine's marriage to Henry's brother in 1501 lasted just one year and a 'link between Spain and England was deemed useful', ³⁴ a dispensation from the impediment of consanguinity was obtained from Pope Julius II and Catherine and Henry were allowed to marry in 1509. However, in 1527, either because he doubted the validity of his marriage or because he was attracted by Anne Boleyn, he confessed to Catherine that he thought their marriage to be canonically invalid. Probably, he came to this conclusion also because he wanted a male heir to stabilise the Tudor dynasty and Catherine had borne only one daughter and had had five miscarriages. The English Church being Catholic, he could not divorce his wife; therefore, by appealing to the words of Leviticus in the Bible, 'if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an impurity; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless' ³⁵, and highlighting the 'huge' number of Catherine's miscarriages, he asked Pope Clement VII to annul his marriage to Catherine. But Clement refused him the annulment for two main reasons. First, he did not want to void one of his predecessor's dispensations; second, he was manoeuvred by the Emperor Charles V, Catherine's nephew, who did not want his aunt to be removed from such an important throne. Henry, being refused the annulment from the Pope, decided to marry Anne Boleyn secretly in 1538 and, three months later, the marriage between Catherine and Henry was declared null by the Southern Convocation of

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

the Church of England. Shortly after, 'the breach between Henry and the Pope was formalised and Henry became head of the Anglican Church' ³⁶ (The annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon was only the first of the three annulments in Henry's matrimonial career. In fact, in 1536 his marriage to Anne Boleyn was annulled and so was the one to Anne of Cleves).

What is interesting, from the point of view of the history of divorce, is that Henry did not divorce Catherine. It would have been possible for Henry to have broken with Rome and established his own church (as he did) and to have legalised divorce just as Reformed churches were doing on the Continent. Not only did Henry not go this far, but the Continental Reformers whom he consulted on the annulment issue excluded divorce from their salvation...Henry VIII's refusal to consider divorce, whether it was based on religious or political considerations, set the tone for the development of divorce in England for the next 300 years. For although a limited form of divorce was established in the eighteenth century, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that a divorce law was passed in England ³⁷

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 21

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-22

The refusal of the Anglican Church to legalise divorce met the indignation of the Early English Reformers. For example, Thomas Bacon³⁸ and Cranmer³⁹ stated that divorce should be at least obtainable on the ground of adultery. In 1543 Henry VIII set up a commission of lawyers, laymen and bishops to draft a Canon law for the Church of England. This commission laid down the Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum that abolished separation and legalised divorce on different grounds: adultery, desertion or prolonged absence, cruelty and deadly hostility. After a long debate in Parliament, however, The Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum was rejected because it was thought to be 'unacceptable to the Church of England'⁴⁰ and only in 1604 the first revision of the Canon law of the Anglican Church legalised separation but not divorce.

VI.

In the three centuries that passed from the Reformation to the French Revolution 'the history of divorce was that of the gradual interpretation and extension'⁴¹ of the laws laid down by the Reformers. Many were the statesmen, the lawyers and the jurists who stated that divorce laws should not be inferred from the Scriptures but from either the Roman law or the law of nature. In other words, they were still working on the process of secularisation of marital matters that, according to Roderick Phillips⁴², could be

³⁸ Chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer

³⁹ Archbishop of Canterbury from 1532 to 1553

⁴⁰ Roderick Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 24

⁴¹ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 127

⁴² Roderick Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 47

considered as the most important change in Western Europe since the Middle Ages. As he himself wrote, 'secularisation was the means by which divorce developed in a critical period between about 1600 and 1800'⁴³ and, as we have already discussed, this process had its roots in the 16th century when the Reformation, by reducing the control of the ecclesiastics over secular matters, had inaugurated a close relationship between the Church and the State based on an identity of views on the content of the matrimonial laws (in the 17th century this process led to the development of parallel secular institutions, alternatives to the clerical or mixed clerical-secular ones). By the end of the 17th and during the 18th century the list of grounds upon which divorce was allowed was extended. By now, not only could the spouses obtain a divorce for adultery and desertion, but they could also divorce for emotional incompatibility, excessive cruelty, impotence and so on.

'Eighteenth-century France is an example of the processes of secularisation at work with the ideology, institutions and law of marriage and divorce'⁴⁴

Before the French Revolution, under the Old Regime, in France only separation was allowed. It was the woman who usually sued her husband for separation, if he ill-treated her, tried to kill her or falsely accused her of adultery. The small number of separations during the Old Regime shows that this mode of separation did not meet the needs of French women since, after separating, they were not allowed to remarry. The indissolubility of marriage and the lack of a divorce law was condemned by the French

⁴³ Ibid.

literature of the Enlightenment whose writers⁴⁵ analysed the issue 'in the light of reason, natural law, liberty and natural rights'.⁴⁶ According to them, the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage was contrary to human nature because men and women were too changeable and weak to remain loyal to each other for the rest of their life. Moreover, divorce could be also 'healthy' for society because it could increase happiness and harmony within the families and promote the growth of the population. As Condorcet and Helvetious said, divorce 'would help to improve things'⁴⁷ since it prevented men and women entrapped in unhappy marriages from committing adultery or bigamy. There was a basic difference between the men of the Enlightenment and the Reformers. The first tried to legitimate and legalise divorce by following the principles of natural and social laws; the second, on the contrary, looked for this legalisation in the Scriptures.

In September 1792, after the French Revolution, the French law of divorce passed. This law abolished separation and legalised divorce on different grounds: mutual consent, adultery, incompatibility of temperament, cruelty or ill-treatment, desertion (for at least two years), absence without news for at least five years, madness and dissolute morals; it is also considered the most liberal law of divorce of 18th- century Western Europe; in fact, not only was the list of grounds extended, but women were given the same rights as men (at least until 1796). After divorcing, in fact, a woman was allowed to take back all the properties she had brought to the marriage. Now, divorce was a protection for both men and women who wanted to end disastrous marriages. Unfortunately, however, under Napoleon this law was replaced by the Code Civil, a set of more severe laws that allowed

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 54

⁴⁵ Only minor French writers fought for this cause.

divorce only by mutual consent, for adultery and cruelty. Women lost again their equal position before the law and their rights to take back their property after divorcing. Furthermore, they were not allowed to divorce their adulterous husbands, unless they had committed adultery in their house; by contrast, men could freely sue their adulterous wives for divorce, no matter where the adultery had been committed.

...after the fall of Napoleon, and the restoration of the Catholic Bourbons in 1816, divorce was abolished altogether, and the Canon law prevailed again in France till 1884, when the divorce of the Code Civil was re-enacted with the exception of divorce by mutual consent',⁴⁸

VII.

By the 19th century divorce was practised in most of the Western Europe countries. In fact, by this time divorce was not allowed only in few European countries; Italy, Spain and Ireland obtained divorce laws only in the 20th century. The other countries had already proceeded with the legalisation and secularisation of divorce and this quick diffusion of the practice of divorce met either the approval or the disapproval of the ideologists of the period. According to who disapproved it, divorce was the cause of

⁴⁶ Roderick Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 55

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57

⁴⁸ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p.161

social instability because it 'weakened marriage and the family and encouraged sexual license'⁴⁹; on the contrary, the legalisation of divorce was supported because it promoted harmonious marriages, encouraged population growth and respected the rights of the people. It was this close connection between divorce and family that made the first a common theme to be discussed in the 19th century when family and its weight on the social order were the main concerns of the Utopian Socialists, Liberalists and Conservatives. For both Conservatives and Progressives,

marriage and the family were fundamental social institutions and that social change, or that maintenance of the prevailing social order, could not be achieved without taking the family into account'⁵⁰

Robert Owen, one of the most important Utopian Socialists of the century, proposed a radical transformation of the legislation and of the social practices linked to the family. In his opinion, marriage should be based upon affection and should not be controlled by the church. According to these principles, divorce would have been rare in society; and if a marriage turned out to be unsuccessful, divorce should have represented the two spouses' last resort. Charles Fourier, another Utopian Socialist, showed a more libertarian attitude towards divorce than Owen. In his opinion, marriage and divorce, in his model of society, would have been anachronistic because there would have been no sexual exclusivity and people would have been free to join different social groups. By contrast, Liberalists

⁴⁹ Roderick Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 164

approached marital matters from another perspective. They highlighted the need and the right of the individual to have complete freedom in these matters.

The Catholic Church and the Conservatives naturally tried to obstruct the legalisation of divorce. In 1864 Pope Pius IX issued the Syllabus of Errors where he condemned the contemporary European views on progress and liberalisation. Ten of the eighty articles of this Syllabus were dealing with marriage and divorce and article 67 dealt specifically with the latter.

By natural law marriage is not dissoluble and [it is an error to assert that] in various cases divorce may be permitted by secular power ⁵¹

The effects of the opposition of the Catholic Church were evident in Italy and Spain where, as we have already stated, divorce was legalised only in the 20th century. In fact, the issue of the encyclical letter Arcanum by Pope Leo X reaffirmed in these countries the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and abolished the practice of divorce till the 1900s.

VIII.

The most interesting legal situation concerning marital matters up to the mid-19th century is undoubtedly that of England. What is amazing is that England is one of the few

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 165

Protestant countries to have been tied to the Canon law for quite a long period; therefore, it is not surprising that the passage of the first English divorce law in 1857 has been and is still considered as 'one of the most important legislative developments in Europe'⁵² of the 19th century.

As we have already seen, in 1604 divorce was still prohibited in England since, according to the Canon law of the Anglican Church, marriage could be broken up only by separation or annulment. When Charles II ascended the throne, the situation did not improve at all. During his reign, in fact, separation was still the only means to end a disastrous marriage and could be obtained only by private acts of Parliament⁵³. According to the procedure of these acts, the innocent party was not allowed to enter a second marriage and if the husband was the innocent party, he could bring an action for damages against the lover of his wife for trespassing in his marital property. Since these procedures were really expensive, only wealthy people, mainly men, could afford separation. Nevertheless, as these acts seemed to satisfy people opposing the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage, little pressure was put on the Parliament for the legalisation of divorce up to 1770. By this year, in fact, the number of separations had so increased that a few bills were introduced in the House of Lords in order to make separations more difficult to get. Women were naturally the ones to suffer most the consequences of this action. In fact, these bills prevented a married woman guilty of adultery from remarrying her lover. One of these bills introduced in the House of Lords was characterised by a severe provision prohibiting remarriage between two adulterers

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 170

and making adultery a crime punishable by fine or imprisonment. These proposals were rejected by the House of Lords because they would have badly affected women's existence after separation. Eventually, however, Lord Auckland managed to get a Standing Order by the House of Lords containing a clause that forbade the adulterous spouse to remarry with his or her accomplice.

Reducing the number of divorces was the main goal of the private acts of divorce, and, actually, this number did actually decrease. In fact, from 1660 to 1857 only 325 separations were obtained, and of these 325 only four were obtained by women. Given the legal condition of the English women of this period, this small number is not surprising at all. In these years in England a woman was 'the nearest approximation in a free society to a slave'⁵⁴. Everything she owned was under her husband's control, and if she separated from him and started to earn money from whatever activity, her savings were liable to his seizure. Even her children were entirely under their father's potestas. In fact, the latter was entitled by law to decide for their future without consulting his wife and he could also prevent her from seeing them. Therefore, unless protected by a 'carefully drawn up deed of separation'⁵⁵, a woman hardly dared to separate from her husband.

Divorce by Act of Parliament was a fundamentally unsatisfactory compromise between marital indissolubility and a divorce law.

⁵² Roderick Phillips, Putting Asunder. A History of Divorce in Western Society, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 412

⁵³ We will see later in the chapter that the acts were one of the reasons of a so late English divorce law.

⁵⁴ Lawrence Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 13

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of it is that it lasted so long and perhaps it did so because any pressures to liberalise divorce was effectively balanced by influential opinion (including the Church of England) that thought any form of divorce to be unacceptable ⁵⁶

At the beginning of the Victorian period people started to show their dissatisfaction with the Acts of Parliament and to claim a more equal and upto-date divorce law. The Acts of Parliament were unjust and sectarian because their high cost could be afforded only by the minority of the population, whereas the majority of unhappy spouses was forced either to remain together or to commit adultery and bigamy. Moreover, since the passage of the first English divorce law was, more or less, contemporary to the passage from a patriarchal society where women were considered as their husbands' property to a more industrialised and democratic society, many people began to struggle in favour of women in order to gain equal rights for them before the law.

The first response to the discontent of the English people at the lack of a law of divorce was the setting of a Royal Commission on Divorce in 1850 ⁵⁷. This Commission in 1853 laid down that the jurisdiction over matrimonial cases should be transferred from ecclesiastical courts and Parliament to civil courts; men were allowed to divorce their wives on the ground of adultery, while women could only obtain a divorce if their husbands were guilty of aggravated adultery. Actually, these provisions did not differ much from those of the private acts of Parliament (the only real change was the transfer of the jurisdiction over marital matters from ecclesiastical courts to secular ones) and the

⁵⁶ Roderick Phillips, Untying the Knot, op. cit., p. 69

position of women had not improved at all. This proposal polarised the English public opinion. In fact, on the one hand, the conservative side, welcomed it as the first step towards the abolition of any kind of separation; on the other hand, Progressives believed that the provisions of the Royal Commission were still too similar to those of the Private Acts and by claiming that rich and poor, women and men had the same rights before the law, they asked for an extension of the grounds for divorce.

In 1856 Lord Chancellor Cranworth introduced into Parliament another divorce bill whose first concern was clearly the abolition of the spiritual jurisdiction over secular matters and not the legal discrimination between men and women.

Three influential upper and middle class groups fought to get this proposal changed from an 'administrative reorganisation of the courts to a significant change in the laws governing divorce'⁵⁸. The first of these groups, led by Caroline Norton⁵⁹, sought for the legal protection of separate women's property and earnings from the seizure of their husbands. Barbara Leigh-Smith was the leader of the second group, mainly composed by upper-middle-class women, and one of her pamphlets, A Brief Summary in Plain Language, of the most important Laws concerning Women, drew the attention of the Law Amendment Society, the third group led by Lord Brougham. These two groups, in fact, worked together at the drafting of a petition to Parliament about the Married

⁵⁷ The report of this Commission was published in 1853 and became the basis of the 1857 legislation.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Stone, *op. cit.*, p.373

⁵⁹ Caroline Norton, herself separated from her husband who forbade her to see her children, wrote a pamphlet in 1839 that led to the passage of the Infant Custody Act. By this act mothers were allowed to have the custody of their children until the age of seven. Afterwards, they passed under the custody of their father but their mothers were allowed to see them.

Women's Property Law⁶⁰. These three groups all joined the long debate over divorce that led to the passage of the first English law of divorce in 1857.

Lord Lyndhurst, a friend of Caroline Norton, was the speaker of the first group. During his intervention in the House of Lords he condemned the fact that after divorcing husbands were entitled by law to seize the property and earnings of their wives. By stating that 'men make the laws and women are the victims'⁶¹, he highlighted the legal discrimination between women and men. In his opinion, refusing divorce could only lead to acts of brutal violence against women. This speech of Lord Lyndhurst caused the House of Lords to prepare a draft that granted protection and security to separated women's property and earnings from their husbands' seizure. According to this draft, women should be also allowed to sign contracts and to be treated as single women before the law.

The petition drafted by the Law Amendment Society and the group of Barbara Leigh-Smith was read in the House of Commons by Sir Erskine Perry. This petition, signed by 25,000 women, aimed, like the intervention of Lord Lyndhurst, at putting an end to all the injustices perpetrated by husbands to wives and at putting husbands and wives on the same footing as far as property was concerned. Married women should be allowed both to retain their own property and earnings during the marriage and after divorce and to work and earn their own wages. This petition met the objections of the government and of the House of Lords and Commons because

⁶⁰ We will deal with this later in the chapter.

⁶¹ Lawrence Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 375

it was likely to lead to separation of economic interests in a single household and thus to a corruption of morals ⁶²

The idea that both women and men would have earned their own wages threatened the Victorian ideology of the two spheres ⁶³: the domestic and peaceful world of women and the corrupting and brutal world of men. In order to earn their own wages women had to leave their sacred world and enter the world of men causing the corruption of the 'sanctity' of home and family, the main pillars of Victorianism. That is why the petition was rejected and only the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 granted women the same 'property rights, and roughly the same responsibilities, as those who stayed single' ⁶⁴ As far as the Conservatives are concerned, Mr Gladstone was 'almost the only champion of indissolubility' ⁶⁵ in Parliament. He proposed a different system of divorce for Christians and non-Christians according to which Christians could keep on refusing divorce and living according to Christian values, whereas the second, already allowed to celebrate civil marriage by law passed in 1836, should be permitted to obtain civil divorce. Even though Mr Gladstone's proposal was a good and sensible one, it could not work in a society where both Christians and non-Christians were seeking for divorce.

Though not being in favour of divorce, Mr Gladstone supported the abolition of any legal discrimination between men and women. He stated that men and women were equal according to the Christian law, therefore, the second were entitled to divorce on the same

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 377

⁶³ The theory of the two spheres will be discussed in the second chapter.

⁶⁴ Phillip Mallet. 'Woman and Marriage in Victorian Society' in Elizabeth M. Craik (ed.) Marriage and Property, Aberdeen University Press, 1984, p. 175

⁶⁵ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 189

grounds as the first. The improvement of women's condition was also the concern of Mr Drummon. In his opinion, women should be allowed to discuss the competence of a tribunal mainly composed by men who judged them "according to their own estimates and for their own purposes"⁶⁶.

The Bishops of the Catholic Church were naturally against the legalisation of divorce.

Samuel Wilberforce, bishop of Oxford,

aimed at retaining all the old ecclesiastical inequalities between the rights of husband and wife, but even at introducing further elements of injustice against the wife⁶⁷

For the bishop of St David, since Christ had not created laws for divorce, it was the task of the legislators to infer these laws not from a few words of the Scriptures but from its whole spirit. Probably, this strenuous opposition of the bishops was the effect of their declining power and of their opposition to the remarriage of two divorced persons. The question of remarriage after divorce, in fact, was the cause of a great theological argument. The Anglican clergymen wondered whether they were entitled to remarry two divorced persons or not. It was a compromise proposed by Mr Gladstone that resolved the question. According to this compromise, a clergyman could refuse to celebrate such marriages but he could not prevent two persons from being remarried by another priest in his own church.

⁶⁶ S.B. Kitchin, *op. cit.*, p. 193

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186

Finally, after a long and heated debate, and against all the critics, the British Parliament in 1857 legalised divorce for the first time in England. The first English law of divorce transferred the discussion of marital matters from ecclesiastical courts to civil courts and, more precisely, to the Supreme Courts of London. A husband could divorce his wife on the ground of adultery and was also allowed to bring an action for damages to his wife's lover (the latter should pay the money to a judge who, at his discretion, would divide the money between the maintenance of the wife, the legal expenses and reparations to the husband). A wife, on the contrary, could divorce her husband only for adultery aggravated by other crimes, such as bigamy, cruelty and so on and she could be given the custody of their children according to the Infant Custody Act of 1839 ⁶⁸. As far as annulment and judicial separation were concerned, they could be obtained only on the grounds laid down by the Canon law ⁶⁹.

By the passing of the first English law of divorce, the number of divorces had undoubtedly increased. Nevertheless, the English rates of divorce remained still the lowest in Western Europe for many years (in fact, divorce became easier to obtain for the majority of the English population only around 1918). This small number is mainly due to the fact that the 1857 law of divorce was essentially conservative in its provisions, and it was created when people had no representatives in Parliament and the influence of the Anglican Church and its Canon law was still too strong.

Even if the number of divorces obtained from women had grown in comparison to the number of separations obtained from 1660 to 1857 (45% of the total of divorces from

⁶⁸ See pp. 19-20

1859 to 1909 was obtained by women), their legal and economic position had not really changed. They could divorce only on one ground and the protection of their property and earnings from the seizure of their husbands proposed by the draft of 1856 had been completely ignored. English women (at least until 1882) were still entrapped in a society ruled by patriarchal values according to which their sole reign was their home where they had to play the role of the domesticated and submissive wife. As Lord Landsdowne stated during the debate, '[an English woman] occupies a condition which is inferior to that which prevails in other modern countries, and inferior to that which prevailed in Rome' ⁷⁰

In conclusion, it is evident that the aim of the first English law of divorce was neither the abolition of the legal discrimination between men and women nor the promulgation of an uptodate law of divorce. The 1857 law, actually, was nothing but a political move to weaken the control of the Anglican Church over marital matters and, consequently, to assert over them, as over any other secular matter, the absolute authority of secular institutions. In other words, this law can be regarded as one of the first steps of the English world towards that process of secularisation that had already taken place in other Western - Europe countries in the previous centuries.

An attempt to abolish all the provisions of this law discriminating against women and to extend the grounds for divorce was made in 1912 by a royal commission. The government, however, rejected the proposal and refused to take action to improve women's legal position. In 1923 the English divorce law was reformed, but, in spite of

⁶⁹ See pp. 6-8

this, the changes in women's legal position were still limited. In fact, according to this new law, a woman was now allowed to divorce her husband for simple adultery 'rather than having to prove [her husband] guilty of aggravated adultery'⁷¹, but this was still the only ground upon which a woman could obtain a divorce till 1937 when the complete liberalisation of divorce took place in England.

⁷⁰ Lawrence Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 223

⁷¹ Roderick Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 192

II. The 'Woman Question' : Marriage, Education, Work and Literature

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but 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. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex ¹

Jane Eyre's voice is only one of the numerous voices that during the mid-19th-century rose against the injustices of a male-ruled society trying to limit woman's sphere of influence through suffocating sexist theories. It was in these years, in fact, that the theories of separate spheres, of double standards and of the Angel in the House ² were made up and spread by intellectuals and ideologists; and it was in this same period that the growing number of spinsters and of women maintaining that marriage should not be

¹ Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, Wordsworth Classics, 1992, . p.95

² This definition was made up by Coventry Patmore when he wrote the famous homonymous poem (1854-56) where he sang the virtues of woman as symbol of purity, wisdom and goodness.

women's ultimate target forced Victorian politicians and ideologists to reconsider more carefully the role of women within society.

The 'Woman Question' is indeed one of the most challenging and important aspects of a world in evolution as the Victorian period was and its roots must be traced in the long process of economic, political, social and sexual evolution taking place in this period. An evolution, as the word itself says, implies changes in the status quo and, indeed, what most Victorian women aimed at was a change in their economic, political and social position in order to carve out for themselves a more dignified and less claustrophobic role than that of the passive and submissive wife.

What I am going to show in the first section of this chapter is that actually the mid-Victorian years gave birth neither to the emancipated woman free from the bonds of a suffocating social system nor to the extreme courtly figure of the angel in the house whose only concerns were supposed to be the well-being of her husband and her children. Indeed, Victorian woman's status was far more complex. The contrast between her inward thoughts of independence and her outward conventional behaviour makes me think of her as a dichotomic self continuously swinging from conventionality to emancipation and viceversa. Victorian women's literature is rich in these struggling creatures trying to find their way among the contradictions within their lives. But, what was the aim of mid-19th-century women's literature? Was it just a means by which express one's own frustrations and unhappiness or was it used as an active device to seek to improve woman's condition? And, if there was a distinctly "female" voice...was this symptomatic of inferior art? These are the questions I will attempt to answer in the

second and last section of this chapter hoping to give an interesting contribution to the understanding of such a complex topic.

I.

At the beginning of the 19th century the position of English women within society was not enviable at all. As I have already pointed out in the previous chapter, as far as the law was concerned, a woman was practically a non-entity since, once married (as I will explain later, marriage was supposed to be the only target achievable by a woman), she and her husband became 'one person in law' ³ and 'the husband [was] that person' ⁴ . Therefore, under the common law, everything a woman owned, money, properties, children, passed into her husband's control. Even her body was considered as her husband's and according to this rule he was allowed to take her back if she dared to leave him.

The legal situation of women before the passing of the 1882 Married Women's Property Act is summed up with characteristic force by Frances Cobbe in the title of one of her essays at the time, 'Criminals, Idiots, Women and minors' - these being the classes of

³ Robin Gilmour, The Victorian Period. The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890, London: Longman, 1993, p. 189

⁴ Lee Holcombe, 'Victorian Wives and Property' in Martha Vicinus (ed.), A Widening Sphere. Changing Roles of Victorian Women, Indiana University Press, 1977, p. 4

people considered unfit for most legal and all political rights at the time⁵

Generally, woman's inferiority to man, without considering John Maynard's theory according to which man's superiority '[flow]ed naturally from Adam's having been created before Eve'⁶, was explained as natural since woman was thought to be by nature physically and mentally inferior to man. According to Christianity, not only was woman inferior to man, but she was also an evil nature characterised by vanity, instability, selfishness and lack of judgement from which harmful effects she could protect herself only by confining herself to the home and by dedicating all her attentions and cares to motherly, wifely and home duties.

In herself the woman was nothing...the woman can only justify her presence on earth by dedicating herself to others; through deliberate self-effacement, duty and sacrifice she will discover the identity and *raison d'être* of which, by herself, she is deprived⁷

What is amazing about this theory is that it was spread and supported not only by men but also by a surprisingly large number of women. Certainly, Mrs Sarah Ellis was one of the most active and combative anti-feminists supporting the supremacy of men and the belief that woman's proper work within domestic walls was the only 'antidote to the

⁵ Robin Gilmour, op. cit., p 189

⁶ Francoise Basch, Relative Creatures. Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837-67, London: Allen Lane, 1974, p. 4

⁷ Ibid., p. 5

feminine vices of vanity, idleness and frivolity'.⁸ Preceding Ruskin, she elaborated her own theory of separate spheres according to which 'men belonged to the world of action...and women to the world of feeling'.⁹

Caught up in the 'fierce conflict of worldly interests', men were occasionally 'compelled to stifle their best feelings' in order to succeed, and it was therefore the woman's task to maintain the home as an emblem on earth of the divine peace and order, where her husband could recover those 'best feelings': for her to leave the home to undertake paid work on her own account would be to betray this sacred trust¹⁰

Given these assumptions, women were not supposed to seek better education or different professions. Their being intellectually inferior to men by nature could not be modified by the achievement of a high-level education. The only education they needed and were supposed to aim at was that necessary for performing the sole role suitable for them: housewife. Thus, it is clear that in these years everything was settled in such a way that women's only aim in life had to be marriage where they were compelled to put aside all their own priorities to the advantage of those of their families. Nevertheless, in a world in evolution where many changes were taking places, this claustrophobic role began to be

⁸ Phillip Mallett, *op. cit.*, p. 161

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

regarded as oppressive, as well as frustrating, by some women who therefore started to claim their place in the sun.

II.

...The first thirty years of Victoria's reign have a certain unity: it was an age of underlying ferment preceding the intellectual, religious and political crisis of authority which, from the 1860s, and before the political outbursts of feminism, was to destroy, among other things, the myth of the woman that had previously prevailed ¹¹

The passage from a feudal-like system based on agriculture to one founded on the principles of capitalism and liberalism had led in England to the gradual affirmation of the middle class in every political, economic and social fields and to a different socio-political structure where old pillars of the previous system had been destroyed to build new ones. In so a different socio-economical structure everybody was free to contribute with his work to the improvement of society. Therefore, both appealing to these new-born principles and to a Protestant-Liberalistic belief according to which 'it was the duty of each individual to work out his or her salvation' ¹², middle class women came out to claim an active role through which they could gain respect. Since respect could only be gained by individuals through their conduct in their lifetime, their work within society,

¹¹ Françoise Basch, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-67

and not through marriage, these daring women strongly maintained that 'it was [therefore] unjust to deny them the chance to undertake such work'¹³ and that 'the helpless dependence of women was not feminine and adorable, but degrading'.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the urgent demand of women's right to work did not stem just from an abstract religious and ideological credo but from a more practical and more urging problem. One of the results of the British industrialisation had been the acquisition of some colonies where many British men had been sent to work. The effect of this migration had resulted in the lack of potential husbands for many women and, consequently, in the increasingly number of spinsters. Furthermore, the fact that in these years the number of women had so increased in comparison to that of men certainly had made this situation even more complex and serious.

Unmarried women found themselves in an impasse, which after being economic became social. In three stages of the development of the word and concept, 'spinster', the emphasis changes from a legal and economic reality to value judgement. Originally 'spinster' designated the trade of spinning-girl, and the civil status of an unmarried woman. The pejorative connotation of the term ('poor spinster') was heard for the first time only in 1719. Barbara Bodichon has traced this development, from which she drew a logical conclusion: the work of the spinster being henceforth done

¹² Phillip Mallett, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-67

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 167

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166

by machines...thus a specific professional problem...led on a cultural level to a lack of respect for the unmarried woman. Having lost her role and dignity as producer, and deprived of the new transcendent function of wife and mother, she became almost an outcast¹⁵

In order to solve this problem it was proposed that all these unlucky girls, who for different reasons could not manage to find a husband at home, had to set out to the colonies where they could hope to fulfil that wifely role they were born for! This quite unfair solution, and the question of single women in general, was the main issue discussed by the first feminists and, more precisely, it was the main concern of the 1830-70 British feminism 'aimed less at elaborating a new female image than remedying certain particular injustices'.¹⁶ Firmly believing that the setting out of all these producers could only turn out to be a loss for Britain as far as production was concerned, these feminists proposed a two-fold solution according to which society had 'to provide more and better paid work for women, and to remove the stigma of social and sexual failure'.¹⁸ The fact that there were many more women than men in Great Britain implied that by then marriage could not be and should not be the sole possible destiny of women. Every woman had to be free to choose for her future. Moreover, the growing number of girls opting for single-status had also resulted both from the fact that very often marriage had turned out to be not that idyllic state many contemporary writers said it was but '...an hell from which there was no

¹⁵ Françoise Basch, *op. cit.*, p. 103

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁸ Phillip Mallett, *op. cit.*, p. 167

escape'¹⁹ and from their 'really' enviable and attractive legal and economic condition; as I have already said in the first chapter, single women could have entire control of their properties, they could 'be bound by contract, be responsible for their own finances'²⁰, and they did not have to worry about the 'all-too-common hazards of frequent child-bearing and high infant mortality'.²¹

Matrimonial ideologies did not exist unchallenged, and whether in sorrow or in anger, many women sought to resist the creed that in missing 'her dream of a heart that she might call her own, of a home and a husband', the spinster has in some sort missed her destiny²²

The position of mid-19th-century feminists towards wifhood and motherhood as the main and only female functions was certainly ambiguous. Many of them, in fact, though quite sure that the condition of single-women was by no means to blame, were still 'cautious in challenging their society's ideologies'²³ and still believed marriage to be not the sole but, at least, the best choice for women. Frances Cobbe, one of the most famous reformers, for instance, managed to solve the contrast between convention and emancipation by appealing to nature. While defending the condition of spinsters, she maintained that marriage, a natural law, had to be regarded as the right condition, 'the most conducive to

¹⁹ Erna Olafson Hellerstein (ed.), Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and United States, The Harvester Press, 1981, p. 120

²⁰ Shirley Foster, Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual, London: Croom Helm, 1995, p. 8

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

virtue’²⁴ for the mass of mankind, not only for women. ‘Like the other feminists, too, she believ[ed] that the widening of women’s minds [would have produced] the multiple benefits of better and more worthily-motivated marriages’.²⁵ Other feminists of the same period, on the other hand, had more radical views about marriage as civil status round which women’s lives had to be centred; ‘I have a mind, an active nature which requires satisfaction’²⁶ and ‘ a place in society where [it] can’t be exercised’²⁷, complained Florence Nightingale in 1852 rejecting the limiting Mission women were supposed to undertake within the family.

Family was ‘too narrow a field for the development of an immortal spirit’..the truth was that there was ‘no longer unity between the woman as inwardly developed, and as outwardly manifested’, and if women were not to perish inwardly, the outer conditions of their lives must be changed...like their male counterparts, middle class women wanted to share the benefits of an expanding economy and, much more importantly, they wanted to contribute to it²⁸

According to Harriet Taylor, John Stuart Mill’s wife, the theory of separate spheres had been carefully and cunningly created by men in order to achieve pleasure and power; as

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9

²⁷ Phillip Mallett, *op. cit.*, p. 166

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Mrs Hugo Reid also maintained in her A Plea for Women in 1843, this doctrine was 'a coercive social construct which needed to be entirely set aside'²⁹

III.

The position of men towards the 'Woman Question' was mainly conservative. Apart from a few exceptions, almost all Victorian exponents of the other sex, politicians, writers, ideologists and so on, were in favour of the doctrine of separate spheres and supported the supremacy of their sex over women. John Ruskin's Of Queens' Gardens (1864) can be certainly considered the manifesto of this sexist group. In 1864, in front of a mixed audience in Manchester, he explained the reasons for the necessary existence of two separate fields of influence for men and women. As he himself stated at the beginning, his lecture was essentially aimed at soothing the angry left of feminism by showing that there was no need of complaining about women's conditions since they were loved and honoured, treated as Queens but just '...so long as they stay[ed] at home'.³⁰ As any form of injustice, oppression, the subjection of women was explained by Ruskin through the appeal to Nature. Not an unjust and sexist social system, but the innate womanly qualities of self-renunciation, generosity, altruism and purity had made her the Angel of the House. Never was her condition meant to be inferior to that of men ;

²⁹ Shirley Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 9

³⁰ Kate Millet, 'The Debate over Women. Ruskin Vs Mill' in Martha Vicinus (ed.), Suffer and Be Still. Women in the Victorian Age, Methuen & Co. LTD, 1980, p. 123

she 'was made to be the helpmate of man'³¹, therefore, her Mission in the world, her sphere of influence had to be different from the male one.

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer. His intellect is for speculation and invention, his energy for adventure and for quest...But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangements and decisions³²

Given these qualities, it is obvious that man's field was that of the outer world, and the home was, instead, the only possible reality for woman.

The man in his rough work in the open world must encounter all peril and trial - to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error, often he must be wounded or subdued, often misled and always hardened but he guards the woman from all this; within his house as ruled by her...need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home. It is the true place of peace³³

³¹ Phillip Mallett, *op. cit.*, p. 168

³² John Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens' in John Ruskin, Sesame and Lilies, London: Cassell and Co., LTD, 1909, p. 73

³³ *Ibid.*

Thus, woman was, according to Ruskin, the Queen of the house who had to preserve its peaceful and pure character and within which she had to exercise her spiritual authority. Leaving the House to seek for self-expression in the outer world would have meant both the betrayal of this sacred role Nature had imposed on her and the corruption of the house and, consequently, the subversion of the family as 'a productive unit within which women [played] an important role'.³⁴ Thus, given that self-renunciation and goodness were said to be the main womanly qualities, woman's education, in Ruskin's opinion, had to be sentimental rather than intellectual; she had to be taught just what was considered useful to run a house and to be a patient listener for both her husband and children. Therefore, high-level education could and had not to be something women had to seek for and the same went for professions requiring such an important education.

Ruskin's theory of separate spheres is indeed conservative and limiting, and, though it is likely to appear as a strategy to contain the enthusiasm of the growing feminism whose revolutionary beliefs so much threatened Victorian society, it turns out to be just a flattering device exploited by its author to consolidate the absolute control and power of men in social, political, economic and cultural sectors of the Victorian world. What Ruskin shows by offering us his narrow-minded ideal of woman is that typical sexist attitude of superiority over women common to almost every mid-Victorian man.

Absolutely at odds with Ruskin is, on the contrary, John Stuart Mill whose approach to the 'Woman Question' clearly displays an open mind and a strong will to offer an interesting contribution to the improvement of the civil status of women. His progressive views on woman's condition are contained in The Subjection of Women (1869), a text

³⁴ Françoise Basch, *op. cit.*, p. 103

whose sincere and daring beliefs caused their author to be denounced 'as mad or immoral, often as both' ³⁵ (The presentation of this book took place before a male audience!). What Mill could not accept was the fact that in a period when everybody was 'free to employ [his] faculties' ³⁶ to choose the lot he longed for women were still denied this freedom. What Ruskin, and many others, called natural feminine qualities and place were actually an artificial thing. Since Aristotle, what was usually customary was regarded as natural, therefore, everything deviating from the norm was considered unnatural and so was any subversion within the woman's natural role: 'the subjection of women to men being a universal costume, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural' ³⁷

...The practice of splitting male and female humanity into two neat little divisions and calling the distinctions in their social and intellectual situation "Nature" is prominently a political gesture ³⁸

This political gesture, in Mill's opinion, was aimed at keeping alive the patriarchal social system within which women had to play their ornamental and limited role. Even the superficial education they were supposed to receive was part and parcel of this prejudiced sexual policy and it could be seen as 'the most ingenious system of mental enslavement' ³⁹ Women, according to Mill, had the right to aim at the same targets as men and to be educated in every branch of art and science; their real condition, instead,

³⁵ Kate Millet, op. cit., p. 124

³⁶ Phillip Mallet, op. cit., p. 168

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 130

was virtually the same as slaves, with the sole exception that women's condition was certainly worse.

Men do not want solely the obedience of women, They want their sentiments. All men...desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one...they have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds⁴⁰

Mill's feminism, essentially linked to his liberal ideas, was individualistic. This means that, according to him, the equality he envisaged for a better world could be obtained only by that small minority of people that, in 'an age of mediocrity'⁴¹, had the courage to affirm its own convictions and to challenge too conservative Victorian values and beliefs. 'Mill's feminism was intended to liberate the greatest variety of individuality, and not to bring about a sense of collective identity. It was, precisely, feminism for a liberal society'.⁴²

IV.

The angelic nature of women was also proved in terms of sexual desire. Both W. R. Greg and William Acton, around the 1850s, maintained that while men had a strong and spontaneous sexual desire, women had virtually none. Their dormant desire appeared only

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Phillip Mallet, op. cit., p. 169

⁴² Ibid., p. 170

when 'excited by actual intercourse'.⁴³ According to these eminent men, the only love that women could experience was that related to children, home and domestic duties. What is worth noticing is that both Acton and Greg agreed on the fact that, since they have been so kindly spared by Nature 'from the torments of sexual desire'⁴⁴, women's sexual condition was surely more enviable than men's. Once again, women had to play the role of the dispenser of purity by saving their men from their coarser nature. Obviously, according to this theory, women's improper sexual behaviour had to be condemned since it was likely to morally damage the 'entire community'⁴⁵, in fact, as the ones who left their home duties to seek for self-expression in the outer world, women acting in such a way to excite their husbands' sexual desire failed their natural Mission within society as mothers and wives. By contrast, men's anomalous sexual behaviours, i.e. intercourse with prostitutes or with other women, were not blamed at all as part of that stronger sexual desire inherent in men's nature. This theory, known as the theory of double standards, reveals once again how deep the limits within which Victorian women lived were. These double standards according to which women and men's sexual behaviour were judged shows how far the enfranchisement of women in half century still was. In fact, it is only by the end of the 19th century that the first results of the long feminist struggle will be visible and tangible in England. In 1882 the Married Women's Property Act 'provided women with exclusive rights to all their property'⁴⁶, and (without considering the first English law of divorce, 1857, that, as I have already

⁴³ Ibid., p. 163

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 164

⁴⁶ Patricia Branca, Women in Europe since 1750, London: Croom Helm, 1978, p. 168

showed in the previous chapter, did not really improve woman's position towards divorce) the complete liberalisation of divorce in England took place even later.

V.

Along the 19th century the question of which kind of education could be suitable to women was one of the main social issues being discussed. According to conservatives and anti-feminists, insisting on the natural inferiority of women which no education could ever remove, women's education should be based on the acquisition of the basic skills they needed to play their role. On the other hand, feminists pushed for a high-level education necessary for having access to 'the top levels of...the professions'.⁴⁷ The first results of feminists' struggle were tangible around the 1830s when University College in London 'open[ed] its doors to women'.⁴⁸

The opening of Queen's College in 1848 and Women's College at Bedford Square in 1849 contributed to the cause of better education...In 1871 Cambridge began to admit women and Oxford followed...in 1879. Women were still not granted degrees, however, and this restraint was not removed until after World War I⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 171

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 174

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Though many feminists had envisaged in better education an alternative to marriage and domestic duties, actually, for most women the achievement of a higher education did not mean a change in the basic goals of their lives. By contrast, it 'enhanced marriage prospects by making the woman more interesting and useful'.⁵⁰ But, while by the end of the century 'the new woman was by definition an educated woman'⁵¹, the same did not go for mid-century woman to whom most of the doors to high-level education and professions were still closed. In fact, since mid-Victorian woman was not supposed to seek for jobs outside the home, as I have already explained, her education was basically aimed at the learning of what was useful to perform the perfect Angel. Better-off girls were usually educated by governesses within their home and they were taught how to be a good companion for their husbands and how to behave within society.

The education of middle class women, instead, took place at boarding schools where they were sent by their families in order to acquire that basic knowledge they needed to perform their home tasks. However, either because of the minor number of men in comparison to that of women or because often their families fell into financial distress, many of these girls were forced to lay aside the common belief according to which 'women's work [was] a disgrace and a misfortune'⁵² and find employment mainly as governesses. These are certainly the most complex figures of the 19th century because, occupying quite an odd position, they often found themselves acting among social and personal contradictions. Having said that during the middle years of 1800 middle class woman's work was essentially condemned by everyone, the position of governesses as

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 175

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 172

employees, as women working outside their proper sphere, could turn out to be a problem both for them and society. This contradiction was solved by the appeal to the real nature of governess' job, by denying or, at least, minimising 'the fact of employment'⁵³ and by denying her womanliness and sexuality. The tasks of a governess were mainly the same as a mother's; the education of children was her main duty whose accomplishment could balance the lack of a family of her own. This was the main reason why this job could be considered more as a second home, a surrogate of a previous home, than a paid job. The personal contradictions of a governess, on the other hand, were not easily solvable for, in this case, too many elements combined to make her life ambiguous. Within the household, in fact, she had an anomalous position because 'she was a lady, and therefore not a servant, but she was an employee and therefore not of equal status with the wife and the daughters of the house'.⁵⁴

An individual's social position is intimately related to patterns of action - to the way others behave towards him and the behavior expected of him - what social scientists call "roles". Incongruent social status results in confused and often contradictory behavior, both from the individual and his or her associates⁵⁵

⁵² Merryn Williams, Women in the English novel-1800-1900, London: Macmillan Press, 1984, p. 9

⁵³ Jeanne Patterson, 'The Victorian Governess. Status, Incongruence in Family and Society' in Martha Vicinus (ed.), Suffer and Be Still, op. cit., p. 14

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

Given these assumptions, it is clear that it was difficult to know how to treat governesses for both the members of the family and the other servants, and what is more important is that governesses themselves did not know exactly how to behave within the family they worked for. Being aware of their contradictory position, they could choose either to hide themselves behind a veil of self-pity or to show too much pride as a compensation 'for the fear of slight or rebuff which [they] felt...' ⁵⁶

If a governess sought pity, she was a bore, if she was proud, she was criticised for a "morbid worldliness" which made her over-sensitive to neglect and disrespect ⁵⁷

Among all these dichotomies a governess's life was quite difficult and unhappy, especially when she, among all the other difficulties her position implied, had to look after cruel and disobedient children; nevertheless, difficult and hard as it was, mid-century governesses' conditions were certainly enviable in comparison to that of working class women working in factories and mines ⁵⁸ or as servants. These were, in fact, the only jobs working class women could aim at and, obviously, lacking in any kind of financial resources, they could not give up working to dedicate themselves to the profession of the Angel. They needed to earn their own living in order to support their families. Neither could they aim at high-level jobs since, like better-off women, up to the end of the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 13

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Only in 1847 were the working hours for women reduced.

nineteenth century they had no access to better education and, consequently, to better professions.

VI.

You may try - but you can never imagine what is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl⁵⁹

One of the few male professions open to mid-century women was literature because, being performed at home, within women's proper sphere, it did not interfere with woman's main duties. Given this, therefore, it is not surprising that a huge percentage of mid-Victorian novels were written by women novelists; but, while many of these novelists wrote just 'to please themselves'⁶⁰, others used literature not as amateurs but as a device to earn their own living, as a job like many others. The fact that women were given the possibility to contribute to the world of letters, however, did not mean that their works were generally judged without any prejudices; on the contrary, according to literary men, a novel by a woman was always synonymous of inferior art since it generally dealt with the sphere of feelings which was regarded as marginal and meaningless in comparison to the public, domain of male literature. This is the reason why some talented writers, such as the three Brontës and George Eliot, chose to write their novels under pseudonym in order to avoid an unjust and sexist criticism.

⁵⁹ Ellen Moers, *Literary women*, London: W. H. Allen, 1977, p. 18

⁶⁰ Merryn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 13

I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed Currer Bell to be a man; they would be more just to him. You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what you consider graceful you will condemn me. All mouths will open against that first chapter, and that first chapter is as true as the Bible, nor is it exceptionable. Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand: and if it is only on such terms my writing will be tolerated, I shall pass away from the public and trouble it no more. Out of obscurity I came, to obscurity I can easily return ⁶¹

These were the harsh words Charlotte Brontë wrote to G. H. Lewes in 1849 to show her dissatisfaction with the current standards according to which women's literary works were evaluated. What it is also clear to trace in her statements is her attack on the sterile, widespread opinion that literature by men was inherently different and better than women's. In those years, in fact, it was believed that women's literature had to mirror exactly their world and pure feelings; men's literature, instead, had and could be universal in the sense that it could depict every aspect of reality without any limitation of language. Therefore, whereas a male novelist was allowed to focus his attention on women and their world, often giving a misleading picture of it, a woman writer had not to come out

⁶¹ Muriel Spark, The Essence of the Brontës. A compilation with Essays, London: Peter Owen, 1993,

from her sphere to indulge in what was not properly feminine, and, whenever she did, like Anne Brontë in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (I will discuss this matter in the next chapters), what she obtained were only condemnation and censorship. As in all the other spheres of reality, thus, also in literature women found themselves prisoner of a dichotomic position, prey to an insane desire to break the golden rules they were supposed to follow and, at the same time, at the mercy of the fear to go beyond their conventional and natural sphere whose main effects would have been the upset of the status quo and their condemnation. Many English female writers of the period preferred to follow Robert Southey's advice to Charlotte Brontë, 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be' ⁶² and, rather than seeing their names filling the list of writers engaged with serious matters, most of them chose being a name in the list of Silly Lady Novelists ⁶³.

Silly Novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them - the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic. But it is a mixture of all these - a composite order of feminine fatuity, that produces the largest class of such novels, which we shall distinguish as the *mind - and - millinery* species ⁶⁴

p. 162

⁶² Muriel Spark, *op. cit.*, p. 71

⁶³ This category is named after the famous article by George Eliot, Silly Novels by Lady Novelists

⁶⁴ George Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' in Thomas Pinney (ed.), Essays of George Eliot, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 301

Belonging to this category were those women whose literature had not a particular aim, neither earning a living nor supporting a social or moral cause; as George Eliot stated, these silly lady novelists wrote only 'from vanity'⁶⁵ and gave birth to a kind of literature whose

greatest deficiencies are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence - patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art...The foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counter balanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write *at all* is a proof of superiority in a woman. On this ground, we believe that the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature, and that while the few women who write well are very far above the ordinary intellectual level of their sex, the many women who write ill are very far below it⁶⁶

George Eliot's strong attack on this feminine literature certainly sprang up from her desire to prove that women and men were alike as far as literature was concerned. Like men, women novelists could produce a really high-standard literature by only combining

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 323

‘the right elements - genuine observation, humour and passion’⁶⁷ within their works. The lack of these requirements and the high opinion sexist critics showed towards the aimless and safer literature were the causes, in George Eliot’s opinion, of the proliferation of low standard feminine literature offering quite a narrow-minded and banal outlook on women’s world, and, consequently, of the depreciation of the real women’s literature.

In order to achieve high quality standards, as I have mentioned before, it was necessary for literature to have a useful function and one of the functions of mid-century women’s literature was that of representing the social, economic and cultural position of women. This function is easily discernible in the novels of really talented writers, such as the three Brontës, Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot, where unconventional and rebellious heroines challenging fundamental Victorian institutions, like marriage, appeared as symbols of their creators’ discontent with a social system denying women any form of self-development and self-expression. Nevertheless, I have to be cautious in stating that all these writers dealing with the undoubtedly problematic existence of women can be considered feminist in the real sense of the word. Being a feminist novelist means having real feminist views on every aspect of woman’s life, whatever class she belongs to, and, mainly the firm opinion that one’s own work must be an active contribution to the improvement and emancipation of women within society. Apart from a few exceptions, like Harriet Martineau and a few others, the majority of mid-century women novelists cannot be regarded as feminist; in fact, they, as well as their heroines were still struggling between the growing desire of being independent and the still too rooted conviction that actually

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 324

they were born to fulfil their natural duties. Charlotte Bronte, for example, who many believe to be one of the first feminists because of her angry vindication of women's rights ⁶⁸, was actually rather conservative ⁶⁹. According to her, working should be a right for women but her category of working women included only those who, for different reasons, had missed their destinies. In other words, work was a sort of compensation to those deprived of their natural vocation 'by the lack of a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct'. ⁷⁰ Her confusion about what were to be considered her proper duties and tasks is clearly expressed in her letter to Robert Southey, dated March 1857, where she answered his advice not to neglect woman's real duties for the love of writing.

You only warn me against the folly of neglecting real duties for the love of fame...My father is a clergyman of limited though competent income, and I am the eldest of his children. He expended quite as much in my education as he could afford in justice to the rest. I thought it therefore my duty, when I left school to become a governess. In that capacity I found enough to occupy my thoughts all day long, and my head and hands too, without having a moment's time for one dream of the imagination. In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble anyone else with my thoughts. I carefully avoid any appearance of preoccupation and

⁶⁸ See p. 36 and p. 57 of this chapter.

⁶⁹ Françoise Basch, *op. cit.*, p. 162

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160

eccentricity, which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits. Following my father's advice...I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I am teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself; and my father's approbation amply rewarded me for the privation...I trust I shall never more feel ambitious to see my name in print; if the wish should rise, I'll look at Southey's letter, and suppress it ⁷¹

As it is clear from these words, and considering that she was brought up in a family with a strong radical and evangelical tradition, Charlotte Bronte's watchword was duty and the fulfilment of one's own duty was the wisest solution she could find for women's destiny; therefore, marriage being the only place where 'the demands of both feeling and duty' ⁷² could be reconciled, wifehood and motherhood had to be women's ultimate targets. Just as she did, her heroines eventually always chose for convention, even the rebellious and indomitable Jane Eyre.

Elizabeth Gaskell's feminism was always balanced by her conviction that 'women's only talents in life were for home-making' ⁷³, and, as time went by, this conviction became so much rooted in her mind, and consequently in her late novels, that eventually she made her choice and, not without suffering, she chose for convention.

⁷¹ Muriel Spark, *op. cit.*, p. 73

⁷² Françoise Basch, *op. cit.*, p. 168

⁷³ Merryn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 109

I long (weakly) for the old times when right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters, and I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women ⁷⁴

Not even George Eliot, who 'wrote at a time when the position of women was fast changing both socially and legally' ⁷⁵, can be considered a real feminist novelists. Her heroines, in fact, still dwell in a limbo since they 'form an admirable transition between the Victorian stereotypes of the wife-mother, the old maid, the impure woman, and the characters of self-conscious feminists, such as Sue Brideshead in Jude the Obscure...'. ⁷⁶ What her characters symbolise is a positive and optimistic progress towards the 'final abandonment' ⁷⁷ of that claustrophobic role of the Angel and towards the literary birth of a new woman, brave enough to criticise not only her traditional role but also other institutions, taking place in late 19th-century English literature thanks to the concern with the 'Woman Question' of both women and, surprisingly, men novelists, like George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. Nevertheless, though being clearly more emancipated in comparison to Jane Eyre, Agnes Grey and so on, these new women did not represent the perfect achievement of a perfect status on the part of women; 'they are still "the

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 113

⁷⁵ Françoise Basch, op. cit., p. XVII

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Weaker””⁷⁸ because, incapable of affirming their new beliefs and values in a still too conservative society, they have to die, break down or renounce love.

In the well-known tale of Griselda⁷⁹ a woman endures with a patience comparable to that of Job her husband’s cruel behaviour. Mid-19th-century English women were asked in a deceiving way to behave exactly as Griselda did; that was, in fact, the aim of the different theories of separate spheres imposing on women the sole and restricting role of the homepreserver. The theories maintaining that she was the Queen of the House, the dispenser of purity and wisdom were just disguising devices to sweeten the pill and made her more likely to accept passively this role.

Miss Ellis and Mrs Beeton placed the wife at the centre of the family as the source of all thoughts, all feelings, all influence. Ruskin invested her with an absolute power over the spirit of man, peace, war, and the fate of humanity. According to Charles Kingsley, the woman is ‘...the natural, and therefore divine guide, purifier, inspirer of the man. Formerly man’s slave, woman was promoted to the rank of guide and inspiration, but we are not generally allowed to forget that her power was the fruit of subjection and submission⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Merryn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 186

⁷⁹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Vittore Branca (ed.), Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1980. Well-known is also Chaucer’s version of the story in the *Canterbury Tales*.

⁸⁰ Françoise Basch, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6

What these supporters of the idyllic figure of the Angel in the House did not actually realise was that their ideal of woman was unattainable. In fact, it was anachronistic in these conservatives to think that in a period when the lack of probable husbands and the growing number of women had resulted in a huge percentage of spinsters women's sole future had to be marriage. Moreover, the ideal of a woman confined within domestic walls little suited working class women who, as I said before, in order to support their families were compelled to do any kind of job, however degrading and humiliating they may be. And it was also preposterous to think that in a period when everybody was free to offer his contribution to the prosperity of the country women had to be denied this right and had to choke back their potentialities into a claustrophobic role.

Nevertheless, though these practical obstacles to the achievement of this ideal woman, the belief that marriage was to be regarded as the best choice for a woman was still quite rooted in the mid-Victorian world and it still had a great influence on women's attitude towards their future. Thus, while increasingly attracted to the feminist promises of a better world for women, mid-century English women were still too reluctant to say 'no' to the safer role of the Angel. This situation obviously resulted in the birth of a woman who did not really know which side to be on. Apart from those who were firmly convinced that their sole roles were that of wives and mothers, a considerable number of mid-Victorian women were entrapped in the contradictions of these years not really knowing whether to be Angels or free women but oscillating from one role to the other. What is indicative of how strong the influences of the old tradition were is the fact that some feminists themselves regarded marriage as the perfect civil status for women.

Mid-Victorian literature mirrors exactly this anomalous situation, and not only do the heroines embody this continuous oscillation between tradition and emancipation, but also the majority of the novelists show a contrasting attitude towards both the role of women within society and of literature as an active means by which seek to improve women's social, economic and cultural condition. Thus, being incapable of giving a practical contribution to the 'Woman Question', mid-century English literature aims less at joining the struggle of the first feminists than at simply giving a picture of what was the real position of women in those years. In fact, the majority of women writers did not criticise and blame the actual legal, social and economic system according to which woman was regarded as a virtual non-person; what they actually blamed was the abuse of powers and laws on the part of fathers and husbands.

Thus, either because of too deep-rooted conservative sexual and social ideologies or because of a too reticent attitude of women towards a possible upset within the given hierarchy, mid-Victorian literature was still quite far from the active and combative feminist literature whose first manifestations will be visible by the end of the nineteenth century and tangible only in the 20th century.

III. Anne Brontë : an Introduction

In the second section of the previous chapter I showed that the majority of mid-Victorian women novelists could not be considered 'feminist' in the real sense of the word because they were still too cautious in openly challenging Victorian social and legal convention about the position of women. On the other hand, I also affirmed the existence of a small number of exceptions who, instead, displayed a more progressive and active attitude towards the 'Woman Question'. It was and it is still universally acknowledged by literary criticism that novelists of the calibre of Harriet Martineau and Florence Nightingale belong to this group; but, Anne Brontë's literature's link with feminist vindication has often been disregarded by the critics. The way the youngest of the three Brontës dealt with the problems inherent in the 'Woman Question' has been ignored for long time by international criticism. This unjust indifference, however, must be read as the obvious result of a more general absence of interest in Anne Brontë's whole literature on the part of literary criticism. This lack of interest is still at work nowadays, though a few critical works aimed at drawing attention to Anne's extraordinary talent have lately appeared. Anne Brontë's image as a 'sensitive, reserved, and dejected'¹ person combined with the widespread conviction of her artistic inferiority to her sisters can be indeed regarded as the basis of her image both as a person and as a writer literary criticism and biographers of the Brontë family conveyed to us. But, indeed, her personality was far more complex than her sisters'. Throughout her brief life, in fact, she showed a more

¹ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' in Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, Angeline Goreau (éd.), London: Penguin, 1988, p. 55

complex attitude towards life that certainly stemmed from her religious doubts about the individual's earthly conduct and destiny after death. It is according to this religious approach to life, therefore, that also her involvement in 'feminism' is to be read and understood; speaking out against the way mid-Victorian society treated women was, in fact, part of the duty she had been called to accomplish according to her religious credo.

In the second section of this third chapter I am going to see in which way Anne Brontë analyses the problematic existence of mid-Victorian women in her first novel, Agnes Grey, where the author starting from the exploration of the difficult condition of 19th-century governess presents a general critical picture of the suffocating and frustrating role women were supposed to play within Victorian society.

Before analysing the novel, however, in order to point out the reasons underlining the unjust devaluation of her art, thus, of her concern for the 'Woman Question'; to see how slowly literary criticism has come at last to the appreciation of her talent as a writer, I think necessary to see how the 'world' reacted and still reacts to her art; as well as an excursus of the main steps of Anne Brontë's life will turn out to be useful to the understanding of the causes leading to her inner and artistic development.

I.

Anne's character was milder and more subdued; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister, but was well-endowed

with quiet virtues of her own. Long-suffering, self-denying, reflective, and intelligent, a constitutional reserve and taciturnity placed and kept her in the shade, and covered her mind, and especially her feelings, with a sort of nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted ²

I quoted at length this description Charlotte Brontë gave of her sister because it is the main source of the image of Anne Brontë offered by contemporary and later critics. After her first appearance in print, Anne had rarely won the favour and appreciation of the literary world. For many years, in fact, she has been seen as 'the dull partner of an otherwise passionate clan' ³; her genius, rarely discerned by most of the Brontës' critics, has suffered mostly in the numerous comparative works where she was usually dismissed as not being 'of the calibre of her sisters'. ⁴ But, in order to offer a more complete and precise picture of Anne Brontë's difficult relationship with literary criticism throughout the years it is better to follow a chronological order, and, therefore, begin our excursus from her very first appearance in the English literary world.

Anne Brontë's first appearance in print dates back to May 1846 when she, together with her sisters, published The Poems of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, a volume containing poems mainly by Emily and Anne. The volume, however, though reviewed positively by periodicals such as 'The Critics', 'The Athenaeum' and 'The Dublin

² Ibid., p. 57

³ Anne Brontë, op. cit., p. 14

⁴ Elizabeth Langland, Anne Brontë: the Other One, London: MacMillan Education LTD, 1989, p. 148

University Magazine', did not meet the appreciation of the reading public. Few copies were in fact sold; the remaining were given away to eminent writers as presents. The second encounter between Anne and the critics took place in 1847 when Agnes Grey was published by Mr Newby in the same volume as Wuthering Heights. For this reason Anne's novel was always reviewed with Emily's and, consequently, compared to it. In December 1847, 'The Spectator' reviewed the two novels and though appreciating the fact that Anne Bronte's was 'not so varied or in its persons and incidents of so extreme a kind of [Wuthering Heights]' ⁵, it criticised Agnes Grey's lack of power in comparison to Ellis Bell's novel. The depreciation of Anne Bronte's work, moreover, resulted also from the fact that Jane Eyre, though being written after Agnes Grey, had been published before it; this, together with the choice of the same subject on Charlotte's part, often led critics to an unbalanced comparison between the two novels. In an anonymous review on the December issue of 'The Athenaeum' (1847), for example, it was wrongly stated that 'the *new* victim's trials [Agnes Grey's][were] of a more ignoble quality than those which awaited Jane Eyre'. ⁶ The same reviewer, besides, went further in his criticism, and, agreeing with 'The Spectator's' reviewer, he maintained that Agnes Grey appeared 'less powerful' ⁷ than Wuthering Heights. In January 1848 on the 'Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper' Agnes Grey was incorrectly judged 'inferior' ⁸ to Jane Eyre; it was regarded as 'a sort of younger sister' ⁹ to Charlotte's heroine. The first generally 'positive' review

⁵ Miriam Allott (ed.), The Brontës. The Critical Heritage, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 217

⁶ Ibid., p. 219

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid., p. 227

⁹ Ibid

to Anne Brontë's first novel appeared in January 1848 on 'The Atlas'. This is what the author of the review wrote praising the realistic element present in the novel:

Agnes Grey...is a tale of every day life. and though not wholly free from exaggeration...[it] does not offend by any startling improbabilities. It is more level and more sunny [than *Wuthering Heights*]. Perhaps we shall best describe it as a somewhat coarse imitation of one Miss Austin's...charming stories. Like *Jane Eyre*, it sets forth some passages in the life of a governess, but the incidents...are such as might happen to anyone in that situation of life, and, doubtless, have happened to many ¹⁰

Nevertheless, later in the review, the anonymous reviewer, according to the example set by the previous reviewers, attacked the lack of power and originality and the fact that, 'even if it le[ft] no painful impression on the mind' ¹¹, Agnes Grey was very likely to leave 'no impression at all'. ¹²

As it is clear from this brief summary of the main reviews of Agnes Grey, Anne Brontë's first impact on the critics was strongly affected by an unjust and limiting comparison with Emily and Charlotte's works. This critical attitude towards the art of the youngest of the Brontës led naturally to the more and more widespread conviction that

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 232-33

¹¹ Ibid., p. 233

¹² Ibid.

Anne, though showing a more realistic literary approach, was doubtless the least talented of all the Brontës. The publication of her second and last novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, condemned by most of the critics as 'coarse and violent', did not help her to gain the literary consensus she undoubtedly deserved; on the contrary, it sets her against the critics and also against Charlotte. In fact, since its first appearance in the Summer of 1848, this unconventional and challenging novel by Anne Brontë was on the whole regarded with suspicion and despise. 'The Spectator' in July 1848 wrote:

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall...suggests the idea of considerable abilities ill applied. There is power, effect, and even nature, though of an extreme kind, in these pages; but there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal, so that his level subjects are not very attractive, and the more forcible are displeasing or repulsive, from their gross, physical, or profligate substratum...it is not only the subject of this novel, however, that is objectable, but the manner of treating it. There is a coarseness of tone throughout the writing of all these Bells that puts an offensive subject in its worst point of view...*¹³

E. P. Whipple on 'The North American Review' (October 1848) though stating that The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was certainly 'less unpleasing' than the other Bell's novels, saw in it the mirror of a depraved and 'geniusless' mind. The anonymous reviewer of 'The

¹³ Ibid., p. 250

Sharpe's London Magazine' (August 1848), instead, after arguing about the authorship of the novel and coming to the conclusion that it was probably a two-handed (man and woman's) novel, concluded his review by maintaining that The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was

‘unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be more useful (namely, imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming and captivating rakes) owing to the profane expressions, inconceivably coarse language and revolting scenes and descriptions by which its pages are disfigured ¹⁴

The only completely positive review to the novel was that published on ‘The Athenaeum’ (July 1848) where an anonymous reviewer concluded his piece by recommending The Tenant of Wildfell Hall ‘as the most interesting novel we had read for a month past’. ¹⁵

Charlotte Brontë, both in her Biographical Notice to the second edition of Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey and in a letter to W. H. Williams (3 September 1856) strongly criticised her sister's second novel; it was a ‘mistake’ ¹⁶ , she said, something ‘little consonant with the character , tastes, and ideas of the gentle, retiring,

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 265

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 250

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 274

inexperienced writer'¹⁷, therefore, 'hardly...desirable to preserve'.¹⁸ As Elizabeth Langland maintains, Charlotte's negative attitude towards Anne's second novel was probably due to the fact that Charlotte unconsciously

'blamed Anne's novel for a number of attacks on *Jane Eyre*'s coarseness. The reviewer in the *Rambler*, for example, had concluded that, 'Nevertheless, on the whole, we should say that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not so bad a book as *Jane Eyre*'¹⁹

By criticising her sister's work and by stating that she was an 'inexperienced writer' Charlotte 'initiated a second stage of criticism to her sister's novel...' ²⁰ whose basic conviction was that Anne Brontë was undoubtedly inferior to her sisters. Mary Ward, for example, in her commentary to the Haworth edition of the Brontës' novels (1898) stated:

The books and poems that [Anne] wrote serve as matter of comparison by which to test the greatness of her two sisters. She is the measure of their genius...²¹

¹⁷ E. M. Delafield (ed.), *The Brontës. Their Lives Recorded by their Contemporaries*, London: Hogarth Press, 1935, p. 125

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 152

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Miriam Allott, *op. cit.*, p. 458

Going through 'The Brontë Society Transactions' of the early 20th century I found a limited number of essays on Anne where she is depicted as a less talented writer than her sisters and as a quiet, depressed and delicate child. In the volume of 1938²² C. Mabel Edgerley maintained not only that the youngest Brontë was quiet, delicate and unhappy, but also that she 'had not the genius of her sisters'.²³ In an earlier essay²⁴, Mr Thomas Soccombe writing on the Brontës among the women novelists of the 19th century did not mention either Anne or Emily, whereas he dedicated the whole essay to Charlotte.

The first monograph about Anne Brontë was published by W. T. Hale; however, ironically, this study was by no means aimed at finally recognising Anne's genius; on the contrary, like the previous works on Anne, this monograph underlined the inferiority of Anne to Charlotte and Emily, 'Anne, indeed, will never be known to fame either as novelist or poet, but only as the sister of Charlotte and Emily'.²⁵

Completely at odds with all these 'blinded' critics was George Moore who in 1930, in his Conversations in Ebury Street, maintained that Agnes Grey, 'as simple and beautiful as a Muslim dress'²⁶, could be considered as the 'most perfect prose narrative in English literature'.²⁷

²² C. Mabel Edgerley, 'Anne Brontë', *The Brontë Society Transactions*, ix, 1938

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 179

²⁴ Mr Thomas Soccombe, 'The Place of the Brontës among the Women Writers of the Last Century', *The Brontë Society Transactions*, 1913

²⁵ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 155

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156

²⁷ F. B. Pinion (ed.), A Brontë Companion. Literary Assessment, Background and References, London: The MacMillan Press LTD, 1976, p. 242

Interest in Anne's work received another boost in 1959 when Winifred Gerin published her definitive biography...and Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford published *Anne Brontë, Her Art and Her Work*, the first sustained study of Anne's poetry and novels. The mid-and late sixties saw an increasing interest in considering the sisters within their family and historical context...The two critics who have done most to call attention to Anne Brontë's artistry in the past decade are Edward Chitani who meticulously edited Anne's poetry in 1979, and P. J. M. Scott who published in 1983 *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment* ²⁸

But, while in the latest years the interest in Anne Brontë has generally increased, the same cannot be applied to the interest paid to her possible concern with the 'Woman Question'. In fact, as I went through the most important publications concerned with the relations between Victorian literature and the 'Woman Question', I noticed that the name of Anne Brontë is generally either not included in the list of women writers or just mentioned; on the contrary, much more attention and space has been paid to Charlotte's involvement in the 'Question'.

²⁸ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-57

II.

Anne was the last of the four Brontës. Her being the child of the house was certainly one of the main reasons why she was, especially by Charlotte, regarded as inexperienced and constantly in need of someone on whom depend. Her nature, instead, since her childhood, contrasted completely with this general belief; in fact, what she really aimed at during her brief lifetime was to gain that experience she needed to be self-supporting. Elizabeth Gaskell in The Life of Charlotte Brontë tells an episode that is undoubtedly indicative of Anne's strong desire of experience; when Anne was still four, her father desiring his children 'to speak with less timidity'²⁹ told them to wear a mask and to speak freely. When Anne was asked about what she as a child most wanted, she just replied : 'Age and experience'.³⁰

A strong religious faith and a critical attitude towards the question of salvation largely affected her general view on life and on the destiny of the individual. Many maintain that the fact that few months after her birth her mother died can be seen as the cause of Anne's deep-rooted sense of sin and, consequently, of her fear of not being among the 'Elected'. Nevertheless, true or false as this theory may be, her religious interest was probably aroused by her being the daughter of a Wesleyan Methodist Minister in whose house religious matters were certainly the bread and butter of discussions. However, her fear of not belonging to the 'Elected' could not be ascribed

either to her father or her aunt's teaching since none of them belonged to the Calvinist branch of Methodism, the only one prophesying salvation for the 'Elected'. Anyway, eventually she managed to overcome this overwhelming fear and to reconcile herself with a more 'relaxed' doctrine of forgiveness and peace thanks to the words of a Moravian Minister, James La Trobe, whom she sent for when she was at Roe Head. Here Anne had been sent in the place of Emily to be educated; and here, though Charlotte was there to teach, she, according to her natural determination and will to learn what she needed to support herself, had endured physical and emotional labours. This, together with a clear disinterest in her younger sister on Charlotte's part, due mainly to the fact that Charlotte herself 'was going through her own crisis, feeling revulsion at the prospect of endless teaching'³¹, caused in Anne a religious and physical crisis from which she recovered only after learning the doctrine of forgiveness from the mouth of the above mentioned Rev. La Trobe.

Within this religious perspective it is possible to frame Anne's strong sense of duty; her will to offer her contribution to the improvement of the world by using the talents God had provided her with. When after the publication of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall she was criticised for having described 'vices and vicious characters'³², for having displayed 'a morbid love of the coarse'³³, she replied:

²⁹ Ibid., p. 4

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5

³¹ Ibid., p. 12

³² Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Stevie Davies (ed.), London: Penguin, 1966, p. 4

³³ Ibid.

Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own³⁴

The same interconnection between art and duty is well expressed in Agnes Grey when at the beginning Agnes says:

All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shrivelled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut. Whether this be the case with my history or not, I am hardly competent to judge; I sometimes think it might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself: shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., p. 5

³⁵ Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey, op. cit, p. 61

Later in the novel the same interconnection is underlined again:

...but my design, in writing the last few pages, was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern...if a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains ³⁶

Given this, it is clear that Anne's idea of literature was far more influenced by 18th-century literature than by Romantic's. The link between literature and pedagogic aims the first words of Agnes Grey imply, 'all true histories contain instruction' ³⁷, evidently betrays an obvious influx of the Enlightenment stress on the function of education. An influx, this, that can be also easily traced in the massive emphasis that Anne Brontë gives on the importance of the balance between passion and reason in the life of an individual as necessary and indispensable condition to gain virtue. Anne Brontë, in fact, defines the excellence of her heroines in their capacity to achieve such a balance throughout their lives; Charlotte and Emily, on the contrary, 'define their heroines' strength in the force of their felt and represented passion, including, for Charlotte, sexual passion' ³⁸. Therefore, Anne's 'feminism' is basically different from that of her sisters;

³⁶ Ibid., p. 93

³⁷ Ibid., p. 61

³⁸ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 30

In Anne's novels, heroines do not humble themselves before male aggression in the often disturbingly submissive manner of Charlotte's heroines...Anne departs from Emily in refusing to glorify that cruelty in a figure like Heathcliff. Anne rejects all glorification of male strength; her heroes are strong principally in moral conviction. And marriage appears as a coda to the novel rather than as a condition of the protagonist's happiness³⁹

As I will point out later⁴⁰, for both Agnes and Helen, the two heroines of Anne's novels, it is very important to complete their *bildung* and to reach a perfect state of serenity before marrying⁴¹. Their *bildung* implies the achievement of a perfect balance between passion and reason, 'the cultivation of reason and [the] nurture of the soul leading to conquest of passion'⁴² without which, according to Anne Brontë, it is impossible to accomplish one's own duty and to achieve happiness.

The influences of The Enlightenment on Anne Brontë can also be traced in her strong critique, stemming from her religious belief, of the difference in the education of Victorian girls and boys. Basing her theory on 18th-century 'arguments for women's equality'⁴³, Anne Brontë, maintaining that women, as well as men, had been endowed

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Both in this chapter and in the next one.

⁴¹ In Helen's case it is a second marriage.

⁴² Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 30

⁴³ Ibid., p. 138

with a 'soul capable of redemption'⁴⁴, stated that they had any right to seek for the education of their own minds and faculties fundamental for the achievement of such a redemption. As I will explain later, Anne Brontë through her novel proves the inadequacy and injustice of the narrow-minded ideal of the Angel in the House; an ideal, as pointed out in the previous chapter, that chokes women's virtues and faculties with the flattering celebration of their 'natural' goodness and wisdom. Both her heroines show the reader that by cultivating, as well as using, one's own faculties and by controlling one's own passions women can find a reason for living also outside those domestic walls within which mid-Victorian society firmly wished to entrap them.

Anne's conviction of having been created to accomplish a particular task on the earth and, consequently, her frustration resulting from the difficulty in performing it, is contained in her Birthday Note (1845). This note was written by Anne when she had just resigned her post as governess at Thorp Green where, quoting her own words, she had 'had some very unpleasant and undreamt-of experience of human nature'.⁴⁵ She, therefore, at this point was certainly prey to a deep sense of failure and disappointment whose strength is clearly discernible in the last words of the note, 'I, for my part, cannot well be flatter or older in mind than I am now'⁴⁶. The fact that she was no longer working as a governess and the sense that all her intellectual work was at a dead end combined to mature in her a strong sense of uselessness; and, even after the publication of her two novels that certainly permitted her to overcome this overwhelming sense of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Muriel Spark (ed.), *The Brontë Letters*, London: MacMillan, 1966, p. 122

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 124

unworthiness and uselessness, she still felt that she had more to do to contribute to the improvement of her society. In her letter to Ellen Nussey dated April 1849, written when she was very ill and quite sure of her close death, she wrote:

...I wish it would be please God to spare me not only for papa's and Charlotte's sakes, but because I long to do some good in the world before I leave it. I have many schemes in my head for future practice, humble and limited indeed, but still I should not like them all to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose⁴⁷

Even if she, as well as the critics, did not realise it, Anne Brontë's literary and moral achievements throughout her brief life, as I will point out later both in the last section of this chapter and in the fourth chapter, had been by no means little!

III.

Agnes Grey is the first novel by Anne Brontë in which the author, according to her sense of duty and her realistic perspectives, explores mid-Victorian woman's world and its restrictions and prejudices. At the centre of this novel is a governess, Agnes, whose difficult condition stands as the symbol for the general condition of governesses in mid-

Victorian reality. The truthfulness and reliability of this precious document of the Victorian period, though the story 'was accused of extravagant overcolouring'⁴⁸, lies in the fact that the novel represents a sort of autobiography written by its author out of her personal experiences as a governess.

As I said in the second chapter, 19th-century governesses led an existence marked by social and personal contradictions that made them undoubtedly the most ambiguous and complex figures of the century. They did not know how to behave within the family they worked for, as much as the family did not perfectly know how to treat them since they were neither servants but nor were they part of the family. What is strikingly odd as far as the nature of the governess' job was concerned was the fact that a governess usually found herself deprived of all the power and freedom she needed to perform her educational task. The over-indulgent and misleading attitude of parents towards their children's behaviour stood too often as an obstacle both to the achievement of education on children's part and to the accomplishment of a governess' duty. Anne Brontë, a governess herself, was undoubtedly aware of the presence of such obstacles between Victorian governess and the fulfilment of their task. She had experienced personally by the Inghams and the Robinsons how badly the interference of parents could affect the relation governess-pupil, and Agnes Grey gave her the chance to make her world aware of the difficulties contemporary governesses had to face up with; the contrast between Agnes' ideal of education and the crude and harsh reality embodied first in the

⁴⁷ E. M. Delafield, *op. cit.*, p. 117-18

⁴⁸ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 4

Bloomfield's children and then in *The Murray's*, in fact, highlights this difficulty inherent in the employment of Victorian governesses. Agnes realises very soon that none of the children takes her seriously and, even more frustrating, as the dialogue with Mrs Murray well shows ⁴⁹, that she is not free to exercise all her powers as a teacher with the children. Furthermore, she also recognises the uselessness of all her work; that little she manages to teach her pupils is, in fact, soon spoiled by either over-indulgence or misdemeanours of parents and relatives. The chapter 'The Uncle' is the place where the author more closely analyses the harmful effects of the continuous interference of relatives within the work of a governess. Here, in fact, Anne Brontë introduces this 'lofty-minded' ⁵⁰ Uncle Robson 'whose visits [are] a great annoyance to [Agnes]' ⁵⁴ since his misbehaviour evidently spoils Agnes' achievements.

...I disliked his coming, so much as for the harm he did the children
- encouraging all their evil propensities, and undoing, in a few
minutes, the little good it had taken me months of labour to
achieve ⁵⁰

Not only does this 'Uncle Robson' encourage the children to destroying the nests of the birds, undoing 'the effect of [Agnes]' whole elaborate course of reasoning and

⁴⁹ Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, op. cit., p. 120. Mrs Murray well instructed Agnes on how to treat her children and on what to teach them. At the end of the dialogue she says: '...remember, on all occasions, when any of the young people do anything very improper, if persuasion and...remonstrance will not do, let one of the others come and tell me; for I can speak to them more plainly than it would proper for you to do'

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

persuasion' ⁵³, but he also teaches Tom that 'the more wine and spirits he could take... the more he manifested his bold and manly spirit, and rose superior to her sisters'. ⁵⁴ (This sentence contains in embryo the theme Anne Brontë will develop later in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, where the abuse of alcohol represents the major cause of an individual's spiritual and physical degradation).

The introduction of the figure of this evil Uncle Robson is also important to the development of Anne Brontë's analysis of the governesses' conditions since it allows her to stress another of the many injustices a governess had to endure; Uncle Robson's neglecting Agnes, 'he seldom deigned to notice me' ⁵⁵ is in fact the natural result of the general indifference and disdain that other people showed towards governesses. Later in the chapter Agnes underlines again the indifference characterising the relations between governess and 'the Others', 'every visiter disturbed me, more or less, not so much because they neglected me...' ⁵⁶; in this case, however, Anne adds through Agnes her own critique to this unjust and prejudiced attitude towards governesses, 'I did feel their conduct strange and disagreeable in that respect'. ⁵⁷ The fact that generally a governess was a woman without a husband made her a kind of outcast since she lacked what was regarded as necessary for playing woman's natural and sole role within society. This was

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 103

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 102

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 106

⁵⁷ Ibid.

basically the main reason why the majority of the so-called 'luckiest people' looked and treated her with contempt and disdain.

Agnes Grey's loss of cast as a result of her employment comes as a great surprise to her. Clearly she had expected to be treated as a friend of the family and is shocked when her first employers behave toward her as she would an upper servant ⁵⁹

What most strikes Agnes is the odd contrast between her education, she has been 'genteely bred' ⁵⁹, and her newly acquired status that causes her to be in an inferior position to people with her same education. But this is exactly part of the contradictions inherent in the governess' status; as Angeline Goreau also points out in her introduction to Agnes Grey, the contradictory nature of the governess' status is well summed up by Anne Brontë in 'Agnes Grey's conflict over whether to walk *with* or *behind* her pupils on the way home from church' ⁶⁰

...when I did walk, this first half of the journey was generally a great nuisance to me. As none of the...ladies and gentlemen ever noticed me, it was disagreeable to walk beside them, as if listening to what they said, or wishing to be thought one of them, while talked over me or across, and if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 44

^{59a} Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

seemed as if they looked on vacancy - as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so.

It was disagreeable, too, to walk behind, and thus appear to acknowledge my own inferiority; for, in truth, I considered myself pretty nearly as good as the best of them, and wished them to know that I did so, and not to imagine that I looked upon myself as a mere domestic, who knew her own place too well to walk beside such fine ladies and gentlemen as they were... Thus - I am almost ashamed to confess it - but indeed I gave myself no little trouble in my endeavours...to appear perfectly unconscious or regardless of their presence, as if I were wholly absorbed in my own reflections, or the contemplation of surrounding objects ⁶¹

In Agnes' decision not to trouble about where to walk, and in her high self-esteem lies Anne Brontë's attack on the Victorian society's treatment of governesses, and her criticism of people's contemptuous attitude towards these 'outsiders' of the Victorian world. On the whole, Agnes' peculiar approach to her employment sums up Anne's defence of governesses. In fact, in contrast to the majority of Victorian literature governesses Agnes 'actively chooses her employment rather than being constrained to do so' ⁶²; by doing this she shows the reader that the choice to dedicate one's own life to either children or teenagers' education often does not stem from extreme necessity but

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 161-62

from a natural vocation to this job. What Anne Brontë does through Agnes' determination to become a governess is to raise the governess' employment to the same level as any other profession, to regard it as a proper job rather than a sterile alternative to marriage or to financial distress. The fact that Agnes decides to leave the Murrays to open a school with her mother soon after meeting Mr Weston and becoming increasingly attracted to him stands as a confirmation of Anne's view on the meaning of work and marriage. By making Agnes choose work and not love the author attacks another important Victorian institution: marriage. This deep-rooted pillar of Victorian tradition, regarded, as I often said, as the sole and respectable aim of women, is included in the novel not only to prove that 'per se' ⁶³ it does not represent the sole means of fulfilment for a woman, but also to suggest that often it can turn into hell, a prison from which it is highly impossible to escape. The marriage between Rosalie Murray and Lord Ashby is an example of how hard and painful the condition of wives could be in that period. Rosalie's youthful illusions about marriage, 'Rosalie was pleased with the thoughts of becoming mistress of Ashby Park' ⁶⁴, are soon shattered by the real nature of her marriage:

I know you warned me against it; and I wish I had listened to you - but it's too late to regret that now - and besides, mamma ought to have known better than either of us; and she never said anything against it - quite the contrary - and then I thought he adored me, and would let me have my own way - he did pretend to do so at

⁶² Ibid., p. 43

⁶³ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 109

⁶⁴ Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, *op. cit.*, p. 194

first; but now he does not care a bit about me. But I should not care for that; he might do as he pleased, if I might only be free to amuse myself and to stay in London...but *he will* do as he pleases - and I must be a prisoner and a slave...Oh, I would give ten thousand worlds to be Miss Murray again! It is too bad to feel life, health and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed, for such a brute as that!⁶⁵

This sincere confession Rosalie makes to Agnes contains attacks on types and themes Anne Brontë will develop in her second novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall; Mrs Murray, who for the love of money decides her daughter's destiny, is a younger and prettier Mrs Hargrave; Lord Ashby is an elder brother to Mr Huntingdon; and the picture Rosalie gives of her marriage anticipates the wretched marriage between Helen And Mr Huntingdon.

Agnes' choice for teaching and, consequently, for independence contrasts in a positive way with Rosalie's; her decision to exercise her faculties in the outer world is, in fact, presented in the novel as the most desirable, and even if eventually Agnes actually marries Mr Weston, this marriage 'stands as a coda to Agnes's journey towards autonomy'.⁶⁶ It is not her marriage, in fact, that puts an end to her *bildung*; her

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 237

⁶⁶Elizabeth Langland, op. cit., p. 109

intellectual and physical growth can be considered already complete when between passion and duty, Mr Weston and the opening of the school, Agnes chooses for the latter.

IV.

Before concluding I think it is necessary to add something about Agnes Grey's narrative structure since the technique Anne Brontë adopted to compose her first novel was undoubtedly innovative in comparison to those generally employed till the 50s of 1800 in English literature by women. Agnes Grey is in fact the first novel in the history of English women's literature where the author adopts a first-person female narrator 'who intimately addresses the 'Reader''.⁶⁷ This is considered a challenging innovation on the part of Anne Brontë since 'it allowed new freedoms for developing the woman's perspective in the world'.⁶⁸ Before her female narrators had been employed only by male writers, such as Samuel Richardson in Pamela and Clarissa. Women writers, Fanny Burney or Jane Austen, instead, having 'not yet claimed for themselves the authority of speaking directly through a woman as narrator'⁶⁹, still used in their novels a third-person narrator expressing a female point of view.

This totally new narrative device was therefore not introduced, as many believe, for the first time in English literature by Charlotte in Jane Eyre; the first person - narrator was a creation of Anne Brontë that symbolises not only her 'superiority' to previous and

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 31

⁶⁸Ibid.

contemporary women writers, but also, and especially, to her more 'famous' sister, Charlotte. Practically, this narrative innovation confirms how much she deserved an important place in the history of 19th-century female English literature; that very place that she has been denied for too long.

In his *Conversations in Ebury Street* George Moore launched in superlatives in praise of Agnes Grey: "The most perfect prose narrative in English literature...the one story in English literature in which style, characters and subject are in perfect keeping"⁷⁰

Anne Brontë's literary career has been affected for long time by an unjust comparison between her novels and the works of her sisters. As the brief analysis of the opinions of different critics has shown, in the comparison between Anne's novels and Charlotte and Emily's works the novels of the youngest were most condemned and undervalued. What particularly strikes is that Charlotte herself gave her contribution to the devaluation of her sister's literature. The oldest Brontë defined, in fact, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall a novel 'hardly desirable to preserve'. The choice of the subjects Anne dealt with in her last novel was, according to Charlotte, little consonant with her sisters mild character. It is evident that Charlotte had not realised how strong and determined her 'little' sister was.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Anne Brontë's literature's involvement in the 'Woman Question' is already clear in her first novel, Agnes Grey. In this work the author deals with the difficult existence of Victorian governess. Her peculiar handling of the question puts her in a contrasting position to other women novelists writing about the subject; Anne Brontë's picture of the life of a governess, in fact, goes further than the 'simple' description of the depressing existence of these 'outcasts'. Agnes Grey is the chance the youngest Brontë had been given not only to stress the difficulties and ambiguities inherent in this job, but also to prove the excellence of such a profession. In order to fulfil this second aim Anne Brontë, departing from the common belief that the governess'job was just an alternative to the lack of husband, makes Agnes decide to become a governess out of vocation and not out of pure necessity, and this certainly represents the distinctive character of Agnes Grey in comparison to all the other contemporary novels on the subject. No English novelist, in fact, before Anne Brontë had spoken of the governess'employment in such 'unusual' terms.

The focus on the importance of working within a woman's life, moreover, allows the author to introduce another important issue of the Victorian years: the role of marriage within women's lives. Agnes' decision of marrying only after achieving her economic independence, and Rosalie's miserable marriage not only show the reader that marriage must not be women's sole aim, but also anticipate themes and characters the author will largely dissect in her second and last novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.

⁷⁰ F. B. Pinion, op. cit., p. 242

IV. ‘...Remember You Are Bound to Your Husband for Life’.
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and The Condition of Married
Women

In the previous chapters I analysed the legal and economic position of Victorian women within marriage, summarised the aspects of the ‘Woman Question’ and pointed out the relationship between the ‘Question’ and Anne Brontë’s literature. Now I am going to see in which way The Tenant of Wildfell Hall deals with the world of Victorian women. I am going to point out the aspects of the ‘Question’ most stressed in the novel and determine what kind of interpretation of it the author offers through her last work.

I.

...remember you are bound to your husband for life⁴

In these few words is contained the problem that informs the whole of the second and last novel of Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Through fictitious episodes and characters the novel, in fact, represents the critical insight of the author into the question of the position of women within marriage, a question that, as previously shown, was one of the main topics at issue in a period characterised by the encounter of conservative ideals

⁴ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, op. cit., p. 374

with the first echoes of the English feminist movement. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall has been regarded by Elizabeth Langland as the place where Anne Brontë highlighted and attempted to correct the 'legal imbalances'² between the position of women and that of men within Victorian marriage; and thus, as the mirror of a perspective obviously informed by feminist premises. Nevertheless, one may argue that the feminist perspective inherent in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is crippling for two main reasons; first, because Helen eventually returns to her husband; second, because after her dreadful matrimonial experience she decides to enter a second marriage with a man who does not appear to be better than her previous husband. There is, indeed, some truth in these arguments, yet a thorough analysis of the novel will justify their presence in the novel not as negatively affecting the progressive attitude characterising the novel, but as resulting from Anne Brontë's own approach to the correction of the wrongs of her society that undoubtedly places her in a closer position to 20th-century feminist literature than to Victorian women's literature. In order to correct the wrongs inherent in the difficult conditions of women within unsuccessful marriages to which they were bound for ever, Anne Brontë proposed as an alternative to divorce (she wrote The Tenant of Wildfell Hall nearly ten years before the passing of the first English divorce law³) a thorough re-examination of the principles which were the basis of unhappy marriages, and, therefore, her own new notion of matrimony as the union of two equals that reveals the feminist mark of her 'forma mentis'.

² Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 119

³ See chap. 1

II.

In Their Proper Sphere, Inga-Stina Ewbank defined Anne Brontë's moralism as more significant than her feminist vindication; she wrote:

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is not a feminist novel in the obvious sense. Its central concern has nothing to do with Women's Rights; Helen does not complain of her legal position in marriage, although it means that her husband has charge of all her money ... and that - whatever he does to her - she cannot divorce him. These points seem hardly to have occurred in Anne Brontë. And yet, through the very nature of its central concern, this novel is feminist in the deepest sense of the word. Without any thought of what ought to be the proper sphere of a woman writer, it analyses passion...exhibits profligacy and demonstrates vice; as demanded by its theme⁴

Anne Brontë 'exhibits profligacy and demonstrates vices'; this said enough according to Ewbank about the general function of her last novel; 'she is a moralist first'⁵, she continued, 'and a woman second; and if the woman gets in the way of the moralist, all the

⁴ Inga-Stina Ewbank, Their Proper Sphere. A Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early-Victorian Female Novelists, Edward Arnold (Publishers) LTD, London, 1966, p. 84

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85

worse for the woman'.⁶ Ewbank's thesis, though putting forward interesting arguments, cannot however be regarded as conclusive; by largely stressing Anne Brontë's literature's ethical purposes it offers a limited reading of such a complex novel. Indeed, the desire to offer the reader her ethical point of view on her contemporary world was strong in Brontë, whose words in the Introduction to the second edition of the novel denote the moral perspective of her second work:

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 it⁷

Nonetheless, it does not represent the final aim of the novel, rather the first and fundamental point to start with in order to make possible the achievement of her ideal of marriage. The moral lesson the wretched existence of Arthur Huntingdon offers to Gilbert Markham reveals the flaws of the Victorian system of education - that affording too much indulgence to men transforms them into brutal, arrogant, self-confident and vicious creatures whose misconduct negatively influences their wives and their marriages in general; it is only by analysing closely the nature of the bad example offered by Arthur's conduct that Gilbert learns the importance of the use of reason as the fundamental device to control one's own impulses, to practise self-restraint and to shoulder the moral burden

⁶ Ibid.

of one's own actions. Yet, Arthur's story is important also because it allows Gilbert to have access to Helen's notion of men, a fundamental step for one who aims to share the rest of his life with her. In other words, through Arthur's case, Gilbert learns how to be the right husband for a woman seeking a marriage based on equality - in which the man has to play the role of the partner, not the master. The feminist perspective, therefore, is not secondary to that of the morals in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall but complementary; the introduction of a heroine who breaks all the golden rules of the Victorian convention - she flees from her husband, she earns her living as a painter - not only cannot be explained as casual, but also casts a light on anything but an irrelevant feature of Anne Brontë's second work of fiction. Among the wrongs of her society, the troublesome condition of married women particularly engaged her attention and stimulated her critical attitude, and, according to her belief of being born to join the fight for the improvement of her world, she embarked on her critical analysis of the question that evidently assumed feminist dimensions. Elizabeth Langland offered a reading of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall revealing the feminist character of the novel;

...*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence. In so doing, it takes on a radical feminist dimension. The outraged reviews that greeted its publication - the castigations . . . it received for its coarseness and brutality - were no doubt prompted as much by the portrayal of the protagonist as by the portrayal of her dissolute husband. Her

⁷ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, op. cit., p. 3

decision to flee an unhappy marriage with her young son violated
Victorian social convention and law⁶

It is in Anne Brontë's approval and defence of the tenant of Wildfell Hall that it is easy to trace her attitude of challenge to her world; Helen has broken all the moral and social conventions of her society, but Anne Brontë not only did not blame her but she also presented her to the reader as an example of excellence. The critical spirit underlining The Tenant of Wildfell Hall appears even more evident if we consider the fact that it was written in the period when the equation of married women with non-person had reached its climax. As pointed out in the first chapter, once married man and woman became one person, this person according to the law was the husband. All the belongings of the wife, as well as her body, passed under his total control; even her earnings were subject to seizure by the man; finally, she was not allowed to divorce him or separate from him 'however profligate he may be'⁶

Given this historical background, thus, it is evident that the feminist matrix of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall cannot be simplicisticly ignored or dismissed. In many respects the novel by presenting a heroine who challenges by her flight the contemporary concept of woman as her husband's property and confronts with her unconventional ideas the principles of the Victorian method of education, represents one of the first open attacks on the Victorian status quo on the part of a woman writer. No woman writers before Anne Brontë had treated in such bold terms the question of the role of married women : 'We may find surprising the degree to which Anne Brontë's plot in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

⁶ Elizabeth Langland, op. cit., p. 119

makes a fictional argument for the correction of [the] legal imbalances [in the position of nineteenth-century women]’⁴⁰; nor had any woman mastered the world of men with so much sincerity and courage. She was writing her protest in a period when the feminist movement had just begun its fight and when none of the most important legal changes in the condition of women had taken place yet. It is, therefore, according to all these premises that her attempt at treating feminist instances must be read and placed in the history of English feminist literature.

III.

The starting point for Anne Brontë’s exploration of the complex reality of Victorian marriage is the system of education based on the fundamental difference between boys and girls and on the affording of too much indulgence to the first. The question of education, as is clear from the previous chapter, is not new to Anne Brontë’s literature; Agnes Grey, in fact, was essentially focused on such a complex and contemporary topic of the Victorian years. Education was something the youngest Brontë considered to be a relevant part in the life of an individual (she had personally experienced through the example of her brother how an education based on wrong principles could negatively affect the life of individuals), however woman or man she or he may be, since it allowed the exercise of those faculties essential to the redemption of one’s own soul. This the reason why she assumed a critical attitude towards the wrong and sexist structure of her contemporary

⁴⁰ Ibid.

educational system granting complete freedom, actually too much, to men and limiting and suffocating women's faculties and sphere of action. In assuming this critical position towards sexist discrimination Anne Brontë not only resumed the arguments of the Enlightenment feminism²⁴, but also anticipated the critical and active attitude of later feminists, like Florence Nightingale and Harriet Taylor²⁵, who around the 1850's and 60's came out from behind closed doors to attack the actual system of education and claim a more equal one.

The correction of the imbalances between the education provided for men and that provided for women was, according to Anne Brontë, the first step towards the birth of an ideal of marriage informed by equality. The typical matrimonial situation in which the wife endured physical and emotional tortures on the part of an arrogant, brutal, selfish and indifferent husband was the result of an education affording too much indulgence to the male sex and teaching women the exercise of patience and endurance. In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall all the male characters are represented as the typical products of the contemporary educational system; though in different degrees, they are all arrogant, selfish, self-confident and over-indulged. In the novel, in fact, it is not possible to trace a hero; even Gilbert Markham, Helen's future husband, is presented as a character in need of reform.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁴ See chap. 3, p. 80

²⁵ See chap. 2, p. 45

That Anne Brontë was convinced that the origin of the corrupted nature of men was the indulgence parents afforded them is clear from the theory Helen exposes to her aunt to justify the wicked nature of Arthur Huntingdon;

Yes, provided he is not incorrigible - that is, the more I long to deliver him from his faults - to give him an opportunity of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his genuine goodness - to do my utmost to help his better self against his worse, and make him what he would have been if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish, miserly father...and a foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent...doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress⁴³

The same argument about the effects of an education based on too much indulgence is likewise highlighted by Gilbert Markham when, after the completion of his *bildung*, reporting retrospectively his quarrel with Helen about the different education provided for women and men, he maintains:

⁴³ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, op. cit., pp. 176-77

I was naturally touchy, or, it would not have vexed me so much.
Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and
some other ladies of my acquaintance¹⁴

The correction that Anne Brontë proposed to eradicate the causes underlining the wicked nature of men implied the revision both of the principles regulating the actual system of education and of the role of parents in the process of education; the latter, as it will be indicated later, presupposed also a general reconsideration of the role and functions of the wife within marriage. The principle 'his wife shall undo what his mother did'¹⁵ could not be the basis of marriage in a reality in which men entered the matrimonial life already imbued with unchallengeable values. The example of the marriage between Helen and Arthur is certainly explanatory in this regard since it not only shows the fruitlessness of Helen's attempts to redeem her husband, but also the indifference of the vicious Arthur to his wife's influence. To make really possible the redemption of men it was necessary to relegate the parents to the role of educators that was instead ascribed to the wife; and the education that the first were called to give to their son had not to afford him indulgence or let him learn by himself how to master temptation. It had to be based on the principle of reason and had to show through example the right path to follow to exercise one's own self-restraint in order not to fall prey to vices. The above-mentioned quarrel between Gilbert Markham and Helen where the second's progressive ideas encounter the conservative attitude of the first can certainly be regarded as the manifesto of Anne Brontë's view on the matter of education. Here, in fact, through Helen the author casts a

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 36

light on the evident wrongs of her contemporary educational structure, highlights the sexist discrimination inherent in it and proposes her different model. The origin of the quarrel is little Arthur's terror in front of a glass of wine he has been invited to drink, 'Arthur, especially shrank from the ruby nectar as if in terror and disgust, and was ready to cry when urged to take it'⁴⁵. The reason of his frightened disgust is soon unravelled by Helen herself who explains his attitude towards wine as resulting from her own desire 'to save him from one degrading vice at least'⁴⁷ by making him 'swallow a little wine or weak spirits - and - water, by way of medicine when he was sick'.⁴⁸ The connection made by Helen between wine and vice causes obvious amazement in an audience accustomed to a behavioural and social code according to which drinking wine is not regarded as a crime, and it is also considered as one of the features characterising the male nature; 'what a man you will make of him...' ⁴⁹, says Gilbert's mother, 'The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped!'.²⁰ By interposing between her son and his experience of wine Helen doubts not only the educational model at work in her contemporary society, but also the 'extraordinary' capacity to resist temptations men were believed to be endowed with;

What is that constitutes virtue, Mrs Graham ? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist ? - Is he a strong man that overcomes great

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 177

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 30

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 31

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

obstacles and performs surprising achievements, though by dint of great muscular exertion, and at the risk of some subsequent fatigue, or he that sits in his chair all day, with nothing to do more laborious than stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth ? If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path...not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone²⁴

What Gilbert attacks here is Helen's position as mediator between her son and the corrupt reality of the outside world; it is not by leading him by his hand and protecting him from the lure of temptations that she will nurture his male character, teach him how to master temptation and avoid falling prey to vice. On the contrary, by pampering him and making him eschew direct contact with temptation, as she has done with wine, she will probably be the cause of the spoiling of 'his spirit'²² and of his developing into 'a mere Miss Nancy'.²³ It is as if here Gilbert is reminding her that their society is based on the fundamental dichotomy between the sphere of men and that of women, characterised by different aspects and functions, and that, therefore, also the education provided for them must be different. What she is doing with the education of her son clearly shows that she is educating him according to the model provided for girls (as pointed out in the second chapter, according to the Victorian standpoint girls had to be kept away from the evil consequences of temptations on their frail beings by limiting their sphere of action to the

²⁰ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 33

home). Nevertheless, it is clear that Helen's overlapping of the two spheres is not the result of her confusion about the right line to follow to educate her son, but the obvious outcome of both her personal experience with men 'supposed' to be good at resisting temptation and of the author's concept of equality between men and women. The concept of a weaker and a nobler sex has no natural justification for Anne Brontë; both the sexes needed to be taught how to impose self-restraint to overcome temptation, in other words, as the following passage confirms, both men and women need to be shown the right path to follow to virtue.

Now *I* would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression' ... as for my son - if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world - one that has "*seen life*", and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it, as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society - I would rather that he died tomorrow...²⁴

According to Helen there is no distinction between men and women's capacity to deal with temptations; they are both prone to err if not alerted to the perils they will probably meet. She has experienced personally the veracity and foundation of such an argument

²⁴ Ibid.

and, therefore, the inadequacy of a system trusting too much in 'the superior fortitude'²⁵ of the 'nobler sex'²⁶ to learn by itself to overcome 'dangers and trials'²⁷,

... I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions)
stumbling and blundering along the path of life, sinking into every
pitfall, and breaking their shins over every impediment that lies in
their way...²⁸

She wants instead to prove the adequacy of her different ideal of education and her son, sent to her by God to be educated, is the chance she has been given to fulfil such an aim and, therefore, to make her contribution to the correction of society's wrongs, 'If ever I am a mother I will zealously strive against this *crime* of over indulgence'²⁹.

Her ideal of education, in which the role of parents as mediators between the outside world and the child plays a relevant part, is also the basis of a different ideal of wifedom according to which the wife is freed from the hard and, often, frustrating task of redeeming the corrupt soul of her husband. Her experience with Arthur Huntingdon has shown her the presumption of her conviction to be so good to undo what an indulgent mother has done, and has pointed to her the right path to follow to prevent other women experiencing the pains and the disillusion she has experienced in the past. Nevertheless, as will be indicated later, her son is not the only character in the novel that symbolises

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 34-35

²⁵ Ibid., p. 34

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 32

²⁹ Ibid., p. 226

Helen's victory over her world; even Gilbert Markham with his *bildung* that transforms him from an 'impudent puppy' into a mature man confirms the positive nature of Helen's model of education.

The introduction of Arthur Huntingdon as the character on whom the negative influences of the educational system are more manifest is indispensable to Anne Brontë to stress the inappropriateness of the actual educational structure in order to make the reader aware of the urgent reform she is proposing throughout the novel. Arthur, in fact, is presented in the book as by no means capable of self-restraint and being not able to trace in his incapacity to resist temptation the negative effects of the indulgence afforded him since his childhood, 'he has no more idea of exerting himself to overcome obstacles than he has of restraining his natural appetites; and these two things are the ruin of him. I lay both to the charge of his harsh yet careless father and his madly indulgent mother'³⁰. He does not ascribe the cause of his fallible nature to the wrong premises on which his society has based the education of boys, but to the innate nature of men, that is, in his opinion his vices are the natural outcome of his biology;

It is a woman's nature to be constant-to love one and one only,
blindly, tenderly, and for ever - bless them, dear creatures ! ... but
you must have some commiseration for us, Helen; you must give us
a little more licence, for as Shakespeare has it -

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 225-26

“However we do praise ourselves,
Our fancies are most giddy and unfirm,
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won
Than women’s are”³¹

...you are an angel of heaven; only be not too austere in your
divinity, and remember that I am a poor, fallible mortal³²

Here, the presence of the arguments used by contemporary ideologists to justify men’s sexual and moral behaviour in the eyes of society is obvious; Arthur is using the theory of double standards as a screen for his misconduct. Naturally, it is rather obvious that men’s inclination to vice could be only partially ascribed to natural causes. As pointed out earlier, it is rather fruit of the wrong system of education that instead of making them good at overcoming temptation made them actually easy prey to it.

The exploitation of the principles of biology and the system of education combines to make the majority of the male characters of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, depicted by Anne Brontë as typical products of her contemporary society, feel free to act as they most like; there is always an excuse ready to justify their behaviours, however related to their nature or to their education or to both. Furthermore, the fact that they trace the origin of their wickedness in their innately corrupt and fallible nature also makes them usually leave all the moral burden of their misdeeds on the shoulders of their wives, known as being creatures characterised by an immense goodness and wisdom. Given these assumptions, it is clear the reason why the marriages described in Helen’s diary are all characterised by the

typical situation in which men act as brutal, arrogant, unfaithful and indifferent creatures towards their patient wives who, 'bound for ever' to them must, instead, try to endure this condition. Naturally, as is clear from this analysis, the attitude of the author of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall towards this subject was obviously critical and by no means yielding. Anne Brontë's aim was not that of exposing impartially the differences inherent in the education of 19th - century boys and girls but to trace in the wrong structure of the contemporary education not only the marks of a sexist approach to it, but also the cause of the impossible and improbable harmony in the relationships between men and women.

IV.

Helen's critical attitude towards the reality of men naturally places her in conflict with the male characters surrounding her, and particularly with her husband, Arthur. Her aggressive temper and her inclination to lecture him are traced by Arthur as the elements revealing her 'ignorance' about the proper duties and proper sphere of a woman. In the eyes of her husband, therefore, Helen does not stand as the symbol of excellence; instead, he could trace those features denoting the excellence of a woman in Millicent Hargrave whose general attitude towards her role of wife more closely recalls the 19th-century concept of womanhood in his opinion :

³¹ Ibid., p. 236

³² Ibid.

...my pretty tyrant, you'll make me regret my choice in good earnest, and envy my friend Hattersley his meek little wife - she's quite a pattern to her sex, Helen: he 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 of 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 any fear or botheration. She never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, do what he will. He says there's no such a jewel in all England, and he swears he wouldn't take a kingdom for her³³

The link between blind acceptance and excellence sounds rather awkward, but, as Arthur says thereby revealing the limitations of his *forma mentis*, the characteristics he finds in Millicent are actually those that make a woman 'a pattern to her sex', preliminary condition to the absolute enjoyment of the pleasures of life on the part of men. No wonder, therefore, that a woman acting in such a manner as to grant all the possible freedom to her husband is compared here to a 'jewel'. If Millicent is a 'jewel', Helen, instead, is 'tyrant', a 'she-tiger'³⁴; if Millicent is a 'pattern to her sex', Helen is not. She never shows sympathy to his 'problems'; she is always too inquisitive about his conduct and never ready to make any allowances for his mistakes; in other words, she acts as an

³³ Ibid., pp. 257-58

obstacle between him and his pleasures. On the other hand, Arthur does not represent, or better, turns out not to be the image of the husband Helen had idealistically and naively pictured in her mind. In fact, soon after the first days of their matrimonial life, she realises how opposite her ideas about the functions of marriage and of the wife are from his. He wants the angel, but Helen soon discovers that in their marriage the angel cannot survive.

Arthur...is a man without self-restraint or lofty aspirations - a lover of pleasure, given up to animal enjoyments...his notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not my notions. Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home - to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her; and when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return; no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime³⁵

Helen's ideal of marriage is as much based on the interrelation between the male and female sphere as Arthur's is on the natural opposite of them; as is evident from what she maintains, she does not want to be someone who he can use according to his mood and his pleasure. She wants to be considered one of his priorities and regarded as an important part of his life. Her concept of wifeness, moreover, does not include the ornamental

³⁴ Ibid., p. 235

³⁵ Ibid., p. 244

function of the woman as his does; 'he considered me a worthy object of pride',³⁶ she says recalling their first journey to London; he wants her to be his pretty doll to be shown as a trophy, and from his attitude it is clear that, according to the general concept of the period of the intellectual faculties of women, he desires others to admire and approve his wife's physical appearance rather than her intellectual qualities. Theirs cannot even be regarded as an intellectual union; Arthur does not find comfort in conversing with Helen just as Helen does not enjoy a conversation with him; 'I do all I can to amuse him, but it is impossible to get him interested in what I like most to talk about; while, on the other hand, he likes to talk about things that cannot interest me - or even that annoy me'.³⁷

V.

Gilbert Markham is first presented in the novel as being not less influenced and characterised by the general sexist mental habit than Arthur Huntingdon; therefore, he is first introduced to the reader, or better, he introduces himself to the reader as a character not possessing the qualities needed to fit Helen's ideal of marriage. Nevertheless, though appearing so close to the image of Arthur, he actually differs from him in his different attitude towards the moral lesson that Helen gives him, and this represents indeed an important element of his character because it both allows him to mature as the perfect husband for Helen and Anne Brontë to demonstrate to her public that a different approach

³⁶ Ibid., p. 217

³⁷ Ibid., p. 208

to the function of education and a more rational concept of women are the basis of an ideal marriage as the union of two equals.

While throughout the novel Gilbert matures and undergoes a *bildung*, Arthur deteriorates; his soul as well as his body undergoes a process which can be termed as an *anti-bildung*. In fact, if in the end Gilbert is a happy mature man who has learnt what the principles regulating marriage are and what it is that constitutes the excellence of a woman, Arthur Huntingdon, deaf to Helen's suggestions and incapable of fighting the deep-rooted effects of his vices, is dead and his death stands as the symbol of the cracks in the nineteenth-century educational system.

Gilbert's *bildung* represents the focal point of the novel. It is he himself that, under the pretext of owing a friend 'a return of confidence'³⁸, goes through the main steps of his *bildung* from the mature man's standpoint; this allows him not only to show the reader how he came to a revision of his concept of woman, but also to point out the faults of the wrong attitude of contemporary society towards men which is the cause of his narrow-mindedness and arrogance.

At the beginning of the novel Gilbert's ideal of woman still recalls the contemporary stereotype; that is why in the comparison that he draws between Helen and Eliza Millward he professes his preference for the second.

Helen Graham, of course, does not instantly captivate Markham. He is confused about what constitutes excellence in a woman, a

³⁸ Ibid., p. 9

confusion that stems from the indulgence afforded him as a man...When Gilbert begins his narrative, he believes his affections are engaged by Eliza Millward, the local vicar's daughter, and he notices Mrs Graham only to criticise³⁹

'I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home'⁴⁰, says Gilbert to himself meeting Helen the first time, '...the lips...had something about them that betokened, I thought, no very soft or amiable temper'⁴¹, and he traces in her eyes an 'indefinable expression of quiet scorn'⁴² rather provoking to him. In contrast with the 'strange lady'⁴³, Eliza Millward, 'a very engaging little creature'⁴⁴, has initially a stronger power of attraction to him; her eyes do not betray the same expression of 'quiet scorn' as Helen's, but they enchanted him because being 'diabolically'⁴⁵ 'bewitching'⁴⁶ as well as 'her manners'⁴⁷, recalling 'those of a pretty, playful kitten'⁴⁸, meet his approval. Nevertheless, the more he becomes acquainted with Helen's 'eloquence, and depth of thought and feeling'⁴⁹, the more his criteria according to which defining the excellence of a woman change. Practically, the more the gulf between Eliza and Helen becomes clear in his mind, 'I found her rather frivolous and even a little insipid, compared

³⁹ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 129

⁴⁰ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *op. cit.*, p. 17

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52

with the more mature and earnest Mrs Graham'⁵⁰, the more the evidence of his progressing *bildung* become manifest.

...One bright February morning, during twenty minutes' stroll along the moor, she laid aside her usual asperity and reserve, and fairly entered into conversation with me, discoursing with so much eloquence, and depth of thought and feeling, on subject, happily coinciding with my own ideas, and looking so beautiful withal, that I went home enchanted; and on the way (morally) started to find myself thinking that, after all, it would, perhaps, be better to spend one's days with such a woman than with Eliza Millward⁵¹

This passage not only records the first results of Gilbert's intellectual growth, but also his own acknowledgement of such an important achievement; Gilbert by now 'has...learned to recognise reason and judgement as excellent things in a woman'⁵² and this is the first important step that marks the distance between him and Arthur Huntingdon, his circle of friends and in general from his world's general attitude towards women. Yet, though his first considerable achievement, he has still much to learn in order to overcome the conventions of his society and complete his *bildung*. His behaviour throughout the novel, in fact, betrays a still powerful influence of 19th - century 'traditional' education on him. As Elizabeth Langland pointed out, in fact, one of the examples still revealing the presence

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 53

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 52

⁵² Elizabeth Langland, op. cit., p. 130

of the effects of his society's mental habit on Gilbert is his opinion of Mary Millward in which the influx of 19th-century belief is easily recognisable and according to which the lack of external beauty in a woman implied a similar lack of mental virtues;

Mary was...a plain, quiet, sensible girl...She was trusted and valued by her father, loved and courted by all dogs, cats, children, and poor people, and slighted and neglected by everybody else⁵³

That Gilbert's opinion of Mary Millward evidently highlights how much he has still to learn to be on a par with Helen is clear also from the different, or rather, divergent conception she has of Mary. Helen, in fact, has a predilection for Mary among all the other women of Linden-Car; she regards her as the only one in the community to be worthy of being called woman; 'she has many estimable qualities, which such as you cannot be expected to perceive or appreciate'⁵⁴, she says to Gilbert pointing out the space still interposing between a view clear of prejudices and conventions and his.

Another substantial factor that surely reveals the influence of the education Gilbert had been given is the manner he responds to certain situations. Gilbert before the reading of Helen's diary still appears prey to his instincts. As Juliet MacMaster posited, in the comparison between Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert 'it is Arthur who emerges as the passionless figure'.⁵⁵ Gilbert's violent assault on Mr Lawrence, who he believes to be

⁵³ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, op. cit., pp. 18-19

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Langland, op. cit., p. 130

⁵⁵ Juliet MacMaster, "Imbecile Laughter" and "Desperate Earnest" in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in *Modern Language Quarterly*, 43, Dec. 1982, p. 365

Helen's lover, is the right example that justifies this statement. As soon as he meets him after over-hearing and misunderstanding a conversation between he and Helen, Gilbert is overwhelmed by a mixture of blind rage and jealousy that leads him to hit him with 'convulsive energy'⁵⁶;

He said no more; for, impelled by some fiend at my elbow, I had seized my whip by the small end, and - swift and sudden as a flash of lightning - brought the other down upon his head. It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead, while he reeled a moment in his saddle, and then fell backward to the ground⁵⁷

'It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction...': in Gilbert the equilibrium between passion and good sense is evidently absent and this incapacity to balance the needs of instinct with a correct use of sense is a clear proof of male arrogance stemming from the over-indulgence they were being afforded throughout their lives. Even his decision not to go and listen to Helen's explanation of the nature of the impediment to their relationship, which is the fruit of the high-regard in which he holds himself and his point of view, clearly demonstrates the lack of good sense in him. It is only when he meets Helen, who, disgusted and disappointed by his immature behaviour, goes away firmly determined not

⁵⁶ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, op. cit., p. 115
⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 116

to give him any explanation anymore, 'I see you're not worthy of [the explanation]' ⁵⁸, that the first signs of his good sense become evident; 'I soon began to regret my precipitancy' ⁵⁹, he says when Helen is already gone. Given this, it is clear that at this point of the novel, Gilbert's *bildung* is only at half way; his sense is there somewhere in his mind, as his regret about his irrational behaviour clearly shows, but it still needs more exercise to achieve a perfect balance with his passion. The dominance of his passionate side makes him still act as the majority of the men of the surrounding world, that is to respond with arrogance to every situation and to believe their ideas to be the only reasonable ones and, thus, to refuse all the other points of view. When Helen reproaches him with not having sense enough to ask her for a justification for her encounter with Mr Lawrence, 'You should have come to me, after all...and heard what I had to say' ⁶⁰, it is in fact his arrogance and high self-esteem that makes him reply:

To what end should I have done so? - You could not have enlightened me farther, on the subject which alone concerned me; nor could you have made me discredit the evidence of my senses ⁶¹

Nevertheless, that Gilbert is on his way to maturity, or, more precisely, that his mind is ready to be opened to other points of view to compare with his own is evident in his final decision to listen to Helen's explanation or, as he himself says, to 'Anything, that could, in

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 123

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 124

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 127

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 128

the last degree, tend to restore my former opinion of you'.⁶² Helen's diary shows that indeed Helen's is not the artefix rather the victim of the crime she has been accused of by the community of Linden-Car; thus, the diary serves to validate Helen in the eyes of Gilbert 'at the very moment Gilbert begins to doubt her'⁶³,

It is only by incorporating Helen's diary into his narrative that Markham can reinterpret the Fallen Woman and runaway wife of Victorian convention as the model of excellent womanhood that the novel proposes⁶⁴

The diary, however, serves not only as a clarification of the mystery surrounding the relationship between Helen and Mr Lawrence, but also, and especially, to Gilbert's final achievement of his *bildung*. As previously mentioned, the diary is in fact necessary for Gilbert to 'accede to [Helen]'s assessment of men and the probity of her 'harshness' in correcting their weaknesses'⁶⁵, indispensable condition to becoming Helen's future husband. It is only the reading of her diary, in fact, that makes Gilbert come into contact and approve Helen's different idea of marriage which does not encompass the concept of the "proper spheres" but is based on the fundamental collaboration of two equal spouses. That the diary eventually achieves this aim is evident in chapter 46 when Gilbert, in warning Mr Lawrence not to marry Jane Wilson, so justifies his suggestion:

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Elizabeth Langland, op. cit., pp. 123-24

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 123

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 134

if you married her, your home will be rayless and comfortless; and it would break your heart at last to find yourself united to one so wholly incapable of sharing your tastes, feelings, and ideas...⁶⁶

The wretched marriage between Helen and Arthur Huntingdon has shown Gilbert that the lack of harmony between the two spouses' feelings, tastes and ideas naturally implies a more general disharmony within marriage which affects not only the relationship between man and wife, but also their relation with the surrounding reality. The acknowledgement of such a situation also allows him finally to trace the causes of Helen's cautious and cold attitude towards the male world of Linden-Car and, therefore, wholly to justify it;

Well! I could readily forgive her prejudice against me, and her hard thoughts of our sex in general, when I saw to what brilliant specimens her experience had been limited⁶⁷

The mistrust and disgust that Helen shows towards the male nature is read by Gilbert as the only obvious outcome of the dreadful experience that such an excellent woman has had with the 'nobler' sex; and what is worth noticing to highlight the progresses of Gilbert's *bildung* is that here his attitude towards the fleeing women does not include blame or condemnation but approval and sympathy.

The diary, moreover, allows also Gilbert too to come to terms with the evident inadequacy of the contemporary method of education his society has provided for boys. At last, he

⁶⁶ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, op. cit., pp. 417-18

must recognise the foundation of the arguments Helen has put forward during their controversy on the matter. The gradual decline of Arthur's body and soul, recorded in minute detail in the diary, is the evident mark of the failure of an entire system based both on the use of too much indulgence towards men's actions and on the immense trust in their 'superior' fortitude; just as the positive influence that the example set by Arthur has in the shaping of his more mature attitude stands for him as the confirmation of what Helen has said about the necessity of a mediator between the 'educando' and the outside world. What Gilbert is called to do after reading the diary is to prove his understanding of the moral lesson contained in the diary, or better, he must demonstrate that he is different, that he has learnt how to be different from Arthur and his friends by transforming his arrogant and passionate temper into a balanced attitude towards life. Practically, he must show Helen that he is her equal and ready to enter the reality of marriage with her. Notwithstanding, his *bildung* still needs to reach an higher stage and this is clear from his confusion before the rose that Helen in the end offers him as the symbol of their love;

This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of *them* could bear: the cold rain of winter has sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 396

flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals. - Will you
have it ? ⁶⁸

The Christmas rose surviving all the hardships is a clear metaphor of Helen's love for Gilbert, but it is only with the help of Helen that Gilbert can finally grasp the meaning of the gesture and come to terms with the foolishness and dullness which has led him to doubt the excellence of such a woman - we must remember that Gilbert's conviction to be no longer loved by Helen because belonging to an inferior rank makes him nearly lose her for ever. Now he is ready to accept the rose and be worthy of it; his gesture in picking up the flower Helen had thrown away marks, in fact, the final achievement of his *bildung* and it is only in this very moment that he could be finally accepted and approved by Helen as her loving and sympathising soul sharing the joys and burdens of marriage.

VI.

Helen Huntingdon is a character who grows and matures throughout the novel; just like Gilbert, she undergoes a *bildung* that from a naive girl transforms her into a mature woman with a critical attitude towards both the ideal of man her society proposes and towards the function of marriage. In many respects her actions and her ideas recall a feminist 'forma mentis'; her decision to flee from her husband, to support herself working as a painter, her view on the function of education and marriage, in fact, not only go

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 482

against Victorian conventions, but also imply a claim for equality and an attempt to show the capacity of women to cope with the 'corrupted' outer world from which they were kept away according the common belief that they would have not survived it;

to subscribe [women] to the myth that [they] need protection from the harsh realities of a competitive business world is to leave them, ironically, vulnerable to an inescapable domestic hell of violence, coarseness, and brutality such as a man like Huntingdon can create ⁶⁹

The disastrous marriage between Helen and Arthur Huntingdon is in fact not only employed by the author to permit Helen and Gilbert's *bildung* (through her experience with Arthur Helen comes to the rejection of her previous ideal of marriage - evidently recalling the Victorian notion of matrimony - and matures an unconventional approach to it; Gilbert's *bildung*, as previously explained, owes its achievement to the example set by Arthur and Helen's unhappy union), but also to point that indeed the reality of the home could be far more threatening than the outside world. The emotional violence Helen is forced to endure during her marriage to Huntingdon is in fact nowhere traceable in her 'alternative' status as a single woman, though the serenity and calmness of her single life is however relative; we must remember that as soon as she assumes the clothes of Helen Graham, she becomes an outlaw in constant fear to be sought out and forced to re-enter the hell of her marriage.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 140

Nevertheless, the question whether to include the name of Helen among feminist heroines or not needs a thorough examination. As previously stated, in fact, her decision eventually to return to her husband and then to remarry can easily be interpreted as the elements affecting the feminist dimension of the novel by making Helen appear as a not very convincing feminist character. The passage, or better, the voluntary regress from a condition of independence to the conventionality of marriage, in fact, seems to alter the progressive dimension of the novel, but, in effect, it is an essential part of the design of the novel.

The image of the mature Helen with which the reality of Linden-Car is brought into contact by no means recalls that of the stereotype of the Victorian woman. In her strikingly unconventional ideas about education and in her professional approach to what in that period was regarded as a female hobby the inhabitants of Linden-Car as well as the reader trace the essence of her peculiarity in comparison to the rest of the female reality; 'she betrayed a lamentable ignorance...On household matters, and all the little niceties of cookery, and such things, that every lady had to be familiar with' ⁷⁰, complains amazed Mrs Graham after meeting the mysterious tenant of Wildfell Hall. On the other hand, Helen appears to be rather self-confident as far as the techniques of paintings are concerned and evidently at ease in her working environment, the Studio. The introduction of Helen's studio is of primary importance to the definition of Helen's unconventionality since it stresses even more the difference between Helen and the rest of the community by placing her in a progressive dimension clearly opposed to the static and conservative

world of Linden-Car. The opposition between the two realities is evident in chapter 5 when visiting Helen, Gilbert and his sister Rose, introduced in the Studio and not in the traditional parlour, respond to the invitation with the typical amazement of who is still foreign to her different perspective of the world;

To our surprise, we were ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter's easel, with a table beside it covered with rolls of canvas, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints, etc. ⁷²

The importance that the studio assumes for Helen is strictly linked to the function of this place in her life; in contrast to the rest of the women surrounding her, in fact, she is a working woman who counts on her own abilities to support herself and her son. Helen does not use painting as a means of amusement, 'I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement' ⁷³; she speaks of her art in terms of profit and, what is worth noticing is that her son also displays a perfect awareness of the close connection between his mother's artistic skills and money; 'mamma sends all her pictures to London...and somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money' ⁷⁵, says little Arthur betraying his belonging to a different and new dimension of reality. Helen, therefore, in the eyes of the community of Linden-Car is unconventional not only because she is ignorant about the proper duties of contemporary woman or because she earns her living herself without counting on the

⁷⁰ Anne Brontë, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, op. cit., p. 15

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 46

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 47

support of men, but also because she works as a painter, a profession generally performed at that time by men. This naturally betrays her closer association with the image of later women than to that of contemporary women and reveals the feminist mark of the novel. Instead, to the world of Grassdale she appears unconventional, or rather, 'criminal' because by fleeing from home she has challenged the contemporary legal system defining her as a property of her husband.

Wildfell Hall represents, therefore, a different reality based on unconventional and progressive values. Helen's abandonment of Wildfell Hall and return to Grassdale might therefore be misinterpreted as a possible decision to reject the feminist dimension and re-enter the dimension of conventionality. The reasons leading Anne Brontë to reincorporate Helen in her previous world, yet, stem from different intentions. First, Helen's return to her husband has a religious motivation; she comes back to Arthur in her final attempt to reconcile him with the word of God by making him repent of all his misdeeds, 'if I could only benefit your soul as well as your body, and awaken some sense of contrition...' ⁷³. Second, it is a necessary condition to the re-acquisition of her real identity (that of Helen Graham is only an assumed identity), to her consequent reintegration in her contemporary society and her reconciliation with the contemporary law she had challenged by her flight, which are the necessary premises to her future marriage to Gilbert, therefore, to the fulfilment of Anne Brontë's aim. Having shown the world the groundlessness of the theories affirming the incapability of women to deal with the corrupted reality of business, Helen can re-assume, or better, must reassume her place in society. As Helen Graham, in

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 416

fact, she cannot survive; she is an 'outlaw' and this would not only place her in a position of complete distance from the actual world of the first years of the nineteenth century, but also prevent her from marrying Gilbert. If Anne Brontë wanted to show her public that the ideal of marriage based on the equality between the two mature spouses could be attained in the contemporary society, she had to re-introduce Helen into her world. It is only by reconciling herself with the reality she had openly challenged by her flight that she can lay the basis for a future union with Gilbert. Furthermore, the Helen re-entering Grassdale is a different Helen. She is no longer the naive and pure girl who had entered the reality of Grassdale with an immense share of optimism and trust in her 'angelic' skills; she is now a mature woman who has proved to the world that women can survive without relying on the support of men and who has learnt to re-evaluate the male nature in the figure of Gilbert Markham. Her return to Arthur, moreover, allows her also to take her own revenge over her husband; 'Oh, Helen, if I had listened to you, it never would have come to this! And if I had heard you long ago - Oh, God! how different it would have been!' ⁷⁵; even Arthur, who had also despised his wife's habit to lecture him, at last must recognise the excellence of her purposes.

If Helen's return to her husband can be misinterpreted as an element of ambiguity in the character of Helen, her second marriage to Gilbert Markham has not been accepted as a positive element by the modern reader because throughout the novel he '...seems to be different only in degree not in kind from Huntingdon'. ⁷⁶ This theory, however, can be easily confuted on the grounds of Gilbert's *bildung* that, as previously pointed out, allows

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 443

him to overcome all the negative limitations typical of the majority of 19th-century men and to develop in a mature man provided with good sense and with a more mature concept of woman.

It is a mark of Brontë's realism, perhaps, that she does not present an ideal hero; she has pointed to the insidious effects of society's indulgence of men, and she will not wholly erase them in any character. However, we should note that the Gilbert who marries Helen Graham is chastened before he can become corrupt ⁷⁷

The marriage between Helen and Gilbert is not the means by which Anne Brontë came to the conclusion that marriage had to be the sole alternative for women in her society (this would have also implied her own failure as a woman); on the contrary, depicted as the union of two equals sharing thoughts, feelings and ideas it represents her personal correction to the actual matrimonial code based on the basic inequality between husband and wife. And it is in this conclusion to which she came only through a preliminary and necessary revision of the relevant function of education that it is possible to recognise those elements of the novel recalling feminist instances and to trace the justification of all those highlighted as ambiguous elements as part of the general plan of the novel.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 134
⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall with its frank attack on the ‘consequences’ stemming from 19th - century society’s ‘value-system based on the worship of machismo’⁷⁸ up to 1847, the year of its publication, is the English novel where the marks of a feminist approach are most clearly visible. Anne Brontë’s second and last work introduces into the English literary world the figure of a heroine with an innovative attitude towards the role of women within marriage and contemporary society. In stressing these aspects the author betrays her intention of highlighting the fundamental importance of reforms within the social and legal system of Victorian world. The novel, in fact, is evidently propositive in its aim. The sad story of Helen and Arthur’s marriage as well as the happy ending are not aimed at demonstrating ultimately that in the struggle between love and hate it is always love that triumphs. The aims of Anne Brontë are certainly more serious. The unsuccessful marriage between Helen and Arthur is the necessary step that allows the author to trace the cause of unhappy union in the flaws of an educational structure based on sexist premises; and the happy ending, made possible only by the achievement of maturity on Gilbert’s part, is the device through which the author can finally show not only the positive foundation of her argumentation about a future reform in the field of education, but also her personal progressive view on the nature of contemporary marriage.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. XVII

Conclusion

It is now possible to answer the questions raised in the Introduction. We can determine the nature of the role of women both within marriage and within Victorian society; point out the involvement of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall in the 'Woman Question'; highlight the elements of the novel which betray links between the novelist and feminism, and justify the presence of the marriage between Helen and Gilbert within the feminist perspective of the novel.

During the first part of Queen Victoria's reign married women had virtually no legal and economic power. They were considered property of their husbands who could treat them according to their wishes. They had no control over their children and they were legally not allowed to end unhappy marriages. Furthermore, they were not allowed to enter the working world; just a few professions were considered fit for women – the profession of letter, for example, was open to women since it did not interfere with home duties. As far as education was concerned, women had to face the prejudices of the conservative and bigot Victorian world. According to the majority of Victorians, women's education had to be aimed at learning only what women needed to become the perfect Angel of the hearth, or, as far as middle-class women were concerned, to acquire that knowledge indispensable for performing a governess' job – a profession women could enter in case of financial distress. However, though a significant number of Victorian men and, surprisingly, women accepted and justified this point of view on the basis of the 'natural' intellectual and physical inferiority of women to men, a small number

of people began to betray their discontent with this situation. They asked for reforms of the laws of marriage and divorce, of the educational system and of the laws concerned with the sphere of work. These were obviously the first echoes of nineteenth-century English feminism that in a period of less than a hundred years improved the condition of English married and single women.

The English literature of the period also dealt with the 'Woman Question'. The handling of the question, however, differed from one novel to the other, or better, from one category of novels to the other. The majority of female novels written in this period, in fact, were termed by George Eliot 'silly novels by silly Lady novelists'; they were novels informed with futile principles and written only 'from vanity'. Only a small number of novels displayed a more serious involvement in the question of women on the part of the authors - the works by the Brontës and Elizabeth Gaskell are clear examples of this kind of novels. In these works, in fact, it is possible to trace the attempt of the novelists at highlighting the wrongs of their society as far as the situation of women was concerned. Nevertheless, the majority of these novels do not offer a real feminist reading of the problem. Their attacks on the bigotry and sexism of the Victorian years are affected by their fear to upset the status quo and by the strong influences of the Conservative theories about women. Like their creators the heroines of these novels, thus, are 'ambiguous' characters continuously oscillating between conventionality and emancipation; as said in the second chapter, these heroines could be regarded as 'dichotomic selves'.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is the novel of the period where this dichotomy between conventionality and emancipation is less evident. The choices of Helen Huntingdon, the heroine of the novel, not only place her in a more emancipated position in comparison to other contemporary heroines, but also betray Anne Brontë's emancipated attitude towards the condition of married women that clearly recalls feminist views. Through the sad example of the wretched marriage between Helen and her first husband, Arthur Huntingdon, the novel exposes the wrong and sexist principles inherent in Victorian marriage. The book can be regarded as the truthful document of what the legal and economic condition of married women was at that time. It proves how much the absolute power of husbands within marriage could harm the relationship between man and wife. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of a reform in the field of education : the same education for men and women is, according to Anne Brontë, the necessary condition for marriages to be successful. Helen's choice to legally flee from her husband, to earn her living as a painter – a male profession at that time – her progressive views on education and her claims for a better and more equal world for women emphasises the presence of feminist elements in the novel. However, the fact that Helen decides in the end to return to her dying husband and then to marry Gilbert may suggest a conventional rather than a feminist reading of the novel. Helen regresses from the emancipated condition of working woman to the conventional status of married woman. This may lead to the conclusion that Anne Brontë opts for marriage as the only possible destiny for a woman. Nevertheless, the interpretation of these facts is not so straightforward. The heroine's return to her husband is the necessary condition for her re-integration in her contemporary society. It is only by reacquiring her real identity – that of Helen Graham is

only an assumed identity – and her place in society that she can marry again. The marriage between Helen and Gilbert is a marriage between equals who share the same thoughts, feelings and responsibilities. This is the reason why Anne Brontë makes her heroine marry again. This union between two equals shows the author's progressive position on marriage and thus her distance from the bigotry and sexism of her world. This distance appears even more evident, if we considered that The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was written when none of the most important legal changes in the condition of women had taken place yet.

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- 3) Edgerley, C. Mabel, 'Anne Brontë', *The Brontë Society Transactions*, ix (1938)
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- 12) McMaster, Juliet, "'Imbecile Laughter'" and "'Desperate Earnest'" in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 43 (December 1982)
- 13) Millet, Kate, 'The Debate over Women. Ruskin Vs Mill' in Martha Vicinus (ed.), Suffer and Be Still. Women in the Victorian Age (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1980)

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FURTHER CORRECTIONS

**Title: ‘...REMEMBER YOU ARE BOUND TO YOUR HUSBAND
FOR LIFE’. THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL AND THE
CONDITION OF MARRIED WOMEN IN NINETEENTH-
CENTURY ENGLAND**

p. 4, n. 1: ‘...**Oxford**: Oxford...’

p. 6, n. 3: ‘...Chapman & Hall **Ltd.**, 1912...’

n. 4: ‘**Ibid.**’

n. 5 – 5th line: ‘...going to **places** of amusement...’

p. 8, 1 line up: ‘...fornication’¹² (**actually**...’

n. 11- 1st line: ‘...Untying the Knot. A Short...’

p. 10, 1 line down: ‘...divorce on such a **ground**...’

p. 12, 2 lines down: ‘...than “**Scripture**”’

p. 13, n. 23 – 2nd line down: ‘...that ill-treatments of a husband **were** aimed...’

p. 14, 4 lines down: '...beginning of the 16th...'

n. 28: '...exception to the **Catholic**...'

p. 20, 1 line up: '...a divorce law **were** condemned...'

p. 23, 6 lines up: '...rare in society, and if...'

p. 26, n. 52: '...**Cambridge**: Cambridge...'

p. 28, 3 lines up: '...**The Most Important Laws Concerning Women**...'

p. 30, 1 line down: '...to lead to **the** separation...'

n. 64: 'Phillip **Mallett**...**Aberdeen**: Aberdeen...'

p. 31, 3 - 4 lines down: '...“according to their own estimates and for their own purposes”’

p. 32, n. 68: 'See **p. 28**'

p. 33, n. 69: 'See **pp. 11-14**'

p. 34, n. 71: the text of Roderick Phillips cited here is **Untying the Knot**

p. 35, n. 1: '...Jane Eyre, **Ware**: Wordsworth...'

p. 37, 1 line up: '**Minors**...'

p. 39, 3 lines down: '... 'action' ... 'feeling''

1 line up: '... many changes were taking **place**...'

p. 40, offset quote: '... **[T]**he first...'

3 lines up: '... each individual to work out his or her **own** salvation...'

n. 11: '... **pp. xv-xvi**'

p. 41, 2 lines down: '...[therefore] **clearly** unjust to deny **women** the chance to undertake such work...'

6 lines up: '... to a value judgement...'

5 lines up: '... and **then** the civil...'

2 lines up: '... Bodichon **had** traced...'

n. 12: '... **p. 166**'

p. 42, 1 line down: '... **Thus**...'; '... **a** hell...'

p. 43, 1 line down: '... **exit** and from their...'

5 lines down: '... and **the** high...'

8 lines down: '... she might **indeed** call her own...'

p. 44, 1 line down: ‘...other **early** feminists...’

6 lines down: ‘...[it **cannot**]...’

4 lines up: ‘...to share **in**...’

p. 45, 5 lines up: ‘...but just ‘...so long as they stay[ed] at home’’

p. 46, n. 32 - 2nd line: ‘...**Ltd.**, 1909...’

p. 47, 6 lines down: ‘...an important **part**...’

p. 48, n. 36: ‘Phillip **Mallett**...’

n. 37: ‘**Kate Millet**, *op. cit.*, p. 126’

p. 49, n. 41: ‘Phillip **Mallett**...’

p. 53, n. 52: ‘...English Novel – 1800-1900...’

p. 55, 5 lines down: “You may try – but you can never imagine...what **it** is to have a man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl”

n. 59: ‘...Literary Women...’

p. 56, 2 lines down: “‘Curren Bell’ to be a man...’

5 lines down: '...will **be** open...'

n. 61: '...A **Compilation** with Essays...'

p. 57, n. 62: '**Ibid.**....'

p. 60, 6 lines down: '...lack of "a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct..."

10 lines up: 'You only warn me against the folly of neglecting real duties **for the sake of imaginative pleasures : of writing** for the love of fame...'

5 lines up: '...I **find**...'

2 lines up: '...**any one** else...'

n. 68: 'See p. **35** and p. **56** of this chapter'

p. 61, 5 lines down: '...I'm teaching...'

p. 62, 5 lines down: '**wrote**' is not part of the quote

6 lines down: '...considered a real feminist **novelist**...'

p. 63, 7 lines up: '...all **thought**, all **feeling**...'

p. 68, 8 lines up: '...as not being 'of the calibre of her sisters''. But, in order to...'

n. 3: '**Ibid.**....'

n. 4: '...The MacMillan Press **Ltd.**, 1989...'

p. 69, 5 lines up: '...Jane **Eyre**...'

p. 70, 3 lines down: '...life, and...'

7 lines down: '...of **one** of Miss Austin's...'

p. 73, 7 lines down: '...so **bad** a book...'

7 lines up: '...**sisters**' novels...'

p. 74, 3 lines up: '**as**' is not part of the quote

n. 27 - 2nd line: '...The MacMillan Press **Ltd.**, 1976...'

p. 75, 3 lines down: '...*Anne Brontë : Her **Life** and Her Work*...'

p. 77, 2 lines up: '...**vice** and...'

p. 78, 4 lines down: '...I **will** speak it...'

p. 80, 3 lines down: '...Anne **then** departs...'

6 lines down: '...marriage **for her heroines** appears...'

6 lines up: '...conquest of **the** passion...'

p. 83, 5 lines up: 'Victorian **governesses**...'

p. 84, n. 49 – 4th lines down: ‘...it would **be** proper...’

p. 85, 2 lines down: ‘...to **his** sisters...’

9 lines down: ‘...**He** seldom...’

p. 86, 3 lines down: ‘...**caste**...’

5 lines down: ‘...**employer behaves**...’

2 lines up: ‘...while **they** talked...’

p. 87, 2 lines down: ‘...**desirous** to make...’

3 lines down: the first line of the quote must be indented

p. 89, 5 lines down: ‘...**too** bad...’

p. 91, 5 lines down: ‘...launched **into**...’

3 lines up: ‘...with her **sister**’s...’

p. 95, n. 4 - 2nd line: ‘...Arnold (Publishers) **Ltd.**, London...’

p. 97, 1 line up: ‘...her dissolute **first** husband...’

p. 98, 1 line up: ‘...Anne Bronte’s plot in *The Tenant*...’

p. 99, 2 lines up: '... This **is** the reason...'

p. 100, n. 11: 'See chap. 3, **pp. 80-81**'

n. 12: 'See chap. 2, **pp. 43-45**'

p. 101, 7 lines down: '... his **own** genuine...'

p. 103, 3 lines up: 'What is **it**...'

p. 105, 4 lines down: '**temptations**...'

p. 106, 1 line down: '**the**' is not part of the quote

2 lines down: '... **trials and dangers**...'

p. 107, 9 lines up: '... I lay **them**...'

p. 108, 1 line down: the first line of the quote must be indented

2 lines down: 'Our fancies are **more** giddy...'

p. 111, 9 lines up: 'minister to his comfort...'

n. 34: '...p. **257**'

p. 112, 8 lines down: '...impossible to get him **to feel** interested in what I **most** like to talk...'

p. 114, 6 lines down: '...the first time. **He notices that** '...the lips...**[have]** something about them that **[betoken]**...no very soft or amiable temper''

7 lines up: '...power of attraction to him. **Her** eyes...'

6 - 5 lines up: '... because being '*diabolically*'...'

5 lines up: '...**and** 'her manners'...'

p. 115, 6 lines down: '...on a subject...'

p. 116, 4 lines down: 'Mary [was]...'

8 lines up: '**she**' is not part of the quote

n. 126: 'Juliet MacMaster, "Imbecile Laughter"...'

p. 117, 7 lines down: '...of **lightning**...'

p. 118, 1 line down: '...you **are** not...'

p. 119, 1 line down: '...the **least** degree...'

5 lines down: '...diary into his **own** narrative...'

p. 120, 1 line down: '...**if** you married her, your home **would** be...'

p. 124, 7 lines up: '...that every lady **ought** to be...'

p. 125, 5 lines up: '...**Mamma** sends...'

p. 126, n. 74: '... p. **426**'

8 lines up: '**only**' is not part of the quote

p. 128, n. 76: '... **pp. 133 – 34**'

p. 134, n. 5): '... **Ware:** Wordsworth...'

Insert **Spark, Muriel (ed.), The Brontë Letters (London: MacMillan, 1966)**

between n. 9) and n. 10)

4 lines up: n. 10) ⇨ n. 11); '-----The Essence...'

2 lines up: n. 11) ⇨ n. 12)

p. 135, n. 11): '...**Aberdeen:** Aberdeen...'

p. 136, n. 17): '...**Cambridge:** Cambridge...'

n. 18): '...**Cambridge:** Cambridge...'

n. 22): '...**Oxford:** Oxford...'