Acts of Custody and Incarceration in Wuthering Heights *and* The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

LAURA C. BERRY

If perversity were not so often the defining mode in Brontë criticism, it might seem perverse to assert that *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are family plots, in fact, stories about custody. Literary criticism—not to mention, in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, Hollywood and a fiercely held popular opinion—has insisted on these novels as romantic fictions about the couple. And there is ample reason for critics to repeat an attention that the novels themselves would seem not only to invite but to demand. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* offers not just one couple in its effort to demonstrate the lurid brutalities of marriage, but pair after pair of ill-suited (we might as well say violently opposed) mates. In fact, the overdetermined quality of nuptial impossibility among these couples, and the determination with which the novel nevertheless reproduces them, is suspicious. As for *Wuthering Heights*, the endurance of a single unkillable couple becomes a novelistic obsession similar to the endlessly repeated duos in *Wildfell Hall*. Not only are Cathy and Heathcliff unable to exit the narrative decently even in death, they are forced to endure the unimaginable horror of an interminable courtship carried on (and on) over supernatural terrain, and apparently reproduced with modifications in the various unions that the novel offers as distorted reflections of its original couple.[1] Perversely or not, I will be arguing that in *Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* the conjugal is replaced by the custodial, and that marriage must make way for a decided emphasis on childhood. "Custody" is a holding place for two significant notions that the novel maintains together: incarceration and protective guardianship. The conjunction between bonds and bondage is the means through which these fictions grapple with domestic enclosure.

Of course, domesticity is a concern by no means confined to the novel in the 1830s and 40s. As critics have exhaustively shown, the domestic appears in writing as diverse as abolitionist tracts and cookery books. Because domesticity is so widely influential in this period, this essay examines the relationship between imprisonment and caretaking in the debates over the Infant Custody Bill of 1839, as well as in the fictions of the Brontës. "Custody" reshapes not only the idea of home but of self, in both legislative discourse and fictional narrative. In the Victorian period, the individual in the eyes and statutes of domestic law became a more fully articulate and articulated subject. The individual could also be understood as a child. The legal status of the child shifted from being disposed as "property" to being scrutinized as a "person." Just as the child first began to be

[1] The work of these two Brontë sisters in relation to one another has been usefully discussed by several critics. Of special note is Gordon's 1984 essay. See also Jacobs. An interesting essay that reads Anne Brontë's novel in relation to George Eliot, especially her story, "Janet's Repentance," is that by Kunert.

understood as a legal subject with rights and needs separate from claims of property, he or she was also defined as dependent. The idea of the individual child subject was imagined in legal discourse at the same time as—and in relation to—the idea of the socially-dependent "client," who would eventually dominate domestic law. Debates over "mother right" in Parliament redefine motherhood and family. In sentimentalizing motherhood, and thereby bolstering domesticity as a category both spatially and ideologically separate from the world of politics and labor, the custody debates exchange a "legal" and implicitly male model for selfhood—a man whose authority rests in status and property—for a "feeling" child whose significance lies in the fact that he or she is not fully independent of the social structures that surround him or her.

The custody debates are not about women, then, or even about mothers; instead they serve to define self in relation to social structures. In the course of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the development of custody law, family relations were defined sentimentally, and women's role in the family shifted from an all-important emphasis on wifedom and its financial implications to a crucial consideration for the sentimental tentacles of motherhood. It is the tentacular relations of the family, rather than its sentimental lures, that will become the basis for the fictions of family, and particularly the necessity of representing childhood, in Emily and Anne Brontë's novels. *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* define the paradigmatic subject not as a woman but as a child, especially one in need of training. Their subject is neither gender nor coupling; rather, these Brontë novels are concerned, like the parliamentary testimony we will scrutinize, with reimagining self. If the child of the custody debates makes possible a new era of social intervention into the middle-class family, the Brontë child offers a self who—unlike the fictions of, for example, Charles Dickens—defies social intervention. The custodial struggles of these novels produce a subject who seeks to defeat, or at least to evade, the violence and confinement that these authors perspicaciously understand as necessary to domestic life.

Of Tender Years

Before the passage of the Custody of Infants Act in 1839, it was the existence and disposition of a minor's estate that alone made the concern of the law possible. When parents separated or, much more rarely, divorced, the father's right to custody of his progeny was largely unquestioned and legally absolute. Adjudicating a well-known case in 1827, Lord Eldon cited precedent for the theory that "this Court has not the means of acting, except where it has property to act upon" (qtd. in Forsyth 11). It was not legally impossible for the Court of Chancery to act in *parens patriae*, but it was highly improbable. Paternal custody right was maintained by a reluctance to interfere with the private matters of the family, which were thought best governed by the father.

Custody law and precedent historically defined a child's relationship to his family as financial. The mother's role was made secondary, if not altogether ignored. In 1850 the English barrister William Forsyth looked back on the earlier era with dismay:

> *The general rule of law in this country is, that the legal power over infant children belongs to the father, and that during his life the mother has none. In the words of Blackstone, "a mother,* as such, *is entitled to no power, but only to reverence and respect." ... [T]he father has, at common law, a right to exclusive custody of his child even at an age when it still requires nourishment from its mother's breast.* (11–12)

Custody right in pre-industrial England supports the primacy of property and status in the legal relations of the family, and the enduring importance of primogeniture. The child is in effect a form of property and so, like all other wealth in the marriage, belongs more or less exclusively to a husband. For the most part, of course, the law treated all persons only in relation to property. But in the judicial code and in legal practice, the father, as the marker for property and status, was understood to be the paradigmatic individual, a category emphatically understood to be a social one.

In the course of the nineteenth century the social representation of the family was retooled, and the father's absolute right over his offspring, not surprisingly, received critical comment. The family was transformed from an analog for rigid patriarchal control to a "correlative figure of parliamentary democracy" (Donzelot 4).[2] In this context the state of custody law began to seem troubling as an unchallenged legal fact. In a characteristic statement of mid-century sensibility, Forsyth "admits" in *A Treatise on the Law Relating to the Custody of Infants* that:

> *the application of this law which enforces with such jealous care the rights of the father, has often been extremely harsh. He might be a man of the most immoral character, and his conduct towards the mother such as to render it impossible for her, without all sacrifice of dignity and self-respect, to live with him; and yet, provided only that he was cautious enough not to bring his children into actual contact with pollution ... he had the entire control over and disposition of them, and might embitter the life of the mother by depriving her of the society of her offspring. And what untold suffering might she not be called upon to endure, in the mental struggle between the affection which prompted her to submit to insult and injury for their sake, and the desire to escape from such usage by abandoning her home.* (12–13)

Family law in the early part of the nineteenth century was subject to considerable criticism because the law did not accurately reflect rising public sentiment about the family, particularly the role of the mother.

But even though the ideological gap between a portrait of sentimental motherhood and the law of custody only widened, a mother's right to custody of her child was not established for many decades. The 1839 Custody of Infants Act, about which I will mostly be speaking, allowed a wife who was separated from her husband to petition the court and, provided she was of good character, to gain access to her young children and, potentially (although it was unlikely),

[2] The changing nature of the family, and particularly the growth of domestic ideology and its relation to industrial society, has been well documented. See Stone, Trumbach, and Davidoff and Hall, to name only selected examples.

temporary custody of those children still under seven years of age. The 1873 Custody of Infants Act permitted the mother to ask for access to, and in certain instances custody of, her children up to sixteen years of age. Neither of these reforms actually transferred the right of custody to the mother. The 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act for the first time appointed a mother guardian upon a father's death, provided there was no question concerning her suitability. (Previously a father could transfer his custodial rights to anyone regardless of a mother's wishes.) But even this legislation leaves untouched the father's right of custody unless misconduct on his part is alleged. Only then can a mother sue for full custody of her child. Reform of custody law in the nineteenth century does not, by and large, resolve the dilemma of a legal code at odds with a cultural representation of nurturing motherhood.[3]

Nevertheless, the Parliamentary debate around the 1839 bill reads motherhood into the law as a nurturing domesticity vitally necessary to a child's proper development. The bill, in acting out opposing cultural representations, transforms the category of "woman" into "mother." Opponents (chiefly Edward Sugden in the House of Commons and Brougham in the Lords) champion the first term, woman, in a resolute focus on the institution of marriage. In their view, a change in custody rights "would open the door to such frightful changes in the whole of this country, and in the whole of the principles on which the law of husband and wife was founded—ay, and such innovations on those laws which had been hitherto regarded as the safeguard of families," that, in short, "the floods of immorality would be sure to overflow the character of the institution of marriage."[4] The oft-repeated logic is reinforced by Mr. Sugden in the House of Commons: "[t]he great tie which prevents the separation of married persons is their common children. A wife was, in general, glad to have that excuse for submitting to the temper of a capricious husband" (40: 1115). The emphasis in the minority opposition to the Infant Custody Bill, whenever it is debated, is on conjugal life and its close tie to social cohesion. The parliamentary record states that "Mr. Tancred had a strong feeling against the measure," for he is convinced that "the greatest evil which could befall a wife was a separation from her husband, and, so far from doing anything to facilitate such separation ... the House ought to support every enactment of the law as it now stood which placed an obstacle in the way of such a separation" (40: 1122).

Other opposing arguments also emphasize wife over mother. For example, Mr. Sugden remarks during later House debate that women who leave their husbands ought not to be rewarded for such behavior by being allowed access to their children. There is general concern that an adulterous or misbehaving wife will not be properly chastised if the law is reformed. One further interesting objection of Sugden's is that a reformed law will give "a right to the judge before

[3] On the history of the law see Graveson and Crane, Holcombe, Shanley, and Stetson.

[4] So says Lord Brougham during the second reading in Lords (Hansard's 44: 780). The Bill was introduced in 1837 to the House of Commons by Sergeant Talfourd, debated on the second reading, and passed by the House rapidly. It was defeated in the Lords by a majority of two after Brougham's speech. In the following year Talfourd again introduced a very similar bill into the House of Commons. It passed and was introduced into the Lords, as it had been the year before, by Lord Lyndhurst. This time Brougham was not present at the second reading, and the only opposition came from Lord Wynford, who called the measure inadequate. It was passed and received the Royal Assent. See *Hansard's*, volumes 38, 40, 42, 44, 47, 48, 49, and 50 (1837–39). Further citations within the text of this essay are to these volumes.

whom the question [is] mooted to investigate the whole domestic life of the parties from the time of the marriage" (42: 1050). This is repeated by Mr. Shaw, who believes women uphold the distinctly private nature of family life, for "no woman of a delicate mind would submit to call upon a court to interfere" (42: 1053). In sum, as Lord Brougham says in discussion in the House of Lords, the bill is "destructive of the comforts, and dangerous to the purity, of marriage life" (44: 787). The decided emphasis is on the unity of husband and wife.

By contrast, the majority opinion in both houses argues for the bill in the name of the mother, insisting on the morality of such a position. Mr. Praed asserts that "this proposal was calculated to do more moral good than any measure which had for a long time been before the House" (42: 1051). He goes on to say that "in nine cases out of ten, especially when the children were of tender years, the mother was the better guardian, and this no one would deny" (42: 1052–53). In defense of his bill Mr. Talfourd asks, "what was more deplorable than that this depth of feeling [on the mother's part] should be the last link to prevent a virtuous woman from separating from her husband who ill uses her, and that only by this iron bond" is she kept in her home (42: 1054). The legal, even financial, bond of marriage has disappeared, only to be firmly replaced by the "iron bond" of mother and child.

In the House of Lords, Lyndhurst argues for the mother who "might be the most virtuous woman that ever lived" but still not gain access to her infant child (44: 773). He cites then-famous cases in which the mother's position is unambiguously wretched: "the husband got ... possession of the child, and on the question being agitated in court (the child having in the mean time been delivered to the mistress of its father, who was then confined in Horsemonger-lane Gaol, where the child was carried to him day by day)" (44: 774). The examples elevate motherhood and present fathers as unfeeling brutes. Lyndhurst leaves it "to the House to conceive what must have been her sufferings" (44: 775). He advocates the taking "the matter out of the hands of the father, and plac[ing] it in the hands of ... independent judges," thus overturning the privacy of family life (44: 778).[5] He calls attention to "the love a mother had to her offspring, the delight she received in their smiles, the interest she took in all their sorrows, and the happiness she had in the superintendence of them" (49: 487). When the Bill is passed, the Lord Chancellor sums up the inchoate sensibility in which the Custody Act participates: "the great danger in the Legislature endeavouring to arrange the disputes of husband and wife was, lest they should lose sight of that which ought to be the primary object of all courts of justice—the conservation of the rights of the children" (49: 493–94).

The Lord Chancellor's summation newly directs attention to the middle- and upper-class child's individual welfare. It makes way for a judicial intervention in family life, reserving for the court the right of judging parental fitness. Such judgments might now be made based on moral grounds, as opposed to mere

5 The cases from which Lyndhurst quotes throughout his speech represent an important background to the history of the Bill. In particular, *Greenhill v. Greenhill* was taken up by Parliament, and by Caroline Norton in her appeals to Members. Greenhill, and several other similar cases, prompted judges to publicly bemoan what they saw as their inability to offer the mother access or custody. The fact that judges began to speak on this subject is further evidence of the tension between motherhood's representation, and the rigidity of the law.

physical cruelty. The anecdote of Horsemonger-lane Gaol suggests that while an unsavory father and his mistress may pose no threat to his child's body, they certainly stand to contaminate the child's mind. Such contamination should now be monitored and halted by authorities. In their address to the moral state of the middle- and upper-class family, these debates introduce a new definition of "the rights of children" based on an internal state, motivated by "morality" rather than "property."[6] The debates in the House of Commons and of Lords provide especially interesting reading; these debates not only represent graphically the struggle between two ways of understanding the private domain of the family, but they also offer a rare example of legislation directed at the family with property. That is, they represent a moment when the internal regulation—to which the bourgeois family willingly submits in private—is publicly evaluated and made visible.

The 1837–38 Parliamentary debate exposes "pedagogical" motherhood in the making. The sentimentalized mother is understood to nurture and protect. It is her role to train, to raise, and to tutor the child in values. She functions as a sign for pedagogy; like the law she will come to hold what will be seen as an educative and benevolent position in the family. The father is associated with absolute control and willful exercise of power, as Lord Lyndhurst's lengthy review of custody case law, read into the Parliamentary record, demonstrates. Confined to prison or, more commonly, conspiring with his mistress to do the children harm, the father of the custody reformers is unfeeling and immoral. Having reimagined the father as a potential tyrant, the State will eventually find it possible to usurp his role, and to take ultimate responsibility over the family, especially the poor family. The mother is thus allied with the State, as instructress and benevolent guardian.[7] It will be her task to keep the family out of the carceral realm.

The shift in the Parliamentary debate we have seen, from the father's absolute right to a more complicated concern over mother, significantly focuses the subject for whom custody negotiations are taking place; that subject is a child. The sentimental mother provides the foundation for a subject who is no longer merely a piece of family property. These changes not only help construct a more fully psychologized individual, but one constantly open to, in fact whose vulnerability invites, intervention. There will now be a self in family law who is "of tender years," one who will require benevolent guidance to determine his "best interests." His value is no longer linked to property, for he is understood to be

6 Children's "rights" were, of course, integral to child labor discussions at least as early as 1802, if not earlier—during Jonas Hanway's protests over the lives of the climbing boys, for example. But these discussions remain distinct from the custody acts in two important respects: first, and most obviously, child labor and workhouse issues, at least overtly, concern the working and pauper classes only. Secondly, the discourse around child labor in particular maintains a strong emphasis on the body and tends to produce legislation that acts upon, nominatively to protect, the victimized child and his or her corporeal self. The concern for the welfare of the upper- and middle-class child in the talk about custodial right is distinguished by a decided moral policing of the private individual, in which a judge considers the fitness of the parents in order to protect the child. The court moves beyond the public and economic space of the factory or the workhouse, and invades the "private" domain of the family. Thus the custody acts themselves are exceptions to the general rule that the middle- and upper-class family is not regulated by the law, but rather that "[l]iberal society and the family were kept free from carceral institutions that were set up to remedy their failures only by assuming the burden of an immense internal regulation" (Miller, *Novel* 59–60).

7 While perhaps not expressed in just this way, this is the general ground covered by Donzelot. It is also very ably discussed by Brophy and Smart, two feminist legal historians writing in Britain.

the "priceless" center of the family.[8] The child subject of the custody debates is created within the constraining structure of the judiciary, a liberal subject never capable of being fully liberated from institutional structures.

Emerging domestic law both creates and contains this subject in scrutinizing and redefining the child. The mother's rights need not be literalized, though they must be invoked, in order to mediate the tension over custody law; the introduction of pedagogy into the law is sufficient to lessen that tension. The bourgeois child addressed in Parliament can be created only by way of an "imprisoning" structure of marriage and family, and imagined only within the defining limits of a legal discourse. The domestic antidote to the carceral is for this reason never fully accomplished, for the domestic continues to function, under the control of the abusive and tyrannical father, as a sort of prison. This point is literalized amusingly in the anecdote, read into legislative record, of the father exercising his custodial rights from within the confines of Horsemonger-lane Gaol. The disciplinary subject, in other words, is never (quite) constituted. The "free" child, the liberal subject, is here only *legally* produced. Although he has a psychology, and although he has been transformed out of property and into subjectivity, he is first introduced by way of, and filtered through, the judicial. The familial is not separated from the carceral realm, but rather emerges from it, and maintains an important relationship to it.[9] In the readings of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* that follow, I will emphasize the ways in which the problems we have seen thus far—of imprisoning marriage and sentimentalized motherhood—will be reimagined in a turn to the pedagogical child couple. Unlike the fictions of other writers of the period, particularly Dickens, the Brontës will resist sentimentality and the embrace of motherhood. On the other hand, like Dickens as well as the custody reformers of the 1830s, Anne and Emily Brontë will recognize in childhood an answer to the dilemma of selfhood.

Tutoring and Torturing

Child custody is at the heart of both novels, overtly so in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The plot concerns the flight of Helen Huntingdon from a depraved husband, a flight she risks in order to remove her young son, little Arthur Huntingdon, from the polluting excesses of his profligate father. When she finds her adulterous husband in the shrubbery with the morally abandoned Annabella Wilmot, the ensuing confrontation concerns the welfare of little Arthur rather than the behavior of his father:

> *"[W]ill you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune, and go ... [a]nywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and I shall be delivered from your presence—and you from mine."*
>
> *"No—by* Jove *I won't!... Do you think I'm going to be made the talk of the country, for your fastidious caprices?"* (315)

[8] For an excellent discussion of this, which focuses on the United States, see Zelizer.

[9] Here, of course, I am arguing in relation to Foucault's formulation of the disciplinary subject, especially in *Discipline and Punish*, and suggesting an extension of it.

Wildfell Hall, set in the years before the passage of the Infant Custody Act, in one sense tells the story of what happens when paternal rights interfere with a sanctified notion of motherhood.

But if *Wildfell Hall* is explicitly about custody, it just as firmly asserts that the guardianship of home can easily collapse into imprisonment. The novel offers numerous identifications between home and prison, beginning with the gothic description of Helen Huntingdon's refuge at her "bleak ... asylum" (76), Wildfell Hall itself, "enclosed by stone walls, and entered by an iron gate with large balls of grey granite" (46). In narrating Helen's early history the novel moves through a series of imprisoning domestic structures: the proposed marriage to the aptly named Mr. Boarham; the constraints of life at home with her aunt and uncle, and then the literal confinements of marriage itself as it is experienced with the decadent Arthur Huntingdon. Helen evolves from imagining marriage as the state of "enjoy[ing Arthur's] society without restraint" (199), to her incarceration in her own home where she cries out after her keys have been taken from her, "I am a slave, a prisoner" (373).

Wuthering Heights is less focally concerned with a single custodial "case" but it is more deeply infused with the issue of custody, beginning with the alarming way in which the house itself keeps turning into a penal colony. Coming to Wuthering Heights would seem to require transforming oneself into either prisoner or ward; it hardly matters which, since they amount to the same thing. Lockwood comes under the protective custody of the house, only to have that protection turn ominous as night falls. Isabella crosses the threshold in marriage, and finds her new home not just a prison but one in which, Hindley instructs, she must immure herself: "he suddenly arrested me, and added in the strangest tone—'Be so good as to turn your lock, and draw your bolt—don't omit it!'" (176). Heathcliff, who has a long history in the custodial battles of this family, makes it clear that, "you're not fit to be your own guardian, Isabella, now; and I, being your legal protector, must retain you in my custody" (189).

Custody and incarceration have been confused, and Isabella has become an infant. Heathcliff not only dismisses her to her room, but adds: "That's not the way—upstairs, I tell you! Why, this is the road upstairs, child!" (189). Even Nelly Dean cannot escape the threat of confinement under the shadow of that house: "'I'll take measures to secure you, woman!' exclaimed Heathcliff, 'you shall not leave Wuthering Heights till to-morrow morning'" (190). At length Nelly is actually jailed at the house, and held captive for several days. Meanwhile, all attempts to lock out the jailer, Heathcliff—"put the key in the lock, and draw the bolts!" (211)—are spectacularly unsuccessful.

Imprisonment, readers readily admit, is dominant in Emily Brontë's novel. But just as critical is the very literal way that every child, every body, who enters the house is or rapidly becomes a problem of custody. The novel enacts a repetitive series of highly-pitched custody battles which often have a legal basis, although the requirements of the law are sometimes rejected in favor of private arrangements. This is the case, for instance, when Heathcliff "trades" his legal custody of his son Linton in order to be allowed to maintain his guardianship of Hareton after Hindley's death. The custody battles begin much earlier than this, of course.

In fact, we might say that custody is the originating event of the story, for it is the unexpected introduction of Heathcliff, "starving, and houseless" (78), into the Earnshaw family that constitutes the "narratable" in *Wuthering Heights*.[10] Following this inaugural act, Hindley becomes guardian to Heathcliff and Cathy after old Earnshaw dies. Hareton becomes Heathcliff's ward with Hindley's death, and Linton is given over to his father's custody after his mother dies, though he enjoys a very brief sojourn under the guardianship of Edgar Linton at Thrushcross Grange. Cathy Linton Heathcliff comes under Heathcliff's "care" after her marriage to Linton, and his subsequent death. At the same time, her property is turned over to Heathcliff as Linton's surviving heir.

Wildfell Hall, superficially at least, constructs custody much as we saw Sergeant Talfourd do during the 1830s: as a struggle between a tyrannical father whose concerns are either financial or vengeful, and a loving mother who has only the child's interest at heart. The profligate Arthur fights for his son for form's sake, while Helen appears to embrace the by now familiar idea of the child as priceless possession. Little Arthur thus serves to define a category that directly opposes property: "I am not going to sell my child for gold, though it were to save both him and me from starving: it would be better that he should die with me, than that he should live with his father" (399).

Wuthering Heights, on the other hand, while it represents this struggle in similar structural terms, locates the battle not between father and mother, but rather between a tyrannical power that would enforce its will through a punishing and often physical brutality, and a coercion evoked by way of persuasion. This novel stages its battles for custody between Nelly's disciplinary tactics and Heathcliff's torturing acts. At one time or another, Nelly and Heathcliff vie for control over most of the bodies that pass through their world, particularly in the case of the younger generation—Hareton Earnshaw, Catherine Linton, and Linton Heathcliff. In each of these "cases," Nelly pleads directly with Heathcliff to allow her to be protector to these children, and to maintain them at Thrushcross Grange. In each case, Heathcliff insists upon what is his right to custody.

To describe the workings of *Wuthering Heights* in this way is, of course, to gesture toward a reading of the disciplinary tactics of the novel.[11] But it should also be to deny that those tactics, however succinctly they may be displayed in the novel, hold sway. More important than the poles of torture and discipline that the novel figures in its examination of custody is the fact that discipline is hardly triumphant; indeed it is often subjected to a severer scrutiny than the brutalities of Heathcliff. Nelly, that is, doesn't define the normative in this novel, and her "disciplinary" tactics are suspect and troubling. *Wuthering Heights* questions persuasion as much as it does violence, in representing Nelly as both guardian and guard. Just as houses keep turning into prisons, parental figures keep metamorphosing into prison guards. When Catherine Linton says, "The Grange is not a prison, Ellen, and you are not my jailer" (275), she is voicing a suspicion shared by some critics that Nelly is neither innocent observer nor nurturing nursemaid.

10 In using the term "narratable," I am following Miller, in *Narrative and Its Discontents*, in which he defines the term as "the instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise" (ix).

11 See, for example, Armstrong, who has explored these issues on several occasions.

It will be important to compare Nelly's coercion in the nurseries over which she presides with the pedagogic relationship that eventually sparks and sustains the relationship between Hareton and Catherine Linton Heathcliff, and is allowed at last to form narrative resolution.

The debunking of discipline is equally evident in *Wildfell Hall*, for that novel refuses to endorse "restraint" as resolution. Excess may lead to disaster, but too much restraint is just as disturbing, as we have opportunity to observe in the pinched and lifeless portrayal of Helen's aunt. For her, love is war, and "when the citadel of the heart is fairly besieged, it is apt to surrender sooner than the owner is aware of, and often against her better judgment" (149). Her prescription for a sterile union that ignores the body is rejected as soundly as is Huntingdon's abandonment to fleshly appetites. Lord Lowborough is the novel's Victorian precursor to the recovering alcoholic, viciously addicted to the "hell-broth," but the fearsome self-control he exercises over mind and body keeps him from drinking, only to suck the vitality from him as thoroughly as dissipation kills the out-of-control Huntingdon. Alternatively, Richard Wilson leads a "temperate" existence but pays a heavy price. His self-improvements impoverish, for, like the overeager student, he lives with an internal taskmaster, and must lie about even in his free hours "with a pocket edition of some classic author in his hand. He never went anywhere without such a companion wherewith to improve his leisure moments ... he could not abandon himself to the enjoyment of that pure air and balmy sunshine ... not even with a lady by his side ... he must pull out his book, and make the most of his time while digesting his temperate meal" (89). Richard Wilson's "temperate meal" is disprized as much as is Huntingdon's stuffing himself with sensual pleasures. It is possible not only to be taken into custody as prisoner, but also to be too much in possession of oneself.

"Custody" is rapidly assimilated, as if by necessity, into a discourse about guardianship; the legal issues of Heathcliff's or Arthur Huntingdon's rights become intertwined with the caretaking functions of Nelly Dean or Helen Huntingdon. At the same time, the novels never cease being about incarceration. They are always poised between the enforcement of punishment and the perils of a course of self-directed regulation. These Brontës make it clear that the family is the inevitable, and indeed the most threatening, site for relations of power both direct and indirect, and (not surprisingly) they introduce the idea of kidnapping frequently into their texts. Scenes of overt abduction reveal the covert power relations of domestic enclosures. In exposing the inevitably violent nature of "custody," these scenes preserve the idea of the cell in the fantasy of the home.[12] Violence is inherent in domestic relations of all kinds, and so are the operations of power that underlie that violence.

Those power relations are not restricted to certain individuals. It is clear in Cathy's diary that Hindley is a tyrant well before Heathcliff takes up the role.

12 The unfailing potential for abduction takes on an almost preternatural quality in the early pages of *Wildfell Hall* when Gilbert Markham, unaware of Helen's history, nevertheless anticipates her greatest fear (and echoes Heathcliff's accidental saving of Hareton), when he rescues little Arthur, unexpectedly tumbling out of a tree. His first remark to Helen is, "You thought I was going to kidnap your son, I suppose?" (48). Helen eventually "saves" her son from his father by kidnapping him, just as Heathcliff harms Isabella in a marriage that is as much abduction as seduction, and later virtually abducts Catherine Linton, and does in fact kidnap Nelly.

The word "tyranny" is altogether a private affair in Brontë fiction; it conjoins connotations of revolution, absolute power, violent control, and political sovereignty with a notion of the inherent and unresolvable power relations that exist within the family, as well as the difficult position of any sovereign self. Lockwood reads Cathy's narration of Hindley's behavior: "'You forget you have a master here,' says the tyrant. 'I'll demolish the first who puts me out of temper!'" (63). When Frances grows peevish, "Hindley became tyrannical" (87). Later, "[t]he servants could not bear his tyrannical and evil conduct long" (106). Perhaps the most memorable use of the word is Heathcliff's, addressed to Cathy, concerning his dalliance with Isabella: "I seek no revenge on you.... That's not the plan— The tyrant grinds down his slaves—and they don't turn against him, they crush those beneath them. You are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement, only, allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style" (151). In this passage power, tyranny, and enslavement are entirely personal, enabling Heathcliff to confuse not only the public and the private, but the relationship between love and violence as well. This is only one of many instances in which Heathcliff is named "tyrant" (214), for he "amuses" himself in Cathy's style often, as when Nelly cannot "picture a father treating a dying child as tyrannically ... as I afterwards learnt Heathcliff had treated" Linton (291). Eventually, Linton himself becomes "the little tyrant" (306) and seizes the opportunity to take up like amusements.

Similarly, Helen writes of Arthur Huntingdon: "I would not submit to be tyrannized over by those bright, laughing eyes" (173). He becomes, in their courtship, "the reigning tyrant of [her] thoughts" (181). But Arthur, in turn, calls her "[y]ou little exorbitant tyrant" (247), and a bit later, "my pretty tyrant" (269). After their marriage Helen discovers that, far from being a political property, tyranny can be exerted by the sheer force of appetite itself: "[h]is appetite for the stimulus of wine had increased upon him.... I succeeded in preserving him from absolute bondage to that detestable propensity, so insidious in its advances, so inexorable in its tyranny" (272). Finally, according to Helen, Arthur's parenting problems derive from the fact that his "selfish affection is more injurious than the coldest indifference or the harshest tyranny could be" (333). In *Wildfell Hall*, as in *Wuthering Heights*, the bloody revolution literally takes place at home, but no effective resistance, and certainly no solace, is successfully imagined.

The legislative reformers during the custody debates envision a potential for liberation in political change. In refusing to allow social remedies into their fiction, the Brontës are writing against a general current of fiction and legislation during this period. The Brontës, in contrast to a writer such as Dickens, take up social issues like custody only to reduce them to the purely private. It can be said, of course, that all novels proceed in this way; and indeed the translation of public issues to private matters is the shift that makes discipline possible, in a Foucaultian reading of fiction. But the Brontës—Anne and Emily, anyway—do more than merely demonstrate the greater persuasive powers of family over political governance. The law, it is true, is irrelevant, "delayed very late" at Heathcliff's order (314). But this brief mention of the world outside the Heights highlights the fact that, unlike Dickens's world, there are no opposing social

structures in place in these novels.[13] There are no workhouses, no schoolrooms, no Chancery Courts, no offices of circumlocution. The family does not function in oppositional relationship to a heartless outside. Heartlessness always resides in, and can never be fully separated from, the haven itself.

If bold recourse to the law is not only insufficient but futile, if the existence of institutions outside the purely domestic is ignored, we might expect that a recuperated next-generation couple could serve as solace to a shattered family, and make nice the naughty injustices of the past in a comedic pairing. But the Brontë novels reveal marriage as inherently flawed, not just unredeemed but unredeemable. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* suggests that violence and cruelty are an inescapable part of coupling, and critics have often pointed out the clarity with which Anne Brontë seems to understand the brutalities of marriage.[14] Her portrayal of Arthur and Helen Huntingdon's courtship and marriage is a cutting analysis of relationships, it is true, but most readings of the novel have tended to see Brontë's fulminations against the couple as a critique of brutal masculinity and the socially-informed power relations that give that brutality a legal and cultural sanction.[15] But *Wildfell Hall* does not, in fact, trace a causal relation between conjugal violence and masculinity. Cruelty in couples originates within the self; it emerges inevitably as a result of the individual appetites of men *and* women, and in fact it is understood to be the generating force that makes the individual possible.

Male/female relationships here and in *Wuthering Heights* are conceived of as essentially sadomasochistic, but the positions within such a system function less as a critique of gender relations than as a discourse on "relations" more generally.[16] As much as marriage is represented as imprisonment in *Tenant*, for example, it is always a prison created out of desire rather than enforced by a straightforward male brutality. Helen's interest in Huntingdon emerges first as a direct result of the restraint she is under in her aunt's household, and among the likes of that very boring suitor, Boarham. Arthur Huntingdon, in all his "wildish" glory, represents "expansion to the mind, after so much constraint and formality as I had been doomed to suffer" (153). Helen's sexual desire is apparent, whether it is expressed by way of a certain religious zeal (167), or by the betrayal of her emotions by her body (164), or in the way in which the two continually spar verbally and physically. A powerful physicality defines Helen's relationship to Arthur Huntingdon; they cannot keep themselves to themselves: "I placed my hand on the portfolio to wrest it from him; but he maintained his hold.... I wrenched the portfolio from his hand" (176). Soon after, we learn that

13 Levy makes this point when she says that "[b]y imaginatively elaborating the realm of the individual, the family, and the household, *Wuthering Heights* naturalized the notion of an 'inside' drained of the materials of the 'outside'—social, political, and historical content" (76).

14 One need go no farther than the back cover of the Penguin edition of the novel, which announces fearlessly that, "In all their judgements on the subject of sex, the Brontës—and Anne most stoutly of all—were eloquent in proclaiming the equality of men and women....*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* might be described as the first sustained feminist novel."

15 Although the essays I cite below are quite different, they are minimally united in recognizing marriage and male/female relations as primary in this novel. See Gilbert and Gubar, Langland, and McMaster.

16 For an interesting reading of male masochistic pleasure in *Wuthering Heights* (and a provocative account of the dominance of psychoanalytic theory in discussions of masochism), see Siegel.

he "caught me in his arms, and smothered me with kisses" (184).[17] Pleasure is dependent upon cruelty, as we have seen in the frequently violent nature of erotic communion. Objects of love are eroticized in terms of violence, as when a courtship moment is enhanced by Huntingdon's coming in from a more conventional hunt "all spattered and splashed as he was, and stained with the blood of his prey" (177).

But if the Huntingdon marriage can be characterized as fundamentally cruel, then we must acknowledge that Helen generously returns the pain she has endured. Pleasure and cruelty are neither rigidly gendered nor consistent. In Huntingdon's decline, we witness an almost perfect reversal of the gendered power relations that dominated courtship. The literal restraints he placed on Helen become Huntingdon's own, as he increasingly feels marriage to be a prison. As much as he attempts to make Helen a captive (212), it is finally his imprisonment that we witness. Indeed, Helen is not above physical reinforcement of her ideas: "Don't be so hard upon me, Helen; and don't pinch my arm so, you're squeezing your fingers into the bone" (218). Such aggression is forecast in their first quarrel, when she locks herself away from him, using imprisonment to deny him her body (223). Thus incarceration works both ways. If it can keep Helen in the house, it can also keep Huntingdon from having access to her. "I was determined to show him," she says, "that my heart was not his slave" (223). Marriage becomes "these mutually inflicted torments" (226), as "comfortless as a convent cell" (349).

Increasingly, Helen's sanctimonious behavior and religious zeal resemble torture. The question of who is in power in the relationship emerges as central when Huntingdon begins to deteriorate and Helen preys upon him. In his feverish ramblings, not unlike Cathy's in *Wuthering Heights*, Huntingdon himself seems to recognize and recoil from the source of his disease: "'It is I, Arthur—it is Helen, your wife,' I replied. 'My wife!' said he, with a start. — 'For Heaven's sake, don't mention her! — I have none. — Devil take her,' he cried, a moment after, — 'and you too! What did you do it for?'" (428). Helen presides somewhat gleefully over this process, making her statement, "I mean to stay with you" (429), sound more ominous than charitable. It would not be far wrong to say that, once Huntingdon is confined to his bed, Helen virtually proselytizes him to death. Though she claims he makes a slave of her, in this caretaking capacity, he is enslaved by her (438). Asking for his son, for example, Huntingdon is instructed that "you will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please.... I must have a written agreement, and you must sign it in presence of a witness" (431). The absolute power of male privilege and legal sanctions is not just

17 Helen's desire is often registered involuntarily by her body, in spite of her efforts at concealment, and is just as often used by Huntingdon to mock her. He aptly interprets her "white face and flashing eyes, looking at me like a very tigress. I know the heart within you, perhaps a trifle better than you know it yourself" (222–23). That is, he can interpret her body and her anger, and translate it correctly into sexual desire. This cruel act is then registered on his own body in his most familiar facial expression, the self-satisfied "smirk." Brutality is not the province of men alone; nor is violence. The view of the hypocritical pastor in *Wildfell Hall* confirms this. In his first visit to "Mrs. Graham," he finds in her "a strong display of unchastened, misdirected passions. She turned white in the face, and drew her breath through her teeth in a savage sort of way" (117). Helen is a formidable opponent in any battle, courtship or otherwise. Neither is she a silent or passive partner in the sparring that passes for passion here; Helen's desire is productive of, and completely present in, their courtship, as Langland has shown.

overturned here. It is almost as if maternal custody is an established, even legal, fact. Helen is the one who wields custody as a weapon, who threatens and imprisons, who tyrannizes a helpless victim, and who will make Arthur subject to a "written agreement."

Although novelistic closure is suggested in Gilbert's marriage to Helen, this is a qualified and conditional marriage, made possible by radical class difference.[18] It is a union that barely manages to take place, after a protracted separation between the lovers and a period of penance on Gilbert's part. As I shall argue in the conclusion of this essay, this marriage is more crucially concerned with establishing Arthur as step-father than with marking him as Helen's husband.[19] Even the love scene in which Markham and Helen are reunited after a long separation is another vision of torture, promising only "one long fever of restless terror and impatience" (487). Their "romance" suggests only a self-denying union with the other's body: "It would not be a separation: we will write every day; my spirit shall be always with you; and sometimes you shall see me with your bodily eye" (486). This kind of union had been prophesied earlier in this couple's most charged and eroticized moment, which unsurprisingly is the moment of separation. Impassioned speeches escalate into a discussion of the possibilities for an otherworldly love that defies at least the corporeal boundaries of selfhood:

> *"We shall meet in heaven. Let us think of that," said she, in a tone of desperate calmness; but her eyes glittered wildly, and her face was deadly pale.*
>
> *"It gives me little consolation to think I shall next behold you as a disembodied spirit" [I replied].*
>
> *"No, Gilbert, there is perfect love in heaven!"* (409)

> *One moment I stood and looked into her face, the next I held her to my heart, and we seemed to grow together in a close embrace from which no physical or mental force could rend us. A whispered "God bless you!" and "Go — go!" was all she said; but while she spoke, she held me so fast that, without violence, I could not have obeyed her.* (411)

This should recall the famous episode in *Wuthering Heights*, in which Cathy and Heathcliff merge entirely, issuing in her death and their perpetual union in the

18 Eagleton believes that the marriage between Helen and Gilbert does not represent any significant intermixing of class, on grounds that Markham is more gentleman than farmer and Helen's social standing is ambiguous. Eagleton reads the marriage as socially unthreatening because he understands the novel as "merely 'moral'" (137); it is a work flawed by its "relative separation of the personal and social" (136). Where Eagleton claims that "[b]y enfolding the Grassdale events within a traditional love-story, the novel once more dissolves the social to the individual" (136), I argue that the presence in the text of the social and the individual represents no such dissolution, but rather the extension of the social into the sanctuary of the middle-class family.

19 Gilbert Markham's likeness to Arthur Huntingdon is often elided in order to read into Brontë's ending a conditional conjugal equality, and thus to make Anne Brontë's novel a proto-feminist one. This understandable gesture—understandable because the novel *is* very much in contention with the social arrangements of its time, and does bring gender into question in significant ways—does not always do service to the complexity of the narrative. Gilbert Markham is sociologically differentiated from Arthur Huntingdon; Gilbert is a farmer whom we often see bucolically at work in the fields or among his livestock, in contrast to Huntingdon's indolent lounging or aristocratic leisure pursuits (hunting animals, for example, rather than tending them as livestock). But Markham has throughout the novel maintained an undercurrent of volcanic fury that is often eroticized; thus he is not psychologically so different from Huntingdon. He is prone to outbursts, he spies on "Mrs. Graham" (124), and he is vicious to his horse as well as to Lawrence (whom he suspects of consorting with Helen) (134, 125). As he says himself of his behavior toward Helen, he "secretly exulted in [his] power, [and] felt disposed to dally with my victim like a cat" (143).

grave as well as in the supernatural sightings that close the book. Like *Wildfell Hall*, *Wuthering Heights* sees only the possibility of disincorporation in adult desire: "An instant they held asunder; and then how they met I hardly saw, but Catherine made a spring, and he caught her, and they were locked in an embrace from which I thought my mistress would never be released alive" (197). That this kind of coupledom does establish a kind of subjectivity in the novels is certainly arguable. Desire produces a self, it is true; the energy of *Wildfell Hall* provides us with the kinetic figures of Helen and Arthur Huntingdon, just as desire works to distinguish as well as to merge Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*.[20] But these appetitive selves show an alarming tendency to consume themselves. Heathcliff and Cathy disincorporate in their desire, and like the separation scene in *Wildfell Hall*, are disembodied spirits. Cathy is right when she tells Nelly, "I am Heathcliff," but it would be just as true to say that "Heathcliff is Cathy," and that neither of them is fully realized as a distinct self. If *Wildfell Hall* reveals that desire is at its most intense at the prospect of substituting the pleasures of the "bodily eye" for those of the body, and in reaching toward death and a "perfect love in heaven," *Wuthering Heights* focuses more closely on the devolution of the couple into animalistic "consumers." These beings ultimately can do little but cannibalize one another. Heathcliff and Cathy are imagined as subjects mostly in relation to their merger with one another, their submission to desire, just as, by a converse but structurally similar logic, the hottest moments in *Wildfell Hall* are moments of separation.

In *Wuthering Heights*, this produces a literal disincorporation: Heathcliff and Cathy must die to be together. In *Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë produces a union desirable only in its unattainability. Once accomplished it pales into platitudes, represented only in Gilbert's offhanded and terrifically bland epistolary account: "As for myself, I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other's society" (490). Blessed, indeed: this is hardly the electrified atmosphere we witnessed earlier. But, perhaps by this time in the novel, if not in the history of the novel, we do not need to be reminded that there is hardly any life, and certainly no liveliness, after marriage.[21]

Thus, *Wuthering Heights* and *Tenant* would seem to demonstrate the impossibility of fully imagining independent selfhood. The world outside the familial enclosure has been erased: there is neither school nor church on the threshold of which a subject might form itself, if only through some act of defiance. The institution is curiously but nevertheless entirely absent in Anne and Emily

20 Here, one might consult Bersani's masterful remarks on *Wuthering Heights* in *A Future for Astyanax*.

21 Conjugal unions lacking sufficient spark are also characteristic of some of Charlotte Brontë's novels (although in other ways her work must be distinguished from that of her sisters, as I note below). The terse "Reader, I married him" which opens chapter 38 in *Jane Eyre* prepares us for the bland summary of married life which soon follows: "My tale draws to its close: one word respecting my experience of married life.... I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth.... We talk, I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking" (475–76). Jane's account is in stark contrast to the lively and erotically-charged nature of talk between herself and Rochester before the wedding. In *Villette*, it is not liveliness but life itself that is deemed impossible after marriage. The novel leaves readers to wallow in the solitary world of fantasy that has been Lucy Snowe's special province throughout the book: "leave sunny imaginations hope.... Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life" (596).

Brontë.[22] In other novels, the "outside" that makes the "inside" (by inside I mean both the self's interiority and the interior of the home) both safe and possible at last, in fiction like that of Dickens, is denied. The enclosure that is (all too) present—the family—has been identified as the site for the production of devolutionary selves. Having made the training of desire a purely private or familial affair, these novels would seem at last to have arrived at a *cul de sac*.

How then do these Brontë fictions locate a stable subject in a world of self-consuming appetite? What being can there be who registers the importance of appetite and need, but who is not him or herself consumed by it? Who can be contained without revealing that containment as an unregenerated incarceration? Ultimately both novels turn to the child subject, abandoning hope in marital pedagogy in favor of child training. Childhood is narratively prized because it can resolve, even as it exposes, the problem of custody. Custodial care can be imagined as pedagogy, and desire as a hunger for knowledge. The child can be a desiring subject of a kind, but one who is also always in need of training. It is therefore true that while adult selves burn out, children are sustained by the necessity of remaining ever in the act of being trained. Innocent of dissipating desire, and elevated from the primitive in pedagogy, children represent a solution to the puzzle of subjectivity in the Brontës. This solution, like that of the custody reformers of the 1830s, is one in which the self is liberated only in childhood, and only so long as certain restraints remain in place.

But by "children" these novels do not refer to the very young or the simply primitive. As if having taken the lessons of Rousseau's *Émile* in hand, *Wuthering Heights* especially distinguishes between the savagery of childhood and the later states of trainability. Cathy and Heathcliff, of course, are themselves always children, a child couple like the one that will finally replace them in the novel's conclusion. But Cathy and Heathcliff are ferociously hungry children who, in their perennially primitive state, never stop devouring. It is this savage and primitive version of childhood, continued in adult selves who were never properly reared by their custodial guardians, that is revealed in both novels as an unrestrained spirit that destroys matter as it defies it.

As desire disincorporates bodies, humans become animals or corpses. But they also come to resemble savage children. Huntingdon, for example, is represented as the product of mismanaged mothering, as when Helen says fairly early in their marriage, "his wife shall undo what his mother did!" (191). The lack of training is evident when Huntingdon is seen as "lusty and reckless, as light of heart and head as ever, and as restless and hard to amuse as a spoilt child" (238). When Huntingdon looks upon his infant son he sees in the baby what the reader sees in him, "a little selfish, senseless, sensualist" (255). In *Wuthering Heights*, adults never quite differentiate themselves from their savage childhood selves. Cathy pinches and hits Nelly in her young womanhood, and Nelly warns Edgar of her untrainability, "Miss is dreadfully wayward, sir!... As bad as any marred child" (112). Cathy can "beat Hareton, or any child, at a good passionate fit of

22 The presence of the institution—Lowood, "governessing," the Church, the school, even the factory—in Charlotte Brontë's work sets her apart from her sisters, and puts her outside the paradigm for subjectivity I am developing in this essay.

crying" (125), and even in her last illness she is "no better than a wailing child" (162).

Linton Heathcliff cannot carry on, and must die off, too, because he is untrainable. Linton may be tortured into submission, but he is essentially and unchangeably defective. Heathcliff points this out, and asserts that Linton's value lies only in how he might be appropriated for the purposes of revenge. He has no "real" value, which comes to reside in Hareton, valued for his capacity to evolve, to learn, to become. This "evolution" happens without benefit of genetic contribution on the part of Heathcliff. Linton remains an infant—"writhing in the mere perverseness of an indulged plague of a child" (273)—who cannot develop or grow because he is a "defective character" (297). He is full of rage, and his breeding cannot keep him from a powerful fury that spends itself and, in so doing, turns him into a devolutionary problem. Catherine urges him uselessly, "Rise, and don't degrade yourself into an abject reptile—don't" (299). It is only a few pages later that he is described as "a perishing monkey" (304).[23]

Catherine and Hareton are children capable of appetite, but rather than devolving into uncivilized savages or simply disincorporating, they are trained into selves that manage appetite. The importance of this capacity is reflected in the emphasis on child-rearing throughout the novel. Heathcliff's treatment of Hareton entirely concerns Hareton's "uncivilized nature," and the possibility of demonstrating how thoroughly "nature" can be thwarted or proven wrong. Heathcliff prevents or artificially alters Hareton's progress: "Now, my bonny lad, you are *mine*! And we'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!" Hareton is made the "uncivil little thing" (252), and Heathcliff glories in his anti-training: "he'll never be able to emerge from his bathos of coarseness, and ignorance. I've got him faster than his scoundrel of a father secured me, and lower; for he takes a pride in his brutishness. I've taught him to scorn everything extra-animal as silly and weak" (253). But Hareton is trainable, and it is that fact which determines his value.

In the novel's conclusion, of course, it is not Heathcliff but Catherine who tutors Hareton, in a pedagogic relation that must be distinguished from discipline because, unlike the "guardianship" of Nelly, this relationship is born of mutuality. Catherine and Hareton are fellow inmates who unite against their jailer. Catherine's civilizing of Hareton means curbing his hungers, and turning the desire to eat into a hungering after literacy. Observing Hareton in the kitchen at the Heights, Catherine tells Nelly, "He's just like a dog, is he not, Ellen?... He does his work, eats his food, and sleeps, eternally! What a blank, dreary mind he must have!" (341). Hareton's dogged pursuit of "daily labour and rough animal enjoyments" (333) is replaced, under Catherine's tutelage, by an intense focus on literacy, in which the need to eat is translated into the desire to know. That transformation is signaled when Catherine first emerges from her isolation after Linton's death. Invited by Hareton to "come to the settle, and sit close by the fire; he was sure she was starved," Catherine responds scornfully, "I've been starved a month and more" (327), suggesting, as had her mother before her (126), that hunger might encompass more than bodily claims. Unlike Cathy, however,

[23] On the complex and interesting topic of *Wuthering Heights* and "evolution," see Goff.

Catherine does not feed her appetite with the self-annihilating desire that turns her mother from matter into spirit. Instead, Catherine feeds her mind, a shift away from the body but pointedly not toward a disembodied self. In her isolation at the Heights, Catherine's "torment" is the loss of her books, which words are imprinted on her body—as opposed to the mark of Heathcliff's language inscribed on her mother: "I've most of them written on my brain and printed in my heart, and you cannot deprive me of those" (332). This opposes Cathy's claim that Heathcliff can never be taken from her, however physically distant he might be, or the way that Heathcliff cannot escape Cathy's words: "Do you reflect that all those words will be branded in my memory, and eating deeper eternally, after you have left me?" (196).

The suggestion that hunger surpasses the claims of matter is borne out as Catherine turns Hareton into a reader. It is obviously their shared examination of books, and the success of Catherine's program in literacy education, that signals the beginning of the change between them. As Nelly tells it, "on looking round again, I perceived two such radiant countenances bent over the page of the accepted book, that I did not doubt the treaty had been ratified, on both sides, and the enemies were, thenceforth, sworn allies" (345). In the union of Catherine and Hareton, pedagogy functions in place of devouring desire. Love is still violent, or at least combative ("enemies"), but domesticated. The covert and coercive influence of Nelly Dean is replaced by the sparring of youthful lovers:

> *"Con-*trary*!" said a voice, as sweet as a silver bell—"That for the third time, you dunce! I'm not going to tell you, again—Recollect, or I pull your hair!"*
>
> *"Contrary, then" answered another, in deep, but softened tones. "And now, kiss me, for minding so well."*
>
> *"No, read it over first correctly, without a single mistake."* (338)

This both replaces the torture to which Catherine had subjected Hareton earlier, when she humiliated him for the lack of training he had suffered under Heathcliff, and it also mocks the brutality that has thus far governed the novel.[24]

It is mediated torture, and a more mutual one, partly made safe by the fact that neither Hareton nor Catherine need ever grow up. It is Nelly who points out how "in their several occupations, of pupil and teacher," Catherine and Hareton nevertheless "both appeared, in a measure, my children" (351). The violent flames that burned in the hearth of the Heights in times past are now the domestic illumination that allows the pursuit of learning and a limitless childhood:

> *The red fire-light glowed on their two bonny heads, and revealed their faces, animated with the eager interest of children; for, though he was twenty-three, and she eighteen, each had so much of novelty to feel, and learn, that neither experienced nor evinced the sentiments of sober disenchanted maturity.* (352)

Wuthering Heights resolves the problem of custody in relocating the central novelistic subject in the pedagogical child couple. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,*

[24] On this scene, see Armstrong, *Desire* 185.

tentative narrative closure is achieved in re-inventing the custodial couple. Resolution, in *Wuthering Heights*, relies in part on its evacuation of all mothers, and in the disappearing of the act of mothering. Brontë's fictions deny the idea of sentimentalized motherhood as a potential haven from imprisoning or tortuous anti-familial or institutional structures.[25] Mothering in *Wuthering Heights* is always an absence, or about to become one. It is Nelly who functions in the maternal role but the peculiar nature of her "mothering," as we have seen, calls the role itself into question. If homes imprison, mothers do not, in this novel, liberate.

Nor can they offer freedom in *Wildfell Hall*, where mothering, in contrast to Emily's novel, is constantly before the reader rather than absent, and its dangerous properties anatomized in excruciating detail.[26] The novel almost universally portrays motherhood as dangerous, never sanctified. Sanctimonious, yes, in Helen's religious policing of her little son—but this zeal is by no means approved. The problem with Helen's behavior, as the little community of the novel sees it, is that "you will treat him like a girl—you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him" (55). Helen's response is an impassioned speech on the gendered nature of the family's teaching:

> *You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experiences of others.... I would not send a poor girl into the world unarmed against her foes ... nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will, to watch and guard herself; —and 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 ... I would rather that he died to-morrow! —rather a thousand times!* (57)

The family, then, is the place where gender difference is created. It is by "protection" and "influence" that a mother forms a daughter; but "making a man" of a boy is achieved in giving him a liberal hand.[27] *Wildfell Hall*, like *Wuthering Heights*, is preoccupied with the training of the child-in-custody. And like *Wuthering Heights*, it removes the child from the presumed safety of a "natural" family. Once remanded to a contrived "custody" the way is open for a microscopic investigation of the procedures of child-rearing and pedagogy. This is evident in *Wildfell Hall* in the way that Helen's departure from her husband, and isolated retreat as a mother-in-hiding, makes possible the kind of critical

25 A fascinating account of motherhood which rests rhetorically on tropes of sadistic pleasure and a masochistic maternality is that to be found in the public speeches and pamphlets of Caroline Norton. What Norton manages, perhaps even more perversely than the Brontës, is to sentimentalize motherhood through sadism.

26 Anne Brontë portrays mothers as meddlers of a particularly horrible sort. The man to whom Helen Huntingdon turns in her isolated retreat, Gilbert Markham, has a nightmarish mother, suspiciously fond of her sons. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hargrave demonstrates the very worst in mother/daughter relations, mercilessly inserting the girls, in one of the familiar moves of Victorian fiction, into the marriage market (244). Mrs. Markham teaches her daughter to be submissive to the needs of the men, beginning with her exalted brothers (78); Mrs. Hargrave teaches her daughters to be avaricious: both represent the pitfalls of parenting.

27 The "teaching" of little Arthur is also examined in relation to his father's "contaminating influence": "his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in [him] all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire—in a word, to 'make a man of him,' was one of their staple amusements; and I need say no more to justify my alarm on [Arthur's] account, and my determination to deliver him at any hazard from the hands of such instructors" (356).

scrutiny to which the community subjects her in the passage we have already examined.

But that scrutiny of child-rearing is evident as an obsession at the moment of Arthur's birth and even before it. It is Arthur Senior's "harsh yet careless father and madly indulgent mother" who are to blame for the "evils." The chapter "Parental Feelings" is an extended pedagogical diatribe. Says Helen, "thank Heaven, I am a mother too. God has sent me a soul to educate for heaven" (252). Her work, as Helen conceives it, will be "to be his shield, instructor, friend—to guide him along the perilous path of youth, and train him to be God's servant" (252). Helen's "constant terror is, lest he should be ruined by that father's thoughtless indulgence" (256). Of course, Arthur Senior is not without his views on the practices of child-rearing. He tells his wife she is "not fit to teach children, or to be with them"; she has already "reduced the boy to little better than an automaton" (387).

Having tried to maintain a mother in the text, unlike *Wuthering Heights*, this novel has trouble pushing to the margins the questions that maternal bonds inevitably present for Anne and Emily Brontë. We have seen how Helen turns to torturing Arthur *père*. What needs equal attention in reading this novel is the extent to which Helen's "torturing" of Arthur senior resembles her "tutoring" of Arthur junior. The distinctions between Helen's likeness to Heathcliff (and to Arthur Huntingdon himself) and Nelly, in her caretaking function, are perilously unstable.

For Helen's most assiduous efforts to train little Arthur precisely concern his appetite. The Markhams are shocked to see little Arthur refuse wine "as if in terror and disgust ... ready to cry when urged to take it" (53). Helen explains that he "detests the very sight of wine ... and the smell of it almost makes him sick. I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine when he was sick, and, in fact, I have done what I could to make him hate them" (53). We learn more of this interesting method later:

> *I exerted all my powers to eradicate the weeds that had been fostered in his infant mind, and sow again the good seed they had rendered unproductive.... I have succeeded in giving him an absolute disgust for all intoxicating liquors ... [h]e was inordinately fond of them for so young a creature, and ... I dreaded the consequences of such a taste ... into every glass I surreptitiously introduced a small quantity of tartar-emetic—just enough to produce inevitable nausea and depression without positive sickness. Finding such disagreeable consequences invariably to result from this indulgence, he soon grew weary of it, but the more he shrank from the daily treat the more I pressed it upon him, till his reluctance was strengthened to absolute abhorrence.* (375–76)

This passage goes on at considerable length to describe in detail the bizarre course of training Helen undertakes to "secure him from this one vice" (376).

The tentative and peculiar solution the novel forges is to remove little Arthur from his father's custody, and to both give and refuse the mother's custodial care.

In the end this novel, which is more directly concerned with the legislative acts of child custody than any other written in the first half of the century, circumvents politics to offer custody to a step-father. Mistrusting motherhood as much as family, *Wildfell Hall* suggests that a child might need a mediating presence to protect him from his mother. That need is reflected in the novel's closure which is truly achieved not by way of marriage, although there is one of those, but rather when masculinity is redefined as a resistance to desires that threaten self; when step-fatherhood becomes the approved mode, and one concerning literacy; and when custody not only of the child, but of narrative itself, is given over to that step-father.

It is, in the end, Gilbert Markham who gets custody not only of little Arthur, but of the story of both Arthurs, of Helen, indeed of all the narrative. First, however, he must prove himself able to resist the temptations that confront him. Gilbert reforms during the period of his separation from Helen, especially when he manages to renounce his desire to hear about Helen after she returns to nurse her husband. Rather than beg her brother Lawrence for news of her, he "departed with a cordial pressure of the hand. I posted the letter on my way home, most manfully resisting the temptation of dropping in a word from myself at the same time" (416). Such "reform" makes "manliness" a matter of resistance. In the end it qualifies him as the one who ought to get the girl. More importantly, he gets the boy—custody of little Arthur.[28]

While the couple at the end of *Wuthering Heights* are children, it is the child at the end of *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that makes coupling possible, and that child remains central to the narrative. Little Arthur is present as an enabling force in the growing romance between Helen and Gilbert from the first, as when Helen allows Gilbert to penetrate her isolation "in spite of her prejudice" because, according to Markham, "between myself and my dog, her son derived a great deal of pleasure from the acquaintance [and] she ceased to object, and even welcomed my coming with a smile" (72–73). The child's role is made explicit when Gilbert says, "Dear Arthur! what did I not owe to you for this and every other happy meeting?... In love affairs, there is no mediator like a merry, simple-hearted child" (109).

The simple-hearted child is the agent of closing the emotional and social gaps between the lovers ("'Why should I stay any longer?' 'Wait til Arthur comes, at least'" [484]). At last, Arthur and Gilbert engage in a scene of reading, signaling Gilbert's domestication and fitness for fatherhood:

> *"Look, Mr. Markham, a natural history with all kinds of birds and beasts in it, and the reading as nice as the pictures!"*
>
> *In great good humour, I sat down to examine the book and drew the little fellow between my knees ... I affectionately stroked his curling locks, and even kissed his ivory forehead: he was my own Helen's son, and therefore mine; and as such I have ever since regarded him.* (487)

28 Lowborough's reform, from alcoholic to hysteric, also results in his getting custody of his children. Annabella is seen as a contaminating influence, much as Parliamentary discourse saw the dissolute man (354). Of course, the law also supports Lowborough's claim.

Gilbert oversees little Arthur in his reading, and he reads Helen's diary and all the events of the story into the novel, thus controlling narrative altogether.

Gilbert and Helen *do* produce subjects of their own, ready and willing to be trained, and the language Gilbert uses in ending "his" narrative will return us in closing to *Wuthering Heights*: "As for myself, I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we are in each other's society, and in the promising scions that are growing up about us" (490). The notion of a family as a productive garden recalls the words of Helen's diary, earlier, in which the contamination of the garden is threatened internally by "the weeds that had been fostered in [Arthur's] infant mind" (375). But it directs us also to the image that closes *Wuthering Heights*, of Hareton and Catherine domesticating Wuthering Heights in planting the garden, displacing Joseph's wild profusions, and formally marking the end of Heathcliff's reign. Hareton and Catherine in possession of one another, like little Arthur in the custody of Gilbert Markham, and like the unnamed offshoots of Helen's second marriage, are all, indeed, "scions," twigs grafted onto an older branch, new growth yet still inheritors of the past. And like the scion, the offspring here represent the possibility of a trained and trainable planting that nevertheless contains the seeds of its less controlled beginnings.

Wuthering Heights and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* present an interesting contrast to other "custodial" discourse in the early Victorian period. These novels refuse the temptation, so lavishly indulged by Sergeant Talfourd and his peers in Parliament, to sentimentalize mothers and family, and in that way to make space for the liberal subject. Nor do Anne and Emily Brontë resemble Charles Dickens, who not only sentimentalized mothers but often reduced them in stature and sensibility to little more than children. These Brontë sisters insist that the home *is* the carceral realm, returning again and again to the ominous nature of natural custody. At the same time however, these two novels share with much discourse of the period, including the reformers of custody law, a resolute turn to the figure of the dependent or trainable child. The dependent and often victimized child is a figure to be reckoned with, so dominant is its presence in and out of fiction throughout the nineteenth century. But his or her representation is hardly consistent nor, as we have seen in this essay, does it always serve the immediate ends of disciplinary society.

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