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Recasting the Garden: Anne Brontë's Subversion of the Victorian Garden Trope
in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Katelyn Sabelko

In Victorian fiction, the garden was carefully constructed as a space that both contained women within the “private sphere” of the home and acted as a metaphor for the ideal Victorian home and family. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, however, Anne Brontë utilizes the Wildfell garden to challenge the association of women and mothers with stainless purity, domestic submissiveness, and feebleness—all Victorian ideals of womanhood that fictional gardens of the period worked to reinforce. Using a familiar trope that her readers would have come to expect, Brontë “recasts” the garden in *Tenant*. To quell the garden’s limiting power over Victorian women, Brontë crafts her protagonist as self-reliant and subversive, intentionally using the garden to augment, not inhibit, Helen’s social status and independence outside of her husband’s jurisdiction and power.

Most critics of *Tenant* focus on Helen’s independence, feminism, and Brontë’s religious views yet leave the strong garden metaphors in *Tenant* untouched. Kristin Le Veness and A. J. Drewery argue that Brontë “recasts” the mother figure through Helen’s advocacy of Wollstonecraftian “rational motherhood” and her simultaneous subversion of Victorian societal expectations that culminate in Helen considering it her “duty” to leave her abusive husband (Le Veness 345-6; Drewery 345). Both critics consider Brontë’s dedication to social reform, and Edward Chitham enters the conversation with an exploration of how Brontë’s unique religious views are inseparable from her views on nature and art, thus arguing that, for Brontë, “imagination was subservient to ‘truth’” and that Helen is a reflection of the author’s beliefs (139). These critics of *Tenant* have failed to explore the prevalent garden imagery and metaphors that fill *Tenant’s* pages. While the Brontës were no great gardeners themselves, it is likely that Anne Brontë was challenging a recognizable literary trope to effectively reach her audience through a shared knowledge of the garden’s message (Emmerson 151). Subsequently, it is the work of historians of Victorian fiction that will inform the following analysis of the Wildfell garden. The insight of these historians enables an in-depth exploration of Brontë’s use of the Wildfell garden to revise the metaphor

that equated Victorian women with their orderly homes and gardens. Looking specifically at the portion of text which focuses on Gilbert's early courtship of Helen, Brontë's literary subversion is evident from the very start of the novel.

Brontë first alerts readers that her heroine will not epitomize the Victorian ideal of traditional womanhood through Gilbert's description of the Wildfell garden before Helen arrives at the hall:

Behind it lay a few desolate fields, and then the brown, heath-clad summit of the hill; before (enclosed by stone walls, and entered by an iron gate with large balls of grey granite—similar to those which decorated the roof and gables—surmounting the gateposts), was a garden...now, having been left so many years, untilled and untrimmed, abandoned to the weeds and the grass, to the frost and the wind, the rain and the drought, it presented a very singular appearance indeed...the castellated towers of laurel in the middle of the garden, the gigantic warrior that stood on one side of the gateway, and the lion that guarded the other were sprouted into such fantastic shapes as resembled nothing either in heaven or earth, or in the waters under the earth; but, to my young imagination, they presented all of them a goblinish appearance, that harmonized well with the ghostly legions and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted hall and its departed occupants. (Brontë 51)

Gilbert views the Wildfell garden as a "goblinish" overgrowth, decayed almost beyond recognition. Mirroring the abandoned "haunted hall," the garden presents an eerie, desolate appearance, reflecting the unsettled status of the hall back to the reader. Because the "state of a person's homestead was often used as an analogy for her moral state" in Victorian fiction, readers would have been informed about what was shortly to follow this description (Page and Smith 30). Soon after this passage, Helen, alias "Mrs. Graham," arrives at Wildfell with her son Arthur, draped in both suspicion and potential scandal. Through Gilbert's description of the Wildfell garden, readers would have been alerted to Helen's dubious moral standing and soon discover that Helen is not the typical virginal, submissive, static heroine so prominent in Victorian fiction, but a multi-faceted character with a complex and even

“questionable” past. To reinforce the inextricable connection between healthy morals, healthy family life, and healthy gardens, the first area of Wildfell observed by Gilbert after Helen’s arrival is again the garden.

Because homes and gardens are “metonymically as well as metaphorically” related in Victorian fiction, and both are inextricably equated with the ideal of Victorian womanhood, Brontë must first utilize the familiar metaphor of the garden before she can challenge it (Waters 228). After Helen arrives at Wildfell, Gilbert observes, “I sauntered on, to have a look...and see what changes had been wrought by its new inhabitant. I did not like to go quite to the front and stare in at the gate; but I paused beside the garden wall, and looked, and saw no change” (Brontë 51-2). Gilbert provides the reader with what would have been the expected outcome of his observations: the Wildfell garden has not changed with Helen’s arrival. Because “fictional gardens frequently function as barometers of family life,” and “positively presented gardens are usually indicative of happy or efficient homes, negatively presented gardens of unhappy ones” in Victorian fiction, it would have been absurd—even scandalous—for the home and garden of a mysterious and evasive single mother to flourish (Waters 229). Before Brontë can subvert the garden trope, she must put in place a familiar signpost for her readers; to ensure that her readers make the connection between Helen and her garden, Brontë must first follow the popular metaphor to the letter and leave Helen’s Wildfell garden unchanged from its “goblinish” appearance.

After Helen has settled in her new home, however, the subsequent improvement of the garden at Wildfell presents a direct challenge to the oppressive trope that renders women a derivative of the home and, thus, the garden. When Gilbert and his siblings visit Wildfell, Helen argues for her contentment in her new home: “there is the garden for [Arthur] to play in, and for me to work in. You see I have effected some little improvement already...There is a bed of young vegetables in that corner, and here are some snowdrops and primroses already in bloom—and there, too, is a yellow crocus just opening in the sunshine” (Brontë 80). In direct opposition to the trope that idealized a woman’s position as the “Angel of the House” and “Queen of the Garden,” both ideals existing only within marriage, Brontë writes that Helen’s garden is thriving. Allotting a single mother and runaway wife a happy home as signified by her flourishing garden, Brontë argues for the validity of a mother-centered,

matriarchal home. Because the garden is indicative of its owner's moral state in Victorian fiction, Brontë uses Helen's garden to argue for a woman's right to remove herself from the legal control of her husband, and, furthermore, for a mother's right to the guardianship of her own child. This subversive recasting of the garden provides a strong argument for the legitimacy of Helen's independence from traditional family structures.

The fact that Helen soon thereafter incorporates Gilbert's plants into her garden further reinforces the validity of the nontraditional family. Gilbert explains how he adds to Helen's garden: "I brought her some plants for her garden, in my sister's name—having previously persuaded Rose to send them" (Brontë 89). Although Gilbert insists the plants are from his sister, Rose, the design is Gilbert's alone; Gilbert persuades Rose to offer the plants as a gift so that he can bear the plants to Wildfell as an excuse to visit Helen. For the Victorian reader, however, this merging of two gardens would have been a poignant detail. The significance of this act is illuminated by the fact that in "Victorian fiction, the act of creating a garden is normally a gesture of commitment to a person, place and domestic futurity, particularly when it is undertaken with or for a loved partner" (Waters 235). Thus, Helen's integration of Gilbert's plants to her garden is a radical one, being that Helen is already legally married to Arthur. And, given that it is "no coincidence that many Victorian novels end not only with a marriage (or the prospect of one) but also with the making of a domestic garden," Helen's lasting and romantic commitment to Gilbert is signified through the willing incorporation of plants from Gilbert's garden to her own (235). Helen and Gilbert build the Wildfell garden together, and their commitment stands in direct opposition to the ideals of Victorian family life, which would have kept Helen a prisoner inside of her unhappy and abusive marriage. This passage reveals a distinctly subversive use of the garden trope, one that is strengthened by Brontë's portrayal of Helen's physical presence within the Wildfell garden grounds.

Brontë further subverts the garden trope by impeding Gilbert's attempts to observe Helen in the garden. Gilbert writes hopefully, "perhaps, I might see her in the field or the garden... My wish, however, was not gratified. Mrs. Graham, herself, was not to be seen" (101). Because the fictional Victorian heroine "is almost always the ocular conquest of a privileged male observer," Helen's avoidance

of Gilbert's gaze is subversive in itself. To adhere to the Victorian garden metaphor, Helen should exist as a passive "ornamental icon or spectacle" within the Wildfell garden (Waters 245). Instead, every precaution is taken by Brontë to avoid the equation of Helen with passivity in the garden: Helen is not found within her garden where Gilbert hopes to see her, and, when Helen is compared to nature, it is the wild and tenuous cliffs by the bay that act as a metaphor for Helen's inner life and beauty, not an ornamental garden scene. By intentionally avoiding a voyeuristic garden scene in which Gilbert is the observer and Helen the passive observed, Brontë resists reducing Helen to a mere picture-portrait of Victorian ideals.

Helen's career as an artist is another unique way in which Brontë avoids the voyeuristic gaze of Gilbert and her readers. Because the traditional Victorian heroine exists as an "ornamental icon" within the garden, "the woman at the centre of the picture, invariably a virgin heroine, a princess rather than a matronly queen, is silent, static, submissive, decorous and, above all, painterly" (Waters 245). While the usual fictional Victorian heroine was depicted as part and parcel of a static and passive garden, as a painter herself Helen resists being painted. In fact, Gilbert mentions that each time he visited Helen he "inquired after the picture she was painting from the sketch taken on the cliff, and was admitted into the studio, and asked my opinion or advice respecting its progress" (Brontë 89). Thus, Helen moves Gilbert swiftly from the garden into her studio, her place of work, foiling all attempts to "paint" her as a part of the garden. Brontë also references the cliffs again in this passage, effectively removing all possibility of garden-like passivity on Helen's part by firmly implanting the association of Helen with wild nature in her reader's minds.

In fact, it is the cliffs, fields, and hills that Gilbert most associates with Helen during their courtship, and which Brontë uses to avoid associations of Helen with a passive and pictorial garden scene. As Gilbert writes of Helen, "sometimes, I saw her myself,—not only when she came to church, but when she was out on the hills with her son, whether taking a long, purpose-like walk, or—on specially fine days—leisurely rambling over the moor or the bleak pasture-lands, surrounding the old hall, herself with a book in her hand, her son gamboling around her" (72). Because Helen is not bound within her "garden gate," but instead spends her leisure hours exploring the countryside, Brontë rejects

the belief that “the garden fence...marked the boundary between the domesticated, feminized zone of women and children and the world beyond” and instead crafts a world in which Helen takes ownership of the land surrounding her home, spending more time outside of the boundaries of her “garden” than within them (Page and Smith 42).

As Helen walks far and often, Brontë further challenges the myth of feminine feebleness by highlighting Helen’s fitness. When Helen expresses a desire to view the cliffs five miles from Wildfell, Gilbert’s sister Rose, who has already planned an excursion to the cliffs for a party of friends, exclaims, “It is a very long walk, too far for you,” and insists that the journey will be “a nice walk for the gentlemen...but the ladies will drive and walk by turns; for we shall have our pony-carriage” (82). In keeping with the Victorian pronouncement of women as the “weaker sex,” Rose assumes that Helen’s gender will limit her capacity for physical exertion. However, in direct opposition to this perceived weakness, Gilbert observes that when the party makes their trip, Helen “walked all the way to the cliffs” (82). Helen’s on-foot journey outside the protection of her “garden gate” is a subversive act. In fact, because many Victorian “writers and physicians believed that after puberty a girl became more delicate and thus should be shielded from strenuous activities,” and concluded that “although long walks were good for a girl’s constitution, care should be taken to avoid damp or cold conditions,” Helen’s proclivity for exercise and activity directly challenges Victorian ideals of feminine passivity, both within the garden and without (39). On every account, Brontë uses Helen’s self-reliance and independence to thoroughly deconstruct the popular garden metaphor in Victorian fiction.

Brontë not only liberates Helen from the garden, but further uses the feature of the bower to directly challenge garden-reinforced Victorian gender roles. According to Page and Smith, “The most resonant image of security within the garden during this period was the arbor, bower, or summer-house, since it served so neatly as an extension of the home” (31). Because the bower was used in Victorian fiction to signify an extension of the home, it is no surprise that the bower is “typically associated with girls” in literature of the time (32). Victorian authors portrayed the garden bower and the “garden seat” as a site for women to practice “domestic skills and virtues,” and to exercise their patient moral

guardianship over male family members (Smith and Page 32). Because the bower is such a distinct reoccurring motif in Victorian fiction, it is significant that the only bower scene in *Tenant* focuses on Gilbert, not Helen.

During the party at the Markham family home, Brontë places Gilbert in the traditionally feminized garden bower. After an outburst of passion regarding the circulating scandal around Helen's situation at Wildfell, Gilbert explains, "I rose and left the table and the guests, without a word of apology—I could endure their company no longer. I rushed out to cool my brain in the balmy evening air, and to compose my mind, or indulge my passionate thoughts in the solitude of the garden" (96). The "solitude" Gilbert seeks is found in the form of a "seat embowered in roses and honeysuckles," a space which Brontë does nothing to de-feminize to suit Victorian ideals of masculinity (96). Instead, Gilbert inhabits the bower naturally and eagerly, nestling "up in a corner of the bower" away from "observation and intrusion" and even peeps through his "fragrant screen of interwoven branches," to see without being seen (96). This moment provides readers with a counter-image to the popular trope of the woman in the garden: Brontë, in placing Gilbert in the bower, effectively recasts the typically-gendered pictorial garden scene as Gilbert himself becomes the "Queen of the Garden."

This subversive moment is pushed even further outside of Victorian boundaries when Helen and her young son Arthur join Gilbert in the bower. During the same party at the Markham home, Helen has also sought refuge in the garden, though hers is a more active solitude and Gilbert must enjoin her to sit with him in the bower. He entreats, "Do sit here a little, and rest, and tell me how you like this arbour; . . . and lifting Arthur by the shoulders, I planted him in the middle of the seat by way of securing his mamma, who, acknowledging it to be a tempting place of refuge, threw herself back in one corner, while I took possession of another" (Brontë 97). The scene Brontë creates is familial in nature, as the Victorian bower was also associated with traditional family pictures which included a mother, father, and children (Page and Smith 35). By placing the married Helen, her child, and the unmarried Gilbert together in the familial and feminized bower, Brontë again legitimizes nontraditional family structures. Through her subversive use of this garden space, Brontë gives Helen total authority over her future, her feelings, and her family. And by rewriting the familial bower scene to include a woman who has left her

abusive husband's authority and home and formed an emotional attachment with a single man while still legally married, she legitimizes a woman's right to control her marriage and home life, her children, and her affections.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Brontë expertly recasts the garden trope to create space for Helen's self-reliance and independence during Gilbert's courtship of Helen. Helen's nontraditional family garden flourishes at Wildfell, and she incorporates Gilbert's plants into her garden in an act of defiance of traditional Victorian familial ideals. Helen resists being painted in the minds of Gilbert and the readers because she herself is the painter, and Brontë promotes a woman's right to choose her own partner by placing Helen and her child in the family-centric bower with Gilbert. It is also clear that Brontë's subversive use of the garden trope in *Tenant* is intentional, complex, and incorporated into each section of the novel. For while this paper has focused on a specific period of interaction between Gilbert and Helen—their courtship phase before Helen shares her diary—a plethora of subversive garden-trope-revising tactics exist in the other two phases of the novel: Helen's diary and the final, post-diary portion of the novel. An exploration of the many ways in which Brontë continues to subvert and re-write Victorian garden metaphors throughout each section of *Tenant* would be a fertile new ground for literary critics.

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