INTRODUCTION

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword.

On its appearance in 1848 Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published under the pseudonym of Acton Bell, elicited strong feelings. A tale of marital breakdown, vice, and dissipation, it was immediately deemed by critics to be 'vulgar', 'coarse', and 'brutal'. 'The mind that conceived [the novel]', wrote one of its early critics, 'is one of great strength and fervour, but coarse almost to brutality.' And with a whimsical flourish, he speculated that 'its owner may be descended from a jarl or a sea-king'.[1] Charlotte Brontë—who, as the author of *Jane Eyre*, had been subjected to similar opprobrium—wrote that it had been an 'entire mistake' for her younger sister, 'gentle Anne', to have tackled such themes, and that she '[could] not wonder' at the unfavourable reviews.[2] Among these, the reviewer in *Sharpe's London Magazine* was typical in counselling women not to read the novel, 'so revolting are many of the scenes, so coarse and disgusting the language put into the mouths of some of the characters'.[3] But despite its perceived defects, critics were also gripped by what they called the novel's 'power', its passionate eloquence, its 'freshness', 'vigour', and, as even its most hostile reviewer conceded, its undoubtedly Christian moral.[4]

By today's standards, of course, there is nothing particularly surprising or outré about a novel that deals with drunkenness, drug taking, or extramarital sex. But the continuing capacity of *The Tenant* to move us, through its vivid account of the alcoholic's physical decline, its subdued narrative of wife abuse, and its electrifying revelation of marital betrayal, suggests that the shocks it produced

[1] Unsigned review, *Literary World*, 12 August 1848, in Allott, 257.

[2] Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' (19 Sept. 1850), repr. in *Letters*, ii. 742–7: 745.

[3] Unsigned review, *Sharpe's London Magazine* (Aug. 1848), in Allott, 263.

[4] Allott, 259, 265: 'we cannot but express our deep regret that a book in many respects eminently calculated to advance the cause of religion and right feeling, the moral of which is unimpeachable and most powerfully wrought out, should be rendered unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be most useful.'

for contemporary readers were not only those of broken social or moral taboos. The novel's power also lies in its frank depictions of states of subjection and powerlessness. It shows us how it feels to be thwarted, betrayed, dominated, and trapped in situations from which we cannot escape. In exploring these states, *The Tenant* presents a sharp critique of a brutal and brutalizing society.

As the youngest child of a remarkable family, with three precocious older siblings, Charlotte (1816–55), Branwell (1817–48), and Emily (1818–48), Anne Brontë must have known from personal experience what it felt like to be subject to the will of others. Biographical accounts of Anne stress her quietness and piety, in contrast to her louder and more boisterous sisters and brother. While the others were flighty, strong-minded, impassioned, and opinionated, Anne appears to have been steady, sensible, patient, and long-suffering. For instance, when Anne returned to the family home at Haworth in June 1845, Charlotte wrote to her friend, Ellen Nussey, that '*her* presence at home certainly makes me feel more at liberty', with no mention of the fact that Anne seemed to have been exhausted and depressed from her four-year stint as a governess.[5] Charlotte, through whose accounts biographies of Anne tend to have been mediated, treated her with something of an elder sister's disdain, and this has coloured Anne's reputation. A frequently cited anecdote from the Brontë childhood that occurred in 1826—a story that is often counted as a primal moment in the children's extraordinary literary development—confirms the impression of Anne as the quiet and patient one. When her brother Branwell received a gift of a box of wooden soldiers, he allowed each of his siblings to choose one soldier for herself, and to give it a name and identity. According to Charlotte, recording the event two years later in her 12-year-old prose,

> mine [the Duke of Wellington] was the prettiest of the whole and the tallest and perfect in every part Emilys was a grave looking fellow and we called him Gravey Ane's was a queer little thing much like herself he was called waiting Boy Branwell chose Bonuparte.[6]

In the biographical record, Anne's identification with the 'queer little thing' named 'waiting Boy' has stuck, even though at the time she was only 6 years old. Later, when she was 14, Charlotte caricatured

[5] Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, ?18 June 1845, in *Letters*, i. 399.

[6] BPM: MS Bon 80 (11), cited in Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

Branwell's high-handed attitude to his sisters depicting him (in the person of Benjamin Patrick Wiggins) as dismissing his three sisters as 'miserable, silly creatures', and that of them all, 'Anne is nothing, absolutely nothing'. When asked by his interlocutor, 'What! Is she an idiot?', he replies, 'Next door to it'.[7] The description is clearly a satire, but none the less has contributed to the impression that we have of this, the 'Cinderella' Brontë.[8]

This picture of Anne has been difficult to challenge because of the paucity of extant documentary evidence regarding her life. In addition to her published poetry and fiction, however, it is likely that she produced an abundance of correspondence, diaries, and imaginative writings. Yet as was not the case with her elder sister, Charlotte, and brother Branwell, most of her juvenile and private writings have been lost or destroyed—whether by her, or posthumously by Charlotte, is unknown.[9] For instance, it is known that from early childhood to probably 1846, in collaboration with Emily she wrote at least four volumes of prose chronicling an imaginary, exotic place that they had invented named 'Gondal'. All of these have been lost, though traces of 'Gondal' persist in cryptic references in poetry and in a few remaining 'Diary Papers'.[10] Given the limited source material, therefore, Anne's personality and inner life remain more shadowy than those of her siblings.

Anne Brontë 1820–1849

The externally verifiable facts of Anne Brontë's life, however, are well known.[11] She was born in January 1820, and her mother died before

[7] 'My Angria and the Angrians', in *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Christine Alexander, vol. ii, pt. 2 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell for Shakespeare Head Press, 1991), 239–93: 250.

[8] The phrase, 'a sort of literary Cinderella' is used by G. E. Moore, in his appreciative assessment of Anne Brontë. See *Conversations in Ebury Street* (1924; rev. edn., London: Heinemann, 1930), 214–23: 222.

[9] On the destruction of manuscripts, see Gerin, *Anne Brontë* (1959; rev. London: Allen Lane, 1976), 59, 104, and 291.

[10] The 'Diary Papers' or 'Birthday Notes' were short accounts written by Emily and Anne at four-year intervals of past events within the family, descriptions of everyday life, and projection into the future, as well as descriptions of events in 'Gondal'. 'Diary Papers' signed by Anne exist for 24 November 1834, 26 June 1837, 30 July 1841, 31 July 1845. On 'Gondal', see Alexander and Smith, 216–21. While 'Gondal' is often presumed to be the imaginative source of *Wuthering Heights*, it is generally thought that Anne distanced herself from this imaginative world when she left Haworth for work.

[11] Biographies of Anne Brontë and of the Brontë family are listed in the Select Bibliography. See esp. Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994).

she was 2 years old. An unmarried maternal aunt, Aunt Branwell (1776–1842), cared for the children after the mother's death, and as the youngest child, Anne had a closer relationship to her than the others. It is reckoned, for instance, that her aunt's Methodism may have influenced her more than her sisters and brother. The children's father, Patrick Brontë (1777–1861), was an academically able child from a poor agricultural family in County Down in Ireland. He worked as a tutor in Ireland before gaining a place at St John's College, Cambridge, in 1802 when he was 25. He was ordained in the Church of England in 1807, and took over the scattered parish of Haworth on the edge of the Yorkshire moors thirteen years later, shortly after Anne's birth. Haworth was a large textile manufacturing village, with a very poor record in public health caused mainly by inadequate drainage and water supply. High mortality rates meant that the average life expectancy was only 26. A reformer with strong evangelical leanings, Patrick Brontë campaigned for health, education, and other social causes in his locality. He was also a published author of poetry and fiction. He implanted in his children a strong sense of social justice, a love of literature, and an intense desire to write. His violent eccentricities, famously described by Elizabeth Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), are considered by more recent biographers to have been exaggerated, if not fabricated, and the Brontë home, despite its oddities, is thought to have been a lively context that stimulated the imaginative development of the children.[12] Anne's eldest two sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, died of tuberculosis contracted at the Clergy Daughters' school at Cowan Bridge when Anne was only 5. Partly as a consequence of this, the younger Brontë girls were educated together at home until 1831, at which time Charlotte was sent to Roe Head school. Emily followed but, unable to settle, came home. Her place at the school was filled by Anne in 1834. Anne proved herself to be a diligent scholar, receiving a prize for good conduct in 1836. In 1837, however, she underwent a period of illness which was connected to a crisis in faith, possibly triggered by the Calvinistic leanings of the school. During this period she

[12] Barker devotes considerable attention to redressing Gaskell's account of Patrick Brontë in *The Brontës*, but see also Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13–23. On the debunking of Brontë myths in general and Gaskell's in particular, see Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), esp. 36–7.

was counselled by a Moravian minister, the Reverend James La Trobe, whose doctrine of universal salvation brought her comfort and restored her faith. The Moravians were a Protestant sect who had close associations with Methodists. Their benign and optimistic doctrine of universalism or '*apocatastasis*'—the belief that hell is a temporary state, and that all free moral creatures will share in the grace of salvation—had a strong influence on Anne throughout her life, and is expressed in *The Tenant* through the character of Helen. In 1839, she took up her first position as a governess in Blake Hall, Mirfield, and afterwards, in 1840 was employed by the Reverend Edmund Robinson at Thorp Green Hall near York, where she remained for four years. Her trying experiences as a governess in both establishments provided source material for her first novel *Agnes Grey* (1846). Like her sisters, she was miserable away from home, and one imagines that she contributed enthusiastically to their plans to set up a school for girls together in the vicinity of Haworth. The scheme collapsed after published advertisements failed to recruit any pupils. Nevertheless it is likely that, in preparation, Anne read about and reflected on issues of pedagogical practice and the appropriate curriculum for female pupils. Of all the Brontë siblings, Anne was perhaps the most professionally committed, certainly the most steadily employed, and the one who spent the longest continuous period away from the family home.

The four years spent with the Robinson family expanded her social experience beyond Haworth. She spent time with the Robinsons in York and in the seaside town of Scarborough, her health benefiting from the bracing sea air. It is likely also that she enjoyed the cultural life of these resorts, going to concerts and possibly also to the comedies and melodramas which were the staple of the Scarborough Theatre Royal. In her third year with the Robinson family, Branwell, who had lost his job as a clerk at Luddenden Foot station on the Leeds to Manchester railway in 1842, was appointed as tutor to the youngest Robinson child. He stayed approximately two years, during which time he became romantically involved with the lady of the house, Lydia Robinson. The exact nature of the affair and the cause of its break-up are not known, except for the fact that in July 1845, a month after Anne had left the household voluntarily, Branwell was sacked, and cautioned never to contact the family again. It is not known for how long and in what detail Anne had known of her brother's

doings, although when he was dismissed, it was she who informed Charlotte of the reasons for the dismissal. But around that time, she recorded cryptically that she had had 'some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience of human nature'.[13] It is likely too that the tiny inscription at the back of her prayer book, 'sick of mankind | And their disgusting ways', dates from this period of her life.[14] Back in Haworth, Branwell sank into alcoholic and drug-addled misery, and died in September 1848 of tuberculosis, exacerbated by the effects of his addictions.[15]

Anne's career as a published writer began simultaneously with those of her sisters. In 1846 they secured a publisher, Aylott and Jones, for a volume of poems by the pseudonymous Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell, names under which they chose to publish. In her 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', first printed in the 1850 joint edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte tells of how she 'came upon' some poems by Emily among her private things—much to Emily's fury. Anne, in contrast, 'quietly produced some of her own compositions, intimating that, since Emily's had given me pleasure, I might like to look at hers. I could not but be a partial judge, yet I thought that these verses too had a sweet sincere pathos of their own.'[16] The volume flopped—only two copies were sold in a year—but its appearance encouraged the sisters to pursue publication of their prose fiction. The publisher T. C. Newby produced *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* in a three-volume edition in 1847, and *The Tenant*, also in three volumes, in June the following year. Anne subsequently had some success in placing her poetry in magazines and newspapers, and Edward Chitham, the editor of her poems, notes that by 1850, thirty-one poems by Anne had been printed.[17] But if Anne Brontë was only at the beginning of her career, its full fruits were never to be seen: like Emily, who died in December 1848, she contracted TB, and passed away five months later, in May 1849, aged only 29. This was less than a year after the

[13] Diary Paper, 31 July 1845, in *Letters*, i. 409–11: 410.

[14] MS note, end flyleaf, *The Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1823), BPM.

[15] On Branwell's medical condition, see Philip Rhodes, 'A Medical Appraisal of the Brontës', *BST* (1972), 16. 82. 101–9.

[16] 'Biographical Notice', 743.

[17] *The Poems of Anne Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Edward Chitham (London: Macmillan, 1979), 26.

publication of *The Tenant*. She died and was buried in Scarborough, the only one of the Brontës not to be entombed in Haworth.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Fact and Fiction*

The central intrigue of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the second of Anne Brontë's two novels, is the romance between farmer Gilbert Markham and Helen Huntington, the mysterious new tenant of the isolated Wildfell Hall. The story of their love affair is told in letters from Gilbert to his brother-in-law, Halford, looking back from the 1840s to events that happened twenty years before. Helen, who has taken the assumed name of Helen Graham, supports herself and her small son by working as an artist, much to the fascination of the genteel inhabitants of Linden-Car, in whose vicinity Wildfell Hall stands. This small group includes Gilbert's mother, brother, and sister; Frederick Lawrence, the young squire and owner of Wildfell Hall (who we later discover is Helen's brother); the vicar and his daughters, Mary and Eliza Millward; and the social climber Jane Wilson. All embellish their daily lives with gossip, especially about the new neighbour. The eponymous tenant is eventually revealed to be the estranged wife of a rake, Arthur Huntington, whom she has left in order to seek protection for her young son, also named Arthur. In the middle of the letter narrative, Helen gives Gilbert a diary which recounts her prior life, her courtship and marriage to Huntington against the advice of her morally upright aunt, and her subsequent life with her dissolute husband and his coterie of rakish companions. These comprise the puppyish Ralph Hattersley, Walter Hargrave, whose romantic interest in Helen becomes increasingly sinister as the diary progresses, and Lord Lowborough, a weak-willed aristocrat who had fallen into gambling, alcoholism, and drug addiction, and who now attempts to reform himself through marriage to a rich and beautiful coquette, Annabella. In the early days of their marriage, Arthur shows to Helen the full extent of his degraded character when he tells her about how he had helped to corrupt Lowborough by inciting him to ever more dissipation. The drunken parties, the abuse that Helen suffers at the hands of her husband and his friends, and the violence inflicted on Helen's friend Milicent by her husband Ralph Hattersley, are all described in vivid detail. But it is the revelation of Arthur's adultery with Annabella, Lady Lowborough, that provokes