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**Bendable and Breakable Men: Changes in Masculinity in  
Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant  
of Wildfell Hall***

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## Introduction

“One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (283).

Paraphrasing these famous words by Simone de Beauvoir, Raewyn Connell writes in her book *Gender* that “one is not born masculine, but has to become a man” and in doing so, she postulates that the theory of gender as a, foremost, social construction is as applicable to the construction of masculinity as it is to that of femininity (5). In both Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) the exploration and questioning of gender roles are central themes, and the unconventional female protagonist of each novel is very noteworthy. However, the male protagonists are worth considering as well, because hidden behind these depictions of radical femininity is a curious pattern of masculinities that are either rejected or accepted in accordance with their ability to change.

The two novels were published during the Victorian period, when gender inequality was customary and women’s subjugation a legislative part of society, and this affected not only the contents of these novels, but also how they were received. In her preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë criticizes the unequal treatment of female authors and states that “if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be” (5). However, Victorian society did not agree with her, and when it was revealed that Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell were really Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, all three of them were “accused by contemporary reviewers of having written ‘unwomanly’ books<sup>1</sup>” (Ewbank, xv-xvii). Anne’s contradictory behaviour – declaring that the sex of the author should not affect the reception of the book, but still publishing under a male or gender-neutral pseudonyms – illustrates well how marginalized female authors were at this time.

When discussing the struggle for women’s rights and gender inequality in Victorian society, much attention has been given to the changes that the feminine role underwent, and little or no recognition has been given to the changes in the masculine role during that same time (Griffin 6-7). This tendency is discernible in literary

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<sup>1</sup> Ewbank states that according to Victorian standards “the pure feminine mind must ... know no sin, no evil, no sexual passion”, and therefore none of the Brontë sisters can be said to have written in an especially feminine way (43).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. men’s rationality versus women’s emotionality.

interpretations as well, as illustrated when Barbara Z. Thaden in her essay about gender depiction in *Jane Eyre* calls the novel “a Cinderella story with a feminist twist ... a manifesto of a *woman’s* [sic] right to the pursuit of happiness” (160). Despite her interpretation being a relevant and justifiable one, it arguably overlooks the changes in masculinities required by the narrative of *Jane Eyre*, and also *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and how these changes are beneficial to both their female and male protagonists’ pursuit of happiness.

In this essay I want to look closer at the masculine behaviours of Brontë’s fictional men, and discuss what consequences these different behaviours have for the narratives. Both novels feature a relationship drama between two men and one woman, and since it will ultimately be the female protagonists’ actions that affect the overarching narrative, the male protagonists will either have to accept or refuse to change – bend or break – in accordance with their female partner’s femininity. The four male protagonists in these novels suffer different fates, and I argue that one possible interpretation of these novels is that by either including or excluding these male characters from their narratives, Charlotte and Anne Brontë implicitly advocate an adaptable masculinity – a masculinity that changes side by side with a changing femininity.

In her pioneering book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that gender is “a *stylized repetition of acts*” and that these “acts ... are *performative*”, making gender a perpetual creation of staged actions (191, 185). Using her concept of performativity when examining the two competing male characters from each novel, I will discuss how these characters are constructed through their actions. Furthermore, by comparing the four male protagonists with Victorian gender norms, I aim to show how they are affected by social structures, and discuss whether they conform or oppose the general norms of masculinity during this time. With this essay, I suggest that the narratives of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* not only offer radical depictions of femininity, but of masculinity as well.

## **1. The Construction of Masculinity**

In the late 1980s, the greatest leap in modern theorizing of gender was taken by the American philosopher Judith Butler, who began discussing gender as an act: “as a *corporeal style* ... which is both intentional and performative” (190). When analysing

gender using this theory, gender seizes to be something solid, but instead becomes a continuous flow of actions; instead of *being* our gender, we *manifest* it through our repeated performances. In this sense, Butler argues that drag can be seen as a subversive act, because mimicking another gender performance than one's biological "reveals the imitative structure of gender itself [sic]" (187). This understanding of gender has, according to Butler, been generally overlooked due to the fact that the construction of gender "conceals its genesis"; its repetitive character makes it appear natural and inherent (190).

One of the first scholars who refused to acknowledge the 'naturalness' of gender was Simone de Beauvoir, who together with her partner, Jean-Paul Sartre, argued for how one should understand the terms masculinity and femininity as different "*gender projects*" (Connell 2005 72). In the words of Raewyn Connell, De Beauvoir strongly criticized "how women were *constituted* [sic] as 'other' in the consciousness of men" and strived to reclaim female autonomy by searching for ways in which "women could ... constitute themselves" (2009 37). Building on this reasoning, Toril Moi argues that women are "quite specifically *man's* [o]ther", and in this sense employed to emphasize his masculinity (133).

Basing her studies of masculinity on Butler's and de Beauvoir's theories, Connell argues that "we cannot think of womanhood and manhood as fixed by nature", but must instead realize that people repeatedly "construct *themselves* as masculine or feminine" (2009 6). However, as Connell points out, the widely held belief is still that there are "innate" differences between the sexes, e.g. in "bodily strength ... sexual desire", and this is combined with an "idea of *character dichotomy*": asserting that *all* women behave in one general way and *all* men in the opposite (2009 105, 53, 60). Because of this framework, the concept of masculinity can only be defined as the opposite of that which is feminine. Moi takes this analysis one step further by claiming that "each term only achieves significance through its structural relationship to the other: 'masculine' would be *meaningless* [sic] without its direct opposite 'feminine'" (104).

In *Sexual/Textual Politics* Moi quotes literary critic and philosopher Hélène Cixous who exposes the power hierarchy this contrastive view sustains by calling it the "patriarchal binary thought" (102). Because, within this dichotomous logic there is a tendency to, by default, ascribe the masculine side a higher value than the feminine

one<sup>2</sup>. Paraphrasing Mathilde Vaerting, Connell states that gender denotes “power relations” in society, rather than describing fixed character traits (2009 36). In order “to defend the existing gender order”, it is often men who tend to side with a biological reasoning supporting these classifications, while women are inclined to oppose them and to look for other constructive explanations (Connell 2009 53).

Quoting Butler, Ranita Chatterjee writes that gender performance is “not voluntary and is strictly enforced ‘within a highly rigid regulatory frame’” (79)<sup>3</sup>. The same line of thought is entertained by Connell, who argues that “social structure conditions practice” and that due to the structures of different societies bodies will not perform gender in arbitrary ways (2009 74). Even though structures do not explicitly tell people how to act, they do so implicitly by “[defining] possibilities and consequences for action” (Connell 2009 74), or as Butler writes: “[W]e regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (190).

Focusing on masculinity, Connell writes that “there are multiple masculinities within the same society”, and this depends on other factors e.g. “class and ethnicity”; however, she argues that there is, nonetheless, a ruling masculinity, which she chooses to call *hegemonic*<sup>4</sup> masculinity (2009 107). In Western society, she argues, “there is an active defence of hegemonic masculinity and the position of economic, ideological and sexual dominance held by heterosexual men”, which is exhibited in the historical resistance to women’s rights movement (2005 216). Connell clarifies that this should not be interpreted as all masculinities having “a fixed propensity to violence”, but instead that it is “the dominant gender” that uses violence, usually hegemonic masculinities (2005 258, 83). Moreover, this violence operates on several levels, e.g. in prescribing character traits for women: which if successful, can lead to “a cultural disarmament that may be quite as effective as the physical kind” (Connell 2005 83).

Ben Knights writes that “[becoming] increasingly aware of the ubiquity of literary discussions of manliness and masculinity” is essential to interpretations of masculinities. He stresses the importance of refusing to see masculinity as an

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. men’s rationality versus women’s emotionality.

<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee further writes that a common misreading of Butler’s first book is that gender performance is voluntary, and, quoting Butler, she states that “gender performance is not a ‘willful appropriation and it is certainly *not* a question of taking on a mask’” (79).

<sup>4</sup> In *Masculinities*, hegemony is defined as “the cultural dynamics by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life” established when “cultural ideal and institutional power” correspond with each other (2005 77).

“unmarked or tacit norm”, but instead understand that the masculine gender is as changeable as the feminine (1). Comparing literary studies with anthropology, Knights argues that texts are “one of the sites where humans can practise what it means and might mean to be human”, and in this sense fictional stories can better our understanding of a special time, place or gender role (27).

## **2. St. John Rivers and Arthur Huntingdon – The Men Who *Do Not* Change**

When analysing what kinds of masculinities St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre* and Arthur Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be said to represent, it is useful first to consider how they are depicted. In accordance with Butler’s theory of performativity I have chosen to focus on the actions of these two characters: not assuming their kind of masculinity to be inherent and static, but instead constantly reproduced by their performances. Furthermore, as both Rivers and Huntingdon are essentially described by the female narrator of each novel, i.e. Jane Eyre and Helen Huntingdon, their narrative abilities and reliability are worth considering when interpreting how Rivers’ and Huntingdon’s actions come across.

Jane’s and Helen’s artistic abilities, when it comes to depictions, lend authority to their character descriptions. Both Jane and Helen are painters, and used to reproducing pictures from reality, or of the mind, onto their canvases. In much the same fashion, they reproduce their impressions of Rivers and Huntingdon onto the blank pages of their journals. While Jane’s drawings are complemented for their imagination, she states that they are “pale portrait[s]” of the things she saw in her mind (125). Helen’s, on the other hand, are described as “elegantly and artistically handled”, and the means by which she supports herself (36). Despite both painters having different strengths and weaknesses, the mere fact that they are actively observing and describing their environment in images is enough to credit them as narrators.

However, due to her sheltered upbringing Helen’s perceptive ability is somewhat innocent and untrained. In the beginning of her narrative, Helen praises herself on being “an excellent physiognomist ... always [judging] of people’s characters ... by their general countenance” (107). Nevertheless, the reader soon discovers that Helen’s faith in her own judgment is deficient, as she fails to discern



Huntingdon's true character and rebuke his marriage proposal, which would have saved her a great deal of grief. Interestingly enough, Helen does seem to be aware of Huntingdon's faults quite early on, because prior to their marriage – when there is still time to regret and refuse – rather than actually calling him a man of “good disposition” and “principle” she states that he *could become* such a man, had he only someone to guide him (117). Therefore, her shortcoming seems to be an unfortunate overestimation of the change she could bring about in Huntingdon's behaviour, rather than a failure to assess his character.

Jane, on the other hand, has led a harsher life than Helen, first with the Reeds and later at Lowood, and is – despite being about equal in age – less rash and naïve in her judgment of people. There are several instances throughout the novel where Jane thoroughly studies the people she meets, and even though she is later referred to as a “girl-bride”, emphasising her youth, this does not seem to weaken her perception (261). Her mature perspective is best exemplified in her conduct towards St. John Rivers, because for a long time she is unsure how to interpret him, and this frightens her: “I had silently feared St. John till now, because I had not understood him. He had held me in awe, because he had held me in doubt. How much of him was saint, how much mortal” (413). However, instead of making up her mind about him too quickly, she watches him and waits for him to reveal his true self, and this scepticism against first impressions will, as it turns out, serve Jane well.

At first, St. John Rivers appears to be the ideal Christian man. He enters into the narrative when he saves Jane's life by admitting her into his home when she is on the brink of exhaustion. He leads a Spartan existence as the village's priest, founding schools for poor children – both boys and girls – and “visiting the sick and poor among the scattered population of his parish” (355). After welcoming Jane into his home, he also offers to help her find a suitable occupation, adding up to the impression of Rivers as a thoroughly good and charitable man, who is “willing to aid [her] to the utmost of [his] power” (351). Moreover, he expresses great faith in Jane's abilities to provide for herself, and by giving her a job and “[putting her] in the way of keeping [herself]”, Rivers helps Jane gain some independence and this favours a positive impression of his character (353).

One of Rivers' strongest character traits is his need for self-control, and he keeps high standards of moderation for himself. Proudly he states that “[i]t is hard work to control the workings of inclination, and turn the bent of nature: but that it

may be done I know from experience” (367). A scene that specifically illustrates Rivers’ firm nature is when he reclines to fantasise about having Rosamund Oliver for his wife. After the fifteen minutes he permits himself, he rises from his daydream and pronounces the infatuation to be “a mere fever of the flesh” (381). Ultimately, he curbs these lusts and excesses in the same way “as a resolute rider would curb a rearing steed” (370). The problematic aspect with his behaviour is that he expects the same discipline and diligence from the company he keeps.

In comparison, Arthur Huntingdon makes no visible effort whatsoever to curb his lusts, which is why Helen’s religious character makes him uncomfortable. He consequently expects her to be less of a moral judge and instead adapt according to his degrading standards. However, Helen nuances his character by writing that he is not “what is commonly called a *bad* man ... but [that] he is a man without self-restraint ... a lover of pleasure, given up to animal enjoyments” (191). What makes matters worse is that Huntingdon, instead of reforming and trying to be a more moderate man, quickly descends down this road as “he [loses] the little self-command and self-respect he once possessed” (220). Brontë manages to present the consequences of Huntingdon’s behaviour as a failure of society rather than a personal failure, showing how married women’s legal protection at this time was deplorable: they were not allowed to hold property and divorce, even from a horrible man, was hard to come by. As pointed out by Carol A. Senf, “Arthur, having squandered his fortune, has good reason for not wanting to relinquish power over Helen and her fortune” (451). Therefore, I argue that Huntingdon’s behaviour foremost serves to critique the way in which Victorian society enabled men to behave badly towards women.

At this point, Rivers and Huntingdon might seem like diametrical opposites – the saint and the sinner, the parson and the pagan; however, there are several aspects bridging these two characters, where the most obvious one is their physical appearance. Both Rivers and Huntingdon are described as attractive young men, and these youthful good looks serve them well during the subsequent courtship. Upon first examining Rivers, Jane remarks that “his face riveted the eye” (349), because of its Grecian beauty and harmonious features, and in similar fashion, Helen describes Huntingdon as having a “too fascinating physiognomy”, and states that she finds it hard to believe “there is any harm in those laughing blue eyes” (122, 107).

Additionally, both Huntingdon and Rivers *do* pose a threat to the female protagonists, because of their need for obedience and subjection. In her second assessment of Rivers, Jane describes him as “exacting” and “[acquiring] a certain influence over [her] that took away [her] liberty of mind” (405). However, Jane does not accept his claim to superiority, but instead considers him to be an equal:

[T]he analysis of his nature was proceeding before my eyes. I saw his fallibilities: I comprehended them. I understood that, sitting there where I did, on the bank of heath, and with that handsome form before me, I sat at the feet of a man, erring as I. The veil fell from his hardness and despotism. Having felt in him the presence of these qualities, I felt his imperfection, and took courage. I was with an equal. (413)

Jane, thus, finds the courage to withstand Rivers’ attempt to subjugate her, and refuses to marry him. This action further triggers the kind of masculinity represented by Rivers, as Jane’s unexpected refusal provokes “the disapprobation of an austere and despotic nature, which has met resistance where it expected submission” (416). After that, Jane realizes that because of Rivers’ gender performance he threatens her claim for independence, and she states that “as a man, he would have wished to coerce me into obedience” (416).

Helen also wishes that Huntingdon would consider her an equal, and states that she wants to be “less of a pet and more of a friend” to him, but even though Huntingdon is not as prone to dominating people with his strong will as Rivers, he is far from considering her an equal (158). Having a greater understanding of men, Helen’s aunt sceptically questions whether Huntingdon will ever “allow himself to be guided by a young girl”, but during his infatuation with Helen he seems to be influenced by her and her “other views and nobler aims” (117, 135). However, as the story progresses it becomes clear this kind of subordination to women (e.g. taking their advice) is unthinkable for the kind of masculinity represented by Huntingdon. He feels his autonomy threatened when he is counselled by someone he considers inferior to him, and this inferiority does not only apply to Helen but to most women he engages with. During his illicit affair his mistress also thinks herself capable of changing him into a moderate man, but as this infatuation too wears off Huntingdon

“[expresses] himself rather glad she was gone” and declares that he presently “shall be [his] own man again” (272).

Acknowledging her husband’s character Helen realizes her entrapment, because Huntingdon will never let her “recall him to the path of virtue”, and she cannot live with him in his current condition (118). However, there are several opportunities for Huntingdon to change of his own accord, but instead he merely talks about changing and never alters his actions: “[w]ords, with him, are so much cheaper than deeds” as Helen reflects (340). In the end, Huntingdon is unable to alter his masculinity, and as divorce is not an option for them and since he will not let Helen leave with her son, he cannot stay in the narrative. Thus, Huntingdon must be removed from her vicinity by the means of death, and with an almost eerie foreboding he prophesizes: “this woman will be the death of me, with her keen feelings and her interesting force of character” (201).

One important implication of Huntingdon’s death is that he is not able to influence his son’s masculinity, as the performative character of gender suggests that young Arthur is liable to adopt the performance of his father. The blame for Huntingdon’s extravagances is laid upon his own parents, and this reasoning is crucial for how the novel can be interpreted. The imitating aspect of gender performance becomes obvious in a scene where young Arthur, called “the infant profligate”, stays up late with his father and his father’s friends, perfectly imitating their debased behaviour: “[T]he little fellow ... learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr Hatterslay, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him” (274, 273). Therefore, even though Helen first escapes with young Arthur and upon returning forces her husband to sign a contract where he renounces his claim on their son, she still cannot be sure that he will not affect her son’s masculine performance while he is still alive.

In Rivers’ masculine performance, it is his need to influence and subjugate women that makes him unfit for the narrative of *Jane Eyre*. Jane resolves never to accept Rivers’ marriage proposal because she suspects that he never will change his attitude towards her, and, thus, will continue to take “away [her] liberty of mind” (405). She acknowledges that “[i]f I join St. John, I abandon half myself: if I go to India, I go to premature death” (411). Jane further realizes that because of his behaviour towards women “he would hardly make a good husband ... [and] is right to choose a missionary’s career” (400). However, Rivers is not content with a solitary

missionary's life, and instead declares that he wants a wife – “the sole helpmeet [he] can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolute till death”; therefore, it is necessary that Rivers should die as well (413). In this aspect, the finishing paragraph of *Jane Eyre* with the dying Rivers is vital: “St. John is unmarried: he never will marry now” (462). That is, even though Jane urges Rivers to seek another wife, “one fitted to [him]”, this ending suggests that perhaps no wife should be fitted for such a man as him (462).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar<sup>5</sup> state that Rivers must be beheaded if Jane is to “achieve her true independence”, and though I am inclined to agree with them, I argue that there are additional reasons behind his death (365). I suggest that the deaths of St. John Rivers and Arthur Huntingdon can be seen to fill two purposes within these novels: first, it literally “kills off” the masculinity represented by them, which enables the women in their vicinity to be more independent than under these men's influences, and secondly, Rivers and Huntingdon are prevented from spreading and affecting other men's gender performances. This aspect of gender inheritance is especially emphasized in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, when Helen starts calling her husband Mr Huntingdon: “Mr Huntingdon as I prefer calling him, for the other is my child's name” (271). Her act of giving Huntingdon's first name, Arthur, to his son implicitly indicates that his masculine legacy as well as his name now belongs to young Arthur.

Even though Rivers and Huntingdon do express different traits of masculinity – one not giving in to any potential vice and the other giving in to all of them – they still expect the same obedience from their women, and in the end they still suffer the same fate, because of their inability to change. However, due to Rivers' religious beliefs I argue that his situation is quite different from that of Huntingdon. Jane comments that “[n]o fear of death will darken St. John's last hour; his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast” (462), and even though it is difficult to see Rivers' ending as a complete blessing, it cannot be deemed a punishment like in the case of Huntingdon, for whom “[d]eath is so terrible ... [he] cannot bear it” (350). Knowing that Rivers does not appear to dread death, but instead long for his reward in the afterlife, I suggest that the ending of *Jane Eyre* is perhaps not as much a punishment

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Jacobus criticizes Gilbert and Gubar for being overly reductionist in their literary interpretation and managing to make “all texts written by women into feminist texts” (quoted in Moi 61). Though her criticism is worth discussing, it does not fit within this essay.

as it is a solution to a problem – the problem of an obsolete, immutable masculinity. From this perspective, even the horrid death of Huntingdon might be said to be the only possible ending for a man with that kind of lifestyle, and because he is given so many chances to reform, but fails to do so, it seems like an inevitable end. Consequently, both Rivers and Huntingdon must leave the fictional world of their female protagonists. Furthermore, in order to understand the masculinities represented by them, it is important to discuss the dominant masculine norms of the Victorian society they live in.

### **3. Masculine Identities in Victorian Britain**

St. John Rivers' and Arthur Huntingdon's different behaviours can be thought to demonstrate two erroneous Victorian assumptions that sustained men's supremacy over women: that "men would always use their domestic authority wisely" and that "a wife would happily submit to her husband's wishes" (Griffin 38). As demonstrated in *Jane Eyre*, Jane is not eager to submit herself to Rivers, but instead, as quoted in the previous section, declares that she would regretfully have to "abandon half [her]self" if she were to marry him (411), and, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* it is blatantly clear that Huntingdon never uses his domestic authority wisely. Luckily, as pointed out by Ben Griffin, these assumptions would later prove very "vulnerable to the emergence of an organized women's movement", or, as this essay illustrates, to critical female novelists (38).

In traditional historical research of the struggle for women's rights much emphasis has been placed on the changes in the female gender role, arguably assuming the feminine gender more in need of scrutinizing than the masculine. Rooted in Brian Harrison's framework of *separate spheres* this way of thinking, as pointed out by Griffin, "effectively removes men from the critical gaze ... [studying] the female body as seen by men rather than the masculinity of the men discussing women" (23). In doing so, he continues, it also tends "to treat 'the woman question' as though it were a separate discourse, hermetically sealed from the rest of Victorian political culture" instead of recognising that the struggle for gender equality has as much to do with masculinity as it has to do with femininity (25).

However, as Griffin argues in his introduction, it was men who held the power and men who ultimately shared *some* of the power, and therefore the demands for

gender equality “had to be filtered through a complex web of male beliefs, assumptions and aspirations if the law were to be changed”. Due to this power hierarchy, it becomes important to study the “changes in the history of masculinity” and try to define what structures oppressed women and in what way, so as to explore how a changing feminine gender role demanded a changing masculine gender role as well (Griffin 6).

Nuancing the opposition against equality, Griffin argues that another problem with traditional research is the inclination to simplify and conflate all resistance against gender equality: presupposing a unified male group that was either for or against *all* questions concerning women’s rights, e.g. marital laws, child custody laws, suffrage etc. However, because of different masculine values, “support for one ‘feminist’ issue did not directly translate into support for another”, and therefore, if we want to comprehend e.g. “men’s view on allocating child custody rights ... we need to pay as much attention to their beliefs about paternity as we do to their beliefs about women’s role as mothers”: shifting the research focus from object *woman* to object *man* (Griffin 22-3).

Victorian Britain not only saw the dawning of women’s demands for equal rights, but also experienced a dramatic emergence of a new masculinity – gentlemanliness. Criticizing Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, Griffin argues that due to the fact that Victorian society was prior to “the emergence of [Western] mass culture”, one cannot discuss its masculinities in a broader sense using this concept (169). However, he continues, this new ideal was an exception, since it was most prevalent among the educated Victorian upper and middle classes, who “shared linguistic and cultural resources, social practices and values ... [making them] a reasonably coherent group”; it was also this kind of masculinity that “exerted the most influence on the performance of parliamentary masculinities”: the ruling masculinities<sup>6</sup> (170). Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deal exclusively with gentlemen, which is justified from both a personal and a political perspective.

Decades before Freud’s assertive attempt to connect the feminine with passivity and the masculine with activity, Victorian society harboured the same line of thought. The common belief was that “‘manliness’ was a state to be attained by

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<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Griffin argues, “the ideal of gentlemanliness ... [was] simultaneously upholding both a class and a gender hierarchy” and while his point is interesting it will not be a focal point in this essay (170).

effort”, while the worries concerning femininity rather targeted “the loss of femininity” (Griffin 173). However, Griffin argues that since masculinity had to be “achieved through effort” it, too, could be lost all too swiftly, and that those who failed to meet these existing norms “were more likely to be labelled unmanly than to be accepted” (186, 188). Therefore, the opposition against women’s rights during this time is better understood in terms of apprehensions about the perceivable threat this movement posed to the norms and privileges of masculinity.

This new masculinity rested to some extent on “changes in the religious culture”, in which “self-restraint and devotion to others” were highly valued masculine performances (Griffin 111, 127). Griffin argues for how this self-restraint – or self-mastery – for men included the subordination of “one’s own selfish desires [and] control of one’s sexual urges”, while for women it required an obligatory submission, which should not be caused by fear but instead be an act of “honour and loving duty” (174, 129). Acknowledging Rivers’ status as a gentleman, his restrained attitude towards Rosamund Oliver and his general ‘selflessness’ might be better understood as attempts to perform in accordance with the existing masculinity norms for his class. Unfortunately for him, Jane breaks with the norms regarding her gender, and does not consider it her loving duty to submit to him.

Furthermore, there was a dichotomous logic of public and private spheres prevalent at this time, where women belonged to the latter and men to the former. Griffin argues that religion was a strong influence here as well, idealising the home as “a peaceful refuge from the sinfulness of the public sphere”, and declaring that men were “better able to cope with the trials of the public sphere”, while women should be kept pure “by remaining in the private sphere<sup>7</sup>” (51, 40). Furthermore, it was women’s responsibility to make sure that the home offered “the peace and love [a man] required to develop his character” so that he would be able to withstand the temptations of the public sphere; thus, if a wife failed to make the household harmonious she endangered both her husband’s “religion and his character” (Griffin 41, 56, 41).

According to Griffin, a widespread belief was that “giving women greater legal rights” would upset this domestic balance and “cause household discord”; because, Victorian domestic policy had, so far, prevented arguments and disputes

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<sup>7</sup> Helen questions the illogical and separate rearing of girls and boys that this reasoning entails, asking Gilbert Markham why he “[makes] this distinction” (26).



within the home “through the total subordination of women to their husbands” (3, 45). The common assertion was that “if two ride on a horse, one must ride<sup>8</sup> behind”: by default the woman, and this meant that men steered and women followed (Griffin 46). Examining how women were treated differently in accordance with their marital status further supports that household harmony was important, as unmarried women were allowed to vote in 1918 while married women had to wait ten more years before granted the same right. Men’s different conduct towards women before and after they marry them is well illustrated in Rochester’s behaviour towards Jane on becoming his fiancée, which I will develop further in the upcoming section about adaptable masculine performances.

However, household discord and men’s identity as husbands were not the only reasons for resisting equality reforms, but, as Griffin writes, increasing women’s rights also “endangered men’s paternal identities” (138). He states that a father in middle-class nineteenth-century England, besides being the authority of the household, was also essentially responsible “for the development of his children’s moral character” and religious education (147, 163). This paternal authority stretched beyond the grave by being ensured through testaments, and this is very telling about male authority and women’s lack of legal protection during this time. However, as depicted in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Huntingdon does not use his authority to improve his son’s moral education, but instead tries to undo the efforts made by Helen. Markham is justly concerned that due to this fickleness of Huntingdon’s character, he will have placed restrictions on Helen in his testament, which luckily he has not.

Echoing Griffin’s stance from the beginning of this section, I argue that since it was men that were in possession of power at this time and place in history, they ultimately would have to be the ones changing and sharing this power; however, this was not an easy thing since their performances were heavily affected and sustained by Victorian gender norms. Because of Rivers’ and Huntingdon’s unchanging masculine performances, they have to leave the narratives, and instead there is a need for new, adaptable men, of which the upcoming section will deal with.

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<sup>8</sup> Though a farfetched connection, it might be interesting to mention that both Huntingdon and Rochester fall off their horses: the latter in the beginning of the narrative, the former towards the end, arguably stressing the point that not all men are good riders (leaders).

#### 4. Edward Rochester and Gilbert Markham –The Men Who *Do* Change

The fictional men that get to stay till the very end of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are Edward Rochester and Gilbert Markham, who also end up marrying the female protagonists. They are allowed to remain in the narratives because they are able to change their masculine performances. In the two novels the changing circumstances are perhaps easier to spot than the changing character – money has been inherited and spouses have died – but I argue that the most important changes are in these men’s behaviours. Furthermore, stressing the repetitive aspect of gender performance, I would like to discuss several instances, rather than one pivotal moment, where the two men act differently at the end of the narrative than they do in the beginning.

One problematic aspect when discussing Gilbert Markham is that there are hardly any written descriptions by Helen of his behaviour, as there are of Arthur Huntingdon’s, which makes Markham’s character difficult to assess in the same manner. The only statement that remains in Helen’s torn journal is her first impression of him, where Markham comes off as a rather proud man: a “fine gentleman and beau of the parish and its vicinity [by] (his own estimation)” (309). Ewbank writes that this narrative style of Brontë’s novel serves to make it unbalanced, as “Helen can reveal her innermost being to the diary”, including opinions and descriptions of Huntingdon’s character, while “Markham is bound to be as objective as possible”, due to the epistolary structure of his narrative (84). However, I agree with Carol A. Senf when she argues that in understanding Victorian gender division this “unique narrative structure, the wife’s story framed by that of her husband ... encourages the reader to focus on questions of gender” (450). Therefore, Brontë’s structure is an achievement rather than a failure, because it exemplifies how often women’s stories are told and delimited by men, even *good* men. As for this essay the narrative discrepancy also presents a suitable challenge, as the interpretation of Markham’s character will have to be based, more or less, solely on his actions.

Edward Rochester, on the other hand, is described by Jane in the same scrutinizing manner as St. John Rivers, and she is as critical and careful in her assessment of both men. Building on my earlier connection with painting, Jane says upon first meeting Rochester that his face is “like a new picture introduced to the gallery of memory”, and at first she finds this picture to be “masculine ... dark,

strong, and stern” (115). As she gets better acquainted with him, Jane notices, while studying his face, that there appears to be “an abrupt deficiency where the suave sign for benevolence should have risen” (132). Jane’s close character observation alerts her to Rochester’s potentially harmful characteristics, and despite the fact that he treats her well, Jane is able to recognize that “his great kindness to [her] was balanced by unjust severity to many others” (147). She further attributes this behaviour to his tendency to be “harsh to inferiority of every description”, and using this logic I argue that his kindness to her suggests that Rochester, at this point, considers Jane an equal: an interpretation he later supports by reassuringly calling her his “equal ... and [his] likeness” (147, 257).

However, as I mention earlier, a wife was according to the law and custom at this time inferior to her husband, and after Jane accepts his proposal Rochester quickly starts implementing this power dynamic into their relationship. Gilbert and Gubar observe that Rochester, after having proposed to Jane, “almost reflexively begins to treat her as an inferior”, which implies that he is probably not even aware that he is doing this, because it was the common behaviour for his sex (355). Further emphasizing this incipient deterioration in Rochester’s behavior towards Jane, there is a scene the morning after his proposal where he cannot even see her clearly, and in what appears to be an innocent mistake calls her eyes a “radiant hazel” despite the fact that they are green (261).

Instead of seeing Jane for who she really is, Rochester begins to try and transform Jane into a different person, praising her beauty, which has not been a substantial part of their relationship before, and treating her like a possession. Jane starts to feel purchased by Rochester, especially when receiving gifts from him: “his smile was such as a sultan might ... bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (271). But, when Jane tries to address this impending problem, asking him not to treat her “as if [she] were a beauty” he patronizes her and refuses to take her opinion into account, and orders her to buy at least two dresses before the wedding (262). Even though Rochester despises the vanity and materialism in Blanche Ingram’s performance, he starts seeing it as a vital component in his relationship with Jane: “I will make the world acknowledge your beauty ... I will attire *my* [sic] Jane in satin and lace ... and I will cover the head I love the best with a priceless veil” (262).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes quite clear that Rochester, to a great extent, is affected by his need for repentance and to atone for previous sins, and

therefore it might appear logical that he tries to make Jane into the Victorian female stereotype the 'angel in the house'. Like Huntingdon, Rochester is described as a sinner with a disgraceful record, but unlike Huntingdon, Rochester is hoping for salvation, or for his "re-transformation from Indian-rubber back to flesh" (133). Rochester thinks that by marrying Jane he will become purified from his previous sins: "[t]en years since, I flew through Europe half mad; with disgust, hate, and rage, as my companions: now I shall revisit it healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter" (262-3). Furthermore, Rochester thinks that he is making Jane a good marital deal, which will redeem him from his previous behaviour towards women: "It will atone – it will atone. Have I not found her friendless, and cold, and comfortless? Will I not guard, and cherish, and solace her?" (258). However, Jane acknowledges the potential danger in Rochester's behaviour towards her and refuses, consequently, to be reduced to a stereotype. Echoing Helen Huntingdon's plea to be treated as an equal by her husband, Jane states that "I like rudeness a great deal better than flattery [and would] ... rather be a *thing* than an angel" (265).

Jane realizes that she needs to assert her independence as a woman to better her possibility for equality as a wife. She admits to herself that Rochester's behaviour is beginning to trouble her, making her "uneasy at the strain he had adopted" (262). However, as pointed out by Gilbert and Gubar, Jane "loves Rochester the man" despite having "doubts about Rochester the husband", and therefore she tries to find a way to exist under these circumstances (356). At this point in the narrative Jane's engagement with Rochester strongly resembles Helen's and Huntingdon's, only instead of waiting till after the wedding to start solving their problems Jane acts straightaway. She concludes that "if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now"; hence, Jane writes to her uncle in Madeira about "his intention to adopt [her] and make [her] his legatee" (271). This act has unforeseen consequences, as it is this letter that saves Jane from marrying Rochester under false pretences.

After the revelation of Rochester's true state of affairs, there still remains the possibility of escaping abroad with him, and this proposal might seem appealing to Jane considering she has close to no relatives or family at this point. However, Rochester inadvertently makes it clear to Jane what sort of union this would ultimately turn into, by recollecting memories of previous mistresses: "Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and

always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (315). If being Rochester’s fiancée makes Jane subordinate to him, being his mistress would evidently be a great deal worse, and Jane realizes that she does not wish “to become the successor of these poor girls” as Rochester would eventually “regard [her] with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory” (315).

However, because of her love for him, Jane actually considers conforming to the stereotypical femininity Rochester wishes to assign her and is about minister to his distraught emotions:

Oh, comply! ... Think of his misery; think of his danger – look at his state when left alone; remember his head-long nature; consider the recklessness following on despair – soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for *you*? or who will be injured by what you do? (320)

But Jane is not the ‘angel in the house’ despite Rochester trying delimit her as such, and in a self-asserting manner she proclaims: “I care for myself ... I will respect myself” (320). She further decides to refuse a possible union with him under these circumstances. Stressing the importance of changing harmful masculine behaviours, I agree with Pike that “[b]y not allowing Jane to stay with Rochester in his present demise, Brontë ... [exposes] Edward Rochester’s impure masculinity, which must be reformed before the ideals of the companionate marriage can be achieved” (276).

The question of different masculine roles as man and husband is not a problem in the case of Gilbert Markham, since the narrative only focuses on his courtship and companionship with Helen Huntingdon. However, there are other implications to the masculinity represented by him. Pike argues that even though “Gilbert is never presented in such a gruesome state” as Huntingdon, he still at times behaves in a negative way, such as in “his cruelly fickle treatment of Eliza and his deplorable mistreatment of Lawrence” (120). I agree that Markham’s behaviour is problematic, especially as he begins his narrative by declaring that “Eliza was charming beyond description”, and that “Mr Lawrence was gentlemanly and inoffensive to all”, making his behaviour towards them appear even more unjustified (30-1). This aspect of Markham is aggravated towards the end of the novel, as he chooses to only apologise to Lawrence. Also troubling for Markham’s character is the fact that he is wrong in

disclosing Helen's journal in his letters, and, as Joshi argues, "The violence of this act is unmistakable; for the second time, Helen is exposed and spoken for" (914).

Much like St. John Rivers, Markham is at first perceived as a decent and agreeable Victorian man, and he appears to have the outlook of a good husband as well. He treats his female relatives well, acknowledging and appreciating his mother's domestic efforts, and he states that "when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than being made so by her: I would rather give than receive" (46). Since Markham is young and inexperienced at the time he makes this statement, his progressive opinion of marriage might be dismissed as naivety. As commented by Senf, "Brontë too makes the reader wonder whether any two individuals could achieve the kind of equal partnership that Gilbert seems to desire in a society that encourages inequality" (449). In Helen's first and only assessment of Markham's character he is proud, and mirroring this, he himself thinks that he is receiving an unjust opinion from the widow of Wildfell Hall: "[S]he was evidently prejudiced against me, and seemed bent upon showing me that her opinions respecting me ... fell far below those I entertained of myself" (28). Even though Markham later admits that he might be "a little bit spoiled by [his] mother and sister", the fact that he is offended by Helen's opinion concerning him, instead of worried, indicates that he holds a slightly mistaken self-image (28).

Even though Markham's behaviour is more sophisticated than Huntingdon's, with regards to eschewing vices and in his manner towards young Arthur, Markham still expresses the same disregard for Helen's personal boundaries. As mentioned before, this is exemplified in his sharing of the contents of her journal, which Helen expressly tells him to not "breathe a word ... to any living being" about (101). Further, he is a very frequent visitor at Wildfell, and states that "I came to her house as often as I dared" (57). When Helen presents restrictions for Markham, he responds with anger, as the rhetorical question asked by Lawrence seems to indicate: "Are you angry because Mrs Graham [Huntingdon] would not let you go home with her" (69). Especially in Markham's conduct towards the seasoned servant Rachel, one can discern his anger if he is not granted what he wants:

I owe Rachel a grudge to this day for the look she cast upon me ere she departed on her mission – the sour, suspicious, inquisitorial look that plainly

demanded, ‘what are *you* here for, I wonder?’ Her mistress did not fail to notice it, and a shade of uneasiness darkened her brow. (79)

Rachel clearly cares about Helen’s wellbeing, and recognizing a dominant masculine behavior, she not only has a problem hiding her dislike but might also want to show Helen her dislike of Markham in order to alert her of him.

Markham keeps imposing on Helen, and after he oversteps her boundaries, she gives him a second chance to restore their friendship. She states her conditions: “provided you never abuse the privilege ... [t]he moment you do, our intimacy is at an end” (72). However, Markham is still not changing, and during their parting Helen blames him for continuing to pursue her affection, giving way to his passions, instead of taking responsibility and “acting like a true friend” (313). Joshi claims, “there is scant evidence of Markham’s reform ... [and] any reform on Markham’s part is so slight as to be hardly worth mentioning” (915). However, I disagree with her and argue that despite his continuous bad behaviour toward Eliza Millward, which I will return to later in this text, and his continuous good behaviour towards young Arthur, he alters where it really matters for the narrative: in his behaviour towards Helen.

When Markham is reunited with Helen, she notices that he has reformed and changed his previous behaviour, but he is unable to see it. Repeatedly she asks him: “Gilbert, what *is* the matter with you? – Why are you so changed?” (376). Self-assured Markham answers her: “No, Mrs Huntingdon, I only *ought* to be” (378). However, throughout the novel, it has been implied that Markham is not the best person to assess his own character, and therefore, he attributes his personal change to the new circumstances: “I am not changed ... unfortunately I am as keen and passionate as ever – it is not I, it is the circumstances that are changed” (376). Even after acknowledging the change in Rachel’s previously hostile attitude towards him, Markham is unable to see his own part in it: “[Rachel] vouchsafed me an almost friendly smile of recognition – she had seen the error of her former estimation of my character” (374). Helen concludes that “[y]ou told me you were not changed ... you *are* very much so” (378).

However, both Helen and Markham are unable to address in what way Markham’s behaviour has changed. Again Helen states: “You *are* changed ... you are grown either very proud or very indifferent” (379). However, I argue for a third possibility, that Markham has grown considerate and respectful of Helen. Rather than

attempting to “[take] the citadel by storm”, and “pushing forward unannounced”, as in previous passages, the changed Markham chooses not to pursue Helen after he learns that she has become a widow (311). This is because of the fact that Helen has “expressly forbidden [him] to hope for a re-union in this world”, and therefore, he refrains from contacting her, despite “[knowing] the address” (372, 338). More importantly, Markham “felt no joy” when he heard of Huntingdon’s death, but instead “a painful commiseration for her unhappy husband”, and wishing that Helen “would in time recover from the effects of it, and be suffered to rest in peace and quietness” (351). Instead of being glad about his new prospects, Markham feels compassion, not only for Helen, but for her irredeemable husband as well, and concludes that “her peace should not be broken by my presence, nor her heart afflicted by the sight of my fidelity” (372). This change in Markham’s performance is fundamental for Helen to accept him, and subsequently ask him to marry her.

The need for Rochester to change his masculine performance is equally important, and a prerequisite for the marital bliss in *Jane Eyre* as well. Earlier in the novel, Rochester declares that what he likes in a person is adaptability – a “character that *bends but does not break* [sic]” – and as Rochester recognises Jane as an equal this should apply to his own character as well (263). In one important scene early in the novel Rochester’s acknowledges Jane’s norm-breaking femininity: “I never met your likeness. Jane: you please me, and you master me ... I am influenced – conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express” (263). However, Rochester, “instead of bending” and being truthful with Jane, tries to trick her into an illegitimate marriage, and because of this he will have to change before she can accept him as her husband again (455).

The fire<sup>9</sup> at Thornfield alters Rochester physically, and he is now “helpless indeed – blind and a cripple”, but he has also changed in his behaviour and character, and for the first time he begins “to experience remorse, repentance” (437, 455). When Jane sees him for the first time since she left Thornfield, she remarks that “[h]is form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever”, but that he looks “desperate and brooding [like] some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird” (440). She recognizes that he is no longer the independent man he once was. The change moves Jane who starts crying as Rochester expresses his new status: “[t]he water stood in my eyes to

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<sup>9</sup> Assuming a religious interpretation of *Jane Eyre*, the fire at Thornfield could be seen as the purgatory, punishing and purifying Rochester’s soul before he can merge his with Jane’s.



hear this avowal of his dependence” (448). Here the change in Rochester’s character becomes evident as Jane observes “a tear [sliding] from under the sealed eyelid, and trickle down the manly cheek” (453). Instead of responding to pain with anger as the old Rochester did when Jane was about to leave him, he is now able to show this pain and frustration through tears (453).

Ultimately, the altered Rochester is more attractive to Jane. She declares that “I love you better now ... than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and the protector” (454). The altered Rochester is ready to live in a mutually dependant relationship with Jane, where he reshapes the autonomous masculine role in favour of a dependant one, stating that “[h]itherto I have hated to be helped – to be led: henceforth, I feel, I shall hate it no more” (454). He completes the transition by declaring that “[n]ever mind fine clothes and jewels, now”, establishing that his idealizing of Jane is now over and that he does no longer wish to make her into a female stereotype (455). Jane confirms that the balance they sought earlier in their relationship, made impossible by Rochester’s masculinity, is now finally attained: “we are precisely suited in character – perfect concord is the result” (460). Wilson argues that Brontë “evolves an ideal of love and union by which both partners freely alternate between ‘masculine,’ or controlling, and ‘feminine,’ or responsive roles”, and I agree that this adaptability serves to make their relationship more resilient (41).

After having their masculinities approved by the female protagonists, and possibly the authors as well, both Rochester and Markham are given a son – a biological son for the former and a foster son for the latter. In the same manner as I argue that death should not be seen as a punishment, neither is new life to be seen as a reward, but rather as a solution for the future. By the end of both narratives neither Rochester nor Markham pose any threat to the women they marry; thus, it becomes advisable that their kind of masculinity should be promoted to future generations. In this sense, it is important that Jane notes that Rochester’s son has “inherited his own eyes”: his way of seeing the world, in general, and women, in specific (461).

Pike argues that “one critical factor that makes Gilbert appealing to Helen” is that he seems to love her son (381), and later in the narrative Markham stresses that young Arthur “was my own Helen’s son, and therefore mine” (120). Pike further argues that Brontë “redefines societal expectations regarding masculinity, advocating the importance of paternal affection as a defining trait of Victorian manliness, along

with great respect for a wife and mother's authority" (122). It is very suitable to introduce Markham's decent masculinity to young Arthur, who will be able to learn good values from Markham e.g. by "[sharing] his dog Sancho and his equestrian skills" (Pike 120). Ultimately, Markham "acts to reinforce manly traits that mirror Helen's view of child rearing", and he is accepted as a new role model for young Arthur to model his masculinity on (Pike 121).

Both Charlotte and Anne Brontë struggle in justifying the *adaptable* male protagonists' conduct towards the women they do not marry. In order to mitigate why the supposedly good men, such as Rochester and Markham, still behave badly towards some women, these women need to be portrayed in an unfavourable way. This kind of female portrayal is exemplified by how Eliza Millward, Jane Wilson, Bertha Mason and Blanche Ingram are portrayed. Because these women are depicted as immoral women, Rochester's and Markham's cruel attitude and manners towards them does not urge the reader to sympathize with them. I acknowledged earlier that Markham does not atone for his abuse of Lawrence until towards the end of the narrative, when he protects him from marrying Jane Wilson. Afterwards, Markham states that regarding Jane Wilson his "conscience has never accused [him], from that day to this, of any evil design in the matter", and that Lawrence should "congratulate himself on the lucky escape he had made" (327). Furthermore, Rochester's imprisonment of Bertha Rochester, and Markham's light physical abuse of Eliza Millward are not addressed within the narratives at all. Trying to explain this discrepancy, Senf argues that "[s]uch inconsistent treatment of women is typical of the nineteenth-century view that tended to separate women into two categories, angel and demon, the one to serve as inspiration, the other to be destroyed" (451).

Summarizing Helen's situation with regards to her relationships with the opposite sex, her aunt stresses a point which is vital for *Jane Eyre* as well:

Could she have been contented to remain single, I own I should have been better satisfied; but if she must marry again, I know of no one, now living, and of a suitable age, to whom I would more willingly resign her than yourself, or who would be more likely to appreciate her worth and make her truly happy, as far as I can tell. (382)

Neither Rochester nor Markham expresses a perfect, benevolent masculinity, but they are pliable to a certain extent, which benefits the female protagonists and makes these men the best possible option at this time. Joshi writes that “alongside the novel’s critique of existing modes of masculinity is its portrayal of the formation of a new masculinity” (908). By depicting male behaviour that is harmful to some women, Charlotte and Anne Brontë imply that this is just the beginning, and that Victorian society still had a long way to go towards gender equality.

However, these depictions of a new masculinity came with implications. Lauren Owsley questions the ending of *Jane Eyre* and its “deliberate and corporal diminishing of male independence compounded with concurrent, serendipitous enhancement of female agency” (55). Furthermore, as pointed out by Wilson, “the solution of God’s fire is a drastic and rather dismaying one”, and I agree with him when he writes that “there must be better ways of separating male bulk from male chauvinism” (46). However, despite Owsley’s and Wilson’s reasonable claims, I argue that the improbability of these narrative solutions also serves to further accentuate the improbability of an equal marriage in Victorian Britain, and they illustrate how hard it was for female authors to imagine and depict equal marriages at this time.

Charlotte and Anne Brontë skilfully question these problems of equality, without assuming a political stance. Senf applauds the Brontë sisters’ literary activism as “[t]hey chose to use their narrative voices to treat difficult or un-popular subjects rather than simply to copy the voices and strategies they found in other novels” (455). I argue that by examining how Charlotte and Anne Brontë depict different masculine performances, one valid interpretation of these novels is that the authors sought to solve the inequality related problems they experienced in everyday life. Robyn R. Warhol advocates “the idea that feminist women exert agency in their cultural productions ... Victorian women novelists like the Brontës are not so much unconsciously ‘written by’ gender codes as they are actively engaged in rewriting them” (858). However, regardless of the Brontë sisters’ political opinion on equality, their narratives conduct an important discussion about feminine and masculine behaviour.

## Conclusion

In this essay I argue that one way of dealing with social injustice, in this case gender based, is to write works of fiction, questioning the norms and customs responsible for this inequality. By using Judith Butler's concept of how gender is performative and thus constructed through repeated actions, I have studied the different gender performances of the two main male characters of each novel: observing how they are different and how they are alike. The strongest similarity between these characters I found in how their performances either changed or remained the same when confronted by a woman expressing an unconventional femininity. Through their different male protagonists in *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Charlotte and Anne Brontë effectively refute two faulty assumptions made in Victorian society. However, not only do these novels strive to ridicule the belief in the *gladly* submissive woman and the *wise* patriarch, but they also present two – for their time – wholesome alternatives.

Because St. John Rivers and Arthur Huntingdon fail to change their oppressive performances of masculinity in accordance with Jane's and Helen's progressive performances of femininity, they are rejected and forced to leave the narratives, i.e. die. Rochester and Markham, because of their adaptability, are accepted and consequently allowed to both marry the female protagonists and procreate, and this allows their masculine performances to be transmitted to future generations. In Markham's case, young Arthur is not his biological son, which only strengthens my reasoning that gender behaviour is not biologically inherent, but instead affected by other people's performances and the norms of society.

Regardless of whether Charlotte and Anne Brontë were 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists or not, their novels lend themselves well to a feminist reading, both out of historical curiosity but also in questioning equality in contemporary society. These novels demonstrate that the different protagonists' pursuit of happiness, regardless of sex, are inextricably tied to and depending on each other. Despite the problem of justifying the actions performed by the *good* men in these novels towards other women than the ones they marry, their masculinities are still remarkable for their time. The masculine performances embodied by Rochester and Markham are in fact so unconventional that several unlikely events have to occur within the narratives to make these happy endings possible, and this blatantly exposes the gender inequality of Victorian society.

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