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Imitation and Protest: Two Case Studies of Depictions of Marriage in Anne Brontë and Olive Schreiner

Jonatan Jönsson

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Supervisors: Cecilia Wadsö-Lecaros &

Jorunn Joiner

Abstract

Literature has long been an effective vehicle for conveying women's morals and opinions when they have otherwise been ignored and suppressed. Fifty years apart, Anne Brontë and Olive Schreiner wrote fiction critical of different aspects of marriage with noticeably different results and conclusions. This project aims to investigate the basis for these differences by using Elaine Showalter's idea of a women's literary history as divided into three separate eras which come with their own distinct relationship to the dominant culture. In this essay, I analyse and account for Brontë's and Schreiner's moral arguments in light of the material, intellectual, and social changes that took place in the time period between them. I also critically evaluate whether Brontë's and Schreiner's work are compatible with Showalter's theory of the three eras, which I conclude that they indeed are.

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Introduction

Depictions of the institution of marriage in literature written by British women writers underwent drastic changes during the Victorian era. As the century progressed and society changed and modernised, new perspectives reinvigorated societal debates and the institution of marriage as a union blessed by the church too began to be questioned. Examining and comparing women's literature in the mid-century to that of the fin-de-siècle will bring insight into this development.

Explaining to critics why she wrote *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anne Brontë wrote in a preface that she added to its second edition, "I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (3). The particular truth being told in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is that of an abusive marriage. Brontë's heroine runs away with her child from her abusive and adulterous husband, an act that made her a criminal in the eyes of the law. By asking the reader for sympathy for her heroine, Brontë challenges the Victorian ideal of a perfect marital bliss, and the laws that reflect this trust in the institution of marriage. The heroine's position is impossible, and her struggle for innocence is only won by the strength of her profound convictions. In the end, Brontë's heroine gets her happy ending, that is, she becomes a wife to a good man.

The fin-de-siècle arrived along with a healthy mix of decadence and expectation for the future. The New Woman was a new radical female ideal who actively resisted patriarchal norms and controls and instead valued independence in her life. This desire is reflected in the stories which New Woman writers wrote. These radical writers had the benefit of the repopularisation of the short story. No longer bound by the restrictive Victorian three-decker novel to reach large audiences, they could now explore any number of concepts in the matter of a few pages, and then spread its message efficiently through dedicated magazines. For many New Women writers, their faith in marriage had collapsed completely. Rather than being woman's natural source of fulfilment, traditional, patriarchal marriage was frequently depicted as a suffocating cage which stifles women. The New Woman heroine's happy ending is now achieved through leaving or reforming marriage. In this project, Olive Schreiner's 1890 short stories will represent British fin-de-siècle women's literature. Schreiner had her roots in South Africa but made an impression as a New Woman writer during her time in London in the 1880s. Her short stories were widely read and were notably favourites of imprisoned suffragettes.

To my knowledge, this project is the first time a comparison between Anne Brontë and Olive Schreiner's writings has been done. What connects the two authors is their common

reason for writing. About *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Brontë wrote, “if I have warned one rash youth from following in [Mr Huntingdon’s] steps, or prevented some thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, *the book has not been written in vain*” (Brontë 4; emphasis added). I have discovered an almost perfectly replicated phrasing made by Schreiner in regard to her own novel *From Man to Man*: “I feel that if only one lonely struggling woman read it and found strength and comfort from it *one would not feel one had lived quite in vain*” (Schreiner, *Letter*; emphasis added). Both authors wrote their stories in the hope that they could positively impact the women who read them. I am interested in investigating how this desire is realised in their fiction and how this differed between the two, especially given the different eras they wrote in. Significant effort will be made to account for how the societal differences between Brontë’s and Schreiner’s times affected their writings. In what follows, I will argue that Schreiner’s stories are more effective than Brontë’s, largely because of the significant differences between their literary eras.

Particularly influential for this project has been Elaine Showalter’s pioneering *A Literature of Their Own : From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1977), in which she applies the previously established idea of the three phases of literary subcultures onto women’s literature. The first two of her three phases are considered in this project: *the phase of imitation*, 1840-1880, and *the phase of protest*, 1880-1920 (*Literature* 11). Through close readings of Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and three short stories by Schreiner published in the 1890 collection *Dreams* – “The Lost Joy”, “Three Dreams in a Desert”, and “Life’s Gifts” – this project will explore the differences in how women’s literature from the two above mentioned phases discussed different aspects of marriage. Additionally, this project will critically evaluate the applicability and validity of Showalter’s framework onto these two authors. Half a century ago, the pioneering and influential *A Literature of Their Own* sought to rediscover and map out a female literary history. In the present day, I believe that much can still be gained from using Showalter’s work. As this essay will show, many of the differences found between Brontë’s and Schreiner’s fiction can be attributed to them belonging to, and writing in, different contexts. Showalter’s theory of the three eras in the women writers’ literary subculture is an appropriate tool for understanding and contextualising Brontë’s and Schreiner’s works, and particularly the stark differences between them.

A background section will introduce this project. It will serve to introduce Showalter’s theory as well as a look at the differences in the laws, publishing conditions, and societal currents of Brontë’s and Schreiner’s eras. Then, a close reading of Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will follow, with special attention to different aspects of marriage. A comparative

close reading of Olive Schreiner's short stories will then tie back to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In summation, this project will show the many differences between the eras Brontë and Schreiner wrote in, how these differences affected their writings about marriage, and how Showalter's framework is an appropriate tool for understanding this difference.

Background

Showalter describes her 1977 book *A Literature of Their Own* as “an effort to describe the female literary tradition in the English novel from the generation of the Brontës to the present day” (*Literature* 9). In it, she proposes that the women writers' literary subculture has, like many other literary subcultures, gone through three phases in its development. First, she explains, there is a *phase of imitation* where the dominant culture's art, norms, and values are internalised and imitated. Then there is a *phase of protest* where these attributes are questioned and rebelled against in favour of minority values and minority autonomy. Finally, there is a *phase of self-discovery* based on a search for an identity free from the reliance on – or in opposition to – the dominant culture (11). For the women writers' literary tradition, Showalter designates 1840-1880 as the phase of imitation, 1880-1920 as the phase of protest, and 1920-1960 as the phase of self-discovery (11). Women's literature existed quite successfully before 1840, but Showalter cites a lack of “communality and self-awareness” among women writers predating this year as her reason not to include them in her timeline (15). The dates Showalter provides for her framework places Anne Brontë in the phase of imitation and Olive Schreiner in the phase of protest. The third phase, *the phase of self-discovery* is outside of the scope of this project and will not be covered.

The material and societal conditions under which mid-century and fin-de-siècle writers wrote about marriage differed significantly. Marriage itself had changed, as marriage law underwent very important alterations during the latter half of the 19th century. Olive Schreiner, who moved to London in 1881 and was an avid writer and thinker until her death in 1920, lived through a prolific period for the development of marriage law and women's rights in Britain. Anne Brontë, however, published *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* nine years before the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, more commonly known as the Divorce Act, passed parliament. Prior to it being passed, divorce allowing remarriage was governed by the canon law of the Church of England and was de facto only available to the richest men in society (Phegley 19). The Divorce Act reformed the law to allow a man to seek a divorce if his wife committed adultery. Contrarily, it allowed a woman to do the same only if the charge was accompanied with

incest, brutality, homosexuality, bestiality, or a two-year desertion (20). Only in an amendment in 1923 were women relieved of the burden of proving additional fault to file a divorce on the grounds of adultery (20). The assumed right of the father to receive custody of any children remained in place until the passing of the Guardianship of Infants Act in 1886, which established that the welfare of the child should also be considered as a factor in the decision (20). Not until 1925 did the welfare and best interest of the child become the primary concern for determining who gained custody (Ward 170).

Another important change came in 1870 with the Married Women's Property Act, prior to which a married woman had legally been considered a *feme covert*. This means that her legal existence was absorbed in that of the husband, making them one person under the law, under his name (Phegley 17). Other than her dowry, every penny and possession a woman had, or would come to have, was instantly considered the property of her husband. The Act of 1870 made a woman entitled to any money she earned *after* entering a marriage, and the amended 1882 Married Women's Property Act established the married woman's full independent legal identity, as well as her full control over every property and earning both before and after her marriage (26). Although these changes in the law did improve the economic situation of women, their economic security was still very much tied to men. As American writer and essayist Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote in 1898, "The female of genus homo is economically dependent on the male. He is her food supply" (27). Improvement in the legal rights of women came at a creeping pace.

The far-reaching changes in the publishing industry too help give context to the differences between Brontë's and Schreiner's writings. Publishing underwent a drastic transformation at the tail end of the century, as Menke explains (par. 2). The three-decker novel and the circulating library had dominated the English market for most of the 19th century, but various changes in the publishing industry saw it quickly decline in popularity. In 1884, 193 three-decker novels were published, compared to no more than four in 1897 (Showalter, *Sexual* 16). Menke describes this period of intense change in the medium of print as "a divide in literary history" (par. 19). Before, publishers had primarily sold books to circulating libraries which had come to rely on the three-decker for profitability. Menke explains how libraries exercised their power as purchasers to maintain the tree-decker as the dominant format (par.7). Similarly, the circulating libraries ensured that the three-deckers were chaste, moderate, and suitable for family reading in order to reach a wider audience and earn more revenue (par. 8). Some authors suffered artistically under the moral stranglehold of the Victorian sexual ideology and many saw the medium as an "aesthetic straitjacket", which severely limited the

stories that could be told (Showalter, *Sexual* 16). Those who had felt constrained by the three-decker celebrated its death and hailed the new possibilities now afforded to them (16).

The possible endings to three-deckers were particularly limited. For example, writing a happy ending for a heroine meant matching her up with a suiter. Showalter writes, “[t]he three-part structure dictated a vision of human experience as linear, progressive, casual and tripartite, ending in marriage or death” (*Sexual* 17-18). In fact, it was such a common phenomenon that a heroine’s literary journey should end with marriage that ‘my third volume’ had become an everyday euphemism for the event (Showalter, *Literature* 149). Liggins et al. describe marriage in the Victorian marriage plot as a “reward in the closing chapters” and contrast this to New Women’s narratives’ open-ended nature and their closer attention to the less idyllic sides of married life (68). With the death of the three-decker emerged less restrictive narrative forms like the short fragments, episodes, and allegories typical of fin-de-siècle literature. Menke is careful not to claim that the death of the three-decker started the type of writing that came to be called New Women fiction, but he notes how it benefited from “the possibility of shorter works that could explore less conventional plotlines” (par. 19). Showalter similarly claims that “The best women’s writing of the 1890s is in the short story rather than in the novel. Women writers found an appropriate form in the short story for the strong feminist themes of the decade” (*Literature* xxvii). Free from the shackles of both morality and form which plagued Victorian novels, the women’s literary subculture was now positioned to enter a new era.

While Anne Brontë and the women writers of her time sometimes wrote decidedly proto-feminist stories, they were rarely publicly defenders of the Woman Question. In fact, it was rare that they even presented themselves as women, typically writing under male pseudonyms instead. Women writers were subject to unjust bias from critics which was exacerbated if they were to write in a way perceived as unwomanly. Taking on a male pseudonym was done to avoid exposing oneself to the condescension and prejudice so often exhibited by male critics towards female writers (Thormählen, “Pseudonyms” par. 2). In the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, “Acton Bell” responded to allegation that a woman had authored the book:

I take the imputation in good part, as a compliment to the just delineation of my female characters; and though *I am bound to attribute much of the severity of my censors to this suspicion*, I make no effort to refute it, because, in my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. (Brontë 5; emphasis added).

The mere suspicion that a woman had authored a book changed its reception. Previous generations of women writers had not suffered critics quite so hostile against the female sex. Authors like Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Ann Radcliffe did at times elect to conceal their identities – but not their gender; Austen, famously, published *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) under the anonymous ‘By a Lady’ (Buzwell par. 7). Showalter notes the criticism between the years 1847 and 1875 as especially rife with double standards toward women writers and particularly harsh ridicule aimed at failures to conform to the stereotype of the subservient and domestic wife (*Literature* 63). Faced by this injustice, women writers responded “not by protest, but by vigorous demonstration of their domestic felicity” (70). To enact a drawn-back and strictly conservative public stance towards the Woman Question was an act of self-defence for Victorian women writers (17).

Things had changed, however, by 1888, when author and essayist Mona Caird’s article “Marriage” was published in *The Westminster Review*. She concludes that “the present form of marriage — exactly in proportion to its conformity with orthodox ideas — is a vexatious failure” (197). She argued instead for a dissoluble union based on equality, with a focus on economic independence for women. It resulted in a debate which garnered responses from 27,000 people, a majority of whom were opponents to her radical claims (Forward 4). Notably, one of her defenders was Olive Schreiner, who once said of Caird, “I quite agree with all she says” (99). Caird’s article is described by Forward as “a catalyst” (5) which demonstrated the strong feelings towards marriage held by many. The marriage debate continued throughout the late 1880s and the 1890s as a steady stream of articles were being written from both sides of the argument.

At the same time as debate raged around marriage in the newspapers, it was explored in fiction. A significant event occurred in 1889, the year after Caird’s first article was published, when Ibsen’s both controversial and influential play *A Doll’s House* was first given a production in England. In the audience sat many of the time’s leading thinkers and novelists including Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, and George Bernard Shaw (Ledger 79-78). The play concludes with the heroine leaving her duties as a wife and mother to escape the confines of marriage and seek her individual freedom. Ledger asserts that “Ibsen’s challenging and subversive female roles were [...] immensely influential in the formation of the New Woman in 1890s London” (81). The New Women lived in a time full of explorations and examinations of the institution of marriage.

Brontë wrote in a time in which the restrictive three-decker ruled, the Victorian sexual ideology censored expression, and critics derided women writers unfairly, especially if they

were perceived as even slightly rebellious. In contrast, Schreiner had the benefit of writing in an age of change, where new and exciting mediums for expression were emerging and political and societal currents were slowly turning in their favour.

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is at its core the story about Helen Huntingdon and her moral struggle between her self-fulfilment and her obedience to her cruel husband as demanded by her church and God. This story is told as an epistolary novel in which we read Gilbert Markham's letters to a friend chronicling his growing friendship with a mysterious widow who calls herself Mrs. Helen Graham. As their relationship deepens Helen breaks it off, reluctantly revealing to Gilbert her reason by lending him her diary. This diary, which takes up more than half of the book, chronicles her relationship to her cruel husband, Mr. Arthur Huntingdon, who she has run away from after years of abuse when his bad influence over their child threatens to become insurmountable. Gilbert and Helen avoid each other until Huntingdon's death, at which point they reconnect, and eventually marry.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was met with mostly negative reviews when it was published, with criticism primarily aimed at the novel's coarseness. Ward highlights several examples, for instance a reviewer in the *Rambler* who considered Brontë's novel "one of the coarsest books which we ever perused" (168). The novel's brutality and unabashed displays of the worst sides of man was viewed with horror and disgust. However, Ward notes that this horror was sometimes mixed with a kind of reluctant awe for its brutal honesty, as is the case in a review in the *Athenaeum*, which conceded that the book was the "most interesting novel which we have read for some time" (169). In the same preface Brontë addressed the rumours of her gender, she wrote that "if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense" (Brontë 3) and, as mentioned above, "if I have warned one rash youth from following in [Mr Huntingdon's] steps, or prevented some thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain" (4). Lamonica Arms notes that despite Brontë's efforts, her critics were not convinced that the novel's brutality was necessary for the story, as even those few who could acknowledge the story's moral message condemned its coarse packaging (34).

By laying open the hypocrisies of marriage to the public, Brontë constructs an effective argument for a serious reconsideration of marriage. As explained earlier, when entering marriage, women became *feme covert*s with few legal rights without the consent of their

husbands. In escaping an abusive home with her child, Helen is seeking refuge from her husband, but also from the law. Brontë places her in an impossible situation and demands sympathy from the reader. From the moment she is married, Helen is abused by the man her legal rights are tied to, the man whose divine right to protect and rule her she is subject to. A prevailing idea at the time was that the husband's right to rule over his wife was beneficial to both parties. An 1852 medical book on the care of women casually claims that "the woman who is considered the most fortunate in life has never been independent, having been transferred from parental care and authority to that of a husband" (Tilt 15). Brontë's message deviated significantly from both the legal and moral norm of her day.

With these facts in mind, it is now pertinent that we revisit Showalter's categorisation of her three phases of the women's literary subculture. Written in 1848, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is located firmly in the phase of imitation, spanning 1840-1880. This phase is, according to Showalter, characterised by "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (*Literature* 11). This seems incompatible with Ward's assertion that "in its stark portrayal of a dysfunctional, abusive marriage, the *Tenant* shattered the pretences of marital harmony so beloved of many Victorians" (151). Showalter does, however, make allowances for overlaps between the phases and stresses that the categories are not rigid (*Literature* 11). She also admits that there may exist, for example, elements typical of the phase of protest in literature which belongs to the phase of imitation. This is precisely what I now intend to argue is the case with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Poole describes Brontë's novel as "simultaneously backward- and forward-looking" and asserts that it "simultaneously reforms and perpetuates the practices of Brontë's society" (859). While the evidence presented so far would suggest that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* does not have the characteristics common to the phase of imitation, a deeper analysis which reaches beyond Brontë's intentions reveals that this is not at all the case. The remainder of this section will lay out the many ways in which Brontë does conform to the dominant tradition while presenting her moral argument, and how this may affect the impact of her radical message.

If Brontë is to construct her moral argument, Helen can have no flaws. By having Helen adhere to the feminine ideal of the self-sacrificing angel in the house, the audience is put at ease and can empathise with her more easily. When the rest of her conduct aligns with the moral ideal of the time, Helen's decision to take her child and leave her husband is then not so easily dismissed as the actions of an immoral woman. Brontë goes to great lengths to portray Helen's virtue and innocence. The worst mistake Helen ever makes is marrying Mr

Huntingdon, but the portrayal of this event makes it clear that, though she has been foolish, Helen is primarily a victim of Huntingdon's seductions. She is initially shown to be careful and thoughtful about who to marry (Brontë 103-105) and has rejected one suitor already (108-112). When questioned by her aunt why she accepted Mr Huntingdon's proposal, Helen says, "I couldn't help it" and bursts into tears (134).

Now married, Helen is determined to carry out her wifely duty to better her husband. First, she believes she must save him from the influence of his friends (137), but in time she learns that he is as bad an influence as they are, if not even worse. When he returns from one of his months-long bouts of drunken depravity in London, Helen takes care of him and is a perfect servant to him, expressing, "How intently I wish he were worthy of all this care!" (176). Worthy or not, she continues to perform her duty. That is not to say that Helen is what we today would term a co-dependent, a person in a relationship who enables their partner's self-destructive behaviour. Instead, every action is calculated to better her husband, to urge him to rid himself of his sins, and to grant him salvation. Helen labours tirelessly to better a man who is completely uninterested in her efforts. When Huntingdon is unfaithful to her with Lady Annabella Lowborough, the wife of one of his closest comrades, and continues to do so despite his wife's knowledge, Helen finally loses her hope for him:

Oh! when I think how fondly, how foolishly I have loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I have laboured, and studied, and prayed, and struggled for his advantage; and how cruelly he has trampled on my love, betrayed my trust, scorned my prayers and tears, and efforts for his preservation, crushed my hopes, destroyed my youth's best feelings, and doomed me to a life of hopeless misery, as far as man can do it, it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband—I HATE him! (243)

This truly is the breaking point for Helen where she gives up on her love for Mr Huntingdon and recognizes at last that she is not to blame for his wickedness (253), but nonetheless Helen continues to stay loyal to her duties as his wife.

This loyalty is continually tested by Mr Huntingdon himself, but also other men around her. One of Mr Huntingdon's friends, Mr Hargrave, who has offered Helen a shoulder to cry on, asks her how much allegiance she owes her husband now. "None", she answers. "And so you consider yourself free at last?" "Yes, [...] free to do anything but offend God and my conscience" (249). When Hargrave persists and later proposes that they elope together, Helen responds angrily, "I have still my God and my religion, and I would sooner die than disgrace my calling and break my faith with heaven to obtain a few brief years of false and fleeting

happiness” (263). Throughout her marital crisis, Helen is shown to be thoroughly committed to the Victorian ideal of the self-sacrificing wife and will not be led astray. Later, Helen will break off her friendship with Gilbert lest it develop into something which could tempt her (312-314).

Helen is clearly still bound to her husband by her morals, and though she ran away from him, she only decided to do so to save her child from his corrupting influence (274-275), not for her own gain. It is significant that even in her defiance of her husband Helen is still self-sacrificial, now in her duties towards her son. Her escape proves to be temporary as Helen returns to Mr Huntingdon when he falls sick to serve him and nurse him back to health. When she cannot cure him, she tries one final time to make him repent and save his soul. When Mr Huntingdon finally dies, Helen faints: “It was not grief; it was exhaustion” (351). It is only now, after Mr Huntingdon’s death, that Helen is free from her obligations towards him. She is free from the shackles of marriage, at last.

It is then interesting to consider that Brontë has the novel conclude with Helen remarrying. In Brontë’s criticism of the institution of marriage she still ends up tacitly reinforcing its legitimacy. But why does Helen remarry? Ward dismisses this question: “Children need fathers” (167). However, I argue that Brontë’s decision to have Helen remarry is directly connected to the narrative structure of the novel. Helen’s story of her abusive relationship with Mr Huntingdon is positioned inside of the framing narrative of Gilbert Markham’s own romance with her, which is conveyed in Gilbert’s correspondence with a friend. The purpose of this double narrative structure has been much debated and criticized. It has been proposed that the narrative structure is meant to illustrate Brontë’s strong opposition to separate spheres for men and women (Carnell), or that dividing the narrative allows for a contrast between Helen Graham as the free artistic woman rejecting marriage and Helen Huntingdon, the submissive wife (Pourgiv & Rahmati 135). A compelling idea is elevated by Diederich, who suggests that while Brontë “abandons her social criticism” towards the end of the story, the narrative structure may be an attempt to coat Helen’s story’s radical message in Gilbert’s more palatable narrative (36). The frame narrative would then work as a Trojan horse, “to offer this social attack to a less than receptive audience” (36). To add to the conversation, I would like to stress the constraints that a three-decker puts on novelists to conform to certain structures and tropes, namely that a heroine’s journey ends in marriage or death. I propose that the narrative structure is, at least in part, a capitulation to the expectation of a concluding marriage.

Looking at Helen's own narrative, we see a fully realised story without a need for the framing narrative it is trapped within. The story could just as well have ended with Helen and her son's liberation from her husband, but instead Brontë conforms to the expectation that marriage or death must conclude the novel and constructs a framing narrative with a romance to fit that trope. Thormählen notes that when any of the Brontë sisters' characters discuss spinsterhood, it is made clear that marriage is the superior alternative ("Marriage" 313). The idea that marriage is the natural goal and conclusion for all women is further reinforced in the novel when Gilbert explains in detail what came to be of all the minor characters (Brontë 357-359, 364, 367, 381-383). All those who can be labelled as morally good characters marry and prosper, while all the morally bad characters' fates range from unsatisfying marriages to suffering and death.

Especially interesting is the fate of Mr Hattersley and his subservient wife, Milicent. Their relationship closely mirrors that of Helen and Huntingdon, but while Hattersley is almost as wicked as Huntingdon, he repents and reforms in the end. Milicent, who entered the marriage even more reluctantly than Helen did (173-174), goes on to live a good life in a satisfying marriage (359). When discussing Hattersley's redemption, Thormählen argues, "This is one of the many ways in which the novel shows that each individual is responsible, and accountable, for his or her own fate" (*Horror* 8). While I do agree with her here, I would like to point out that this resolution further undermines Helen's cautionary tale. In service of a happy ending, subservience is inadvertently presented as a successful option for women in Helen's and Milicent's situation.

It is also interesting to note what came of Helen's rival, Lady Annabella Lowborough. Annabella's affair with Huntingdon is eventually found out by her husband. As a result of this, Huntingdon suffers no worse fate than the loss of a friend while Annabella loses everything. Lord Lowborough divorces her, and Huntingdon is all too ready to throw her aside, leaving her without much in the way of a future. The rumour is that "she sunk, at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness" (Brontë 357). Those who knew her "have all lost sight of her long years ago, and would as thoroughly forget her if they could" (357). This is a harsh fate. Annabella is a morally bad character, yes, but even though both she and Helen are seduced by Huntingdon and have their lives ruined by him, only one of them is depicted as deserving of sympathy.

Who it is that may receive sympathy in a story might depend on in which era it was written in. When discussing another pair of women vying for the same man, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Mason, Showalter asks, "Can we imagine an ending to *Jane Eyre* in which

Jane and Bertha leave Rochester and go off together? Obviously, such a conclusion would be unthinkable. Such possibilities and such solutions are beyond the boundaries of the feminine novel” (*Literature* 102). Here, ‘the feminine novel’ refers to novels belonging to the phase of imitation. Parallels can be drawn between the antagonization of Bertha and Lady Annabella Lowborough. Sympathy for Annabella as another one of Huntingdon’s victims is beyond the boundaries of the phase of imitation. Helen and Annabella cannot join forces against Huntingdon, the man who ruined both of their lives, at least not in this phase of women’s literature.

Poole aptly describes *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a “novel of conflicts and contradictions” where “[s]ocial practices are reformed and reproduced” (871). While there are elements of the novel that bring it beyond Showalter’s phase of imitation, these are repeatedly countered by the novel’s chronic compliance with the established modes of expression. Brontë’s moral tale of the potential horrors of marriage is undermined, or at least complicated by the compliance with the trope that marriage is the sole path to a woman’s happy ending.

Olive Schreiner’s Short Stories

As I described in the background section, fin-de-siècle women writers wrote under very different conditions than Brontë and her contemporaries. This newer generation was writing in a contentious new world. Many Victorians were alarmed by unrest in Ireland and other colonies, increased poverty and class-consciousness, and growing calls for women’s rights. While, as Showalter explains, the “lower races” were safely tucked away in distant lands and the poor were kept out of sight as much as possible, “men could not hide in the same way from the threat of a revolution by women” (*Sexual* 6). Discussions surrounding the Woman Question gave birth to the image of the “New Woman”. She was regarded by most Victorians as “the unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon ready to overturn the world” (Schaffer 39) while others hailed her as a new feminine ideal. New Women fiction was written by, for, and about New Women to explore both aesthetic and political ideas, criticising the status quo with one eye aimed towards a better future.

Olive Schreiner is one of many prominent New Women short story writers of her time, such as Sarah Grand, Charlotte Mew, and George Egerton in Britain, as well as American writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin. I have singled Schreiner out of the group due to her popularity, her connection to London’s intellectual and feminist circles, and her frequent discussions of aspects of marriage in her fiction. Suffragette Constance Lytton

sang Schreiner's praises and claimed in 1914 that "Olive Schreiner, more than any one other author, has rightly interpreted the woman's movement and symbolised and immortalised it by her writings" (157). Schreiner, born in 1855, grew up in South Africa where she, much like Anne Brontë, worked for some time as a governess (Forward 50-52). She spent the years 1881-1889 and 1913-1920 in England where she established herself quickly with her 1883 novel *The Story of an African Farm*. During her first stint in England, she befriended many leading English intellectuals, socialists, and feminists, including Eleanor Marx, Mona Caird, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and Karl Pearson (Forward 52-55). Almost all of Schreiner's output was published with London publishers and primarily written for an English and European audience (Beyers 21). Throughout her career Schreiner published many novels and non-fiction books, but here I will primarily focus on her short stories which were published in the collections *Dreams* (1890), *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893), and the posthumously published *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923). Schreiner's short stories were widely popular, particularly *Dreams* which went through 25 editions in just 40 years (Chrisman 126). Despite this, Schreiner's short stories have received far less academic attention than her other work, which Beyers suggests may be explained by modern readers' aversion to Schreiner's use of allegories (29-30).

While Schreiner proved herself a skilled realist with *The Story of an African Farm*, most of her short fiction instead rely on a heavy use of allegories and simple prose. Her moralistic allegorical tone in combination with a simple vocabulary and sentence structure makes her style somewhat reminiscent of children's tales. Appearances are deceiving, however, as the themes and questions of oppression, injustice, and violence that are brought up reveals a far deeper complexity in her work. As Jay points out, Schreiner adjusted her register when she tailored her political material to specific audiences (xvi). Her morals are then packaged in a format designed to be approachable and digestible, much like, as I brought up earlier, Diederich suggests that the moral of Helen's story in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is packaged inside of Gilbert's more palatable narrative to reach unreceptive audiences (36). But while, as I have argued, Brontë's moral is suffocated by its frame narrative, Jay notes that the allegory is especially well suited for representing the experiences of the marginalised. She explains how the allegory can destabilise assumptions of the dominant culture's inherent moral value and instead create bridges between diverse experiences (xxi-xxii). Furthermore, Brontë's use of a frame narrative is, in my opinion, done in order to conform to the trope of a concluding marriage. It is an act of imitation. Schreiner's experimental choice of format is instead an act of protest and rejects dominant modes of expressions in favour of the allegory, as it better

conveys her message. Unlike in Brontë's novel, Schreiner's moral message is not compromised by its more digestible presentation, but rather enhanced by it.

"Three Dreams in a Desert", published in her 1890 collection *Dreams*, is perhaps Schreiner's most celebrated short story. It is made up of three allegorical dreams depicting various stages on the road to a more equal relation between the sexes, a frequent subject in Schreiner's writings. The past, present and future is in turn described. The first dream depicts a beast of burden named "woman", who lays crushed under the "burden of subjection" (Schreiner, *Dreams* 16). It was put on her by "the Age-of-domination-of-muscular-force" who has since been killed by "the Age-of-nervous-force" with the "knife of Mechanical Invention", causing the burden of subjection to fall from woman's back (16-17). She is still weak, but will rise, given time. The second dream describes a wandering woman attempting to reach "the Land of Freedom" through "the water of Suffering" (18). To have a chance to succeed, the woman must leave behind her "mantle of Ancient-received-opinions" and her "shoes of dependence" (18). Even man must be left behind to grow on his own. Still, she knows she will die crossing the water of Suffering but does so anyway with the grim knowledge that the bodies of the forerunners will become a bridge for all who follow. The last dream is the briefest, and simply depicts a future where men and women walk hand in hand as perfect equals (20).

Through the first of these dreams, Schreiner lays the foundation for the argumentation that is to follow by utilising evolutionary and historical reasoning. Through metaphors, she relays the idea that the historical factors which supplied the basis for the oppression of women no longer exist in modern society due to the advent of technology. Women's oppression has until recently been a cruel historical necessity, but now there is simply no longer any reason for women's continued subjection. Granted, woman is very weak after aeons of suffering under her burden, but the circumstances necessary for her liberation are now here to be seized on. This idea is similarly expressed in Schreiner's non-fiction work *Woman and Labour*, the book which "Three Dreams in a Desert" was originally written to accompany (Schreiner, *Woman* 16). Here, Schreiner describes how "almost hour by hour [...] crude muscular force [...] sinks in value in the world of human toil" (40), erasing the arbitrary exclusion of women from the workforce. It is *inevitable* that woman will rise because modern society no longer supports the old paradigms.

I find it very likely that Schreiner picked up this idea from her own research, or from her socialist and intellectual circle of friends in London. While Brontë was educated and had the benefit of intellectual exchange with her sisters, Schreiner's advantage over her is evident,

as her strong connections to London's intellectuals offered her fiction an intellectual basis which was simply out of reach for Brontë.

The second dream in the short story is a call to action. It explains what must now be done by the New Women, and what sacrifices must be made in order to realise their dream of equality between the sexes. Constance Lytton describes how when she and a group of suffragettes read this story in a prison in 1909, it "seemed scarcely an allegory. The words hit out a bare literal description of the pilgrimage of women. It fell on our ears more like an A B C railway guide to our journey than a figurative parable" (157). Comments like this show how Schreiner's stories were able to provide both a blueprint for the future as well as strength and reassurance to those who decided to take up the fight. That being said, she is very frank about the bleak outlook. Those who go first will need to sacrifice themselves in the river of Suffering. Many will suffer the even worse fate of being swept away downstream, never managing to turn their suffering into a contribution to the cause.

Being self-sacrificing is one of, if not *the* primary characteristic of both Brontë's Helen and Schreiner's pioneering woman. Helen is devoted to her husband to a fault, staying by his side though abuse, abandonment, and infidelity. She leaves him in yet another act of self-sacrifice in service of her son. The self-sacrifices that exist in Schreiner's short stories are complete opposites of that of Helen's domestic duty. It is instead motherhood and wifedom that Schreiner's women give up in order to, in Schreiner's words, "[make] more possible a fuller and higher attainment of motherhood and wifedom to the women who will follow her" (*Woman* 127). While Helen's sacrifices are done for the benefit of her marriage and her family, Schreiner's women denounce love and matrimony to achieve the destruction of the institution of marriage in favour of something better in the future. Schreiner's belief in delayed satisfaction when it comes to love is illustrated in the allegory "Life's Gifts" (1890). "Life" offers a woman a choice between two gifts, Love or Freedom (Schreiner, *Dreams* 28). When the woman chooses Freedom, Life reveals that if she had chosen Love, her wish would be fulfilled. Having chosen Freedom, however, there will come a day when Life "shall bear both gifts in one hand" (28).

The third and final dream in "Three Dreams in a Desert" depicts the fruits of women's labour, a utopian future where men and women are equals and walks hand in hand. This ideal relationship is explored further in "The Lost Joy" (1890). In this short story, a woman, "Life", meets a man, "Love", and a child is born, "Joy" (Schreiner, *Dreams* 3). One day they wake to find that little Joy is lost. In its place stands "Sympathy" who accompanies Life and Love and aids and guides them through various hardships (3-4). An old woman, "Reflection" makes the

pair realise that they would not give up Sympathy to have Joy back (4). She then reveals that Sympathy simply is Joy grown older.

Here, Schreiner depicts her ideal bond between man and woman, a union based on love, equality, and Sympathy. Sympathy is “the Perfect Love” (5) and is reminiscent of the relationship described by Schreiner’s friend Mona Caird (197-199). Although this form of union may initially mean hardship for the pair, a union based on Sympathy is superior to one based on Joy. Sympathy becomes the new bond between the two through which they continue to love each other, but also to support and help each other. This is a relationship which I would like to contrast to the one between Nora and Helmer in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, the London premier of which Schreiner attended in 1889. Nora describes how she has been her husband’s “doll-wife, just as at home I was papa’s doll-child” (Ibsen 85) before deciding to leave her marriage. Ibsen, through Nora, describes a marriage based on shallow, childish Joy, while Schreiner sets out to describe a union based on robust, equal Sympathy.

When reading Schreiner’s short stories, it is both evident that they belong in Showalter’s phase of protest, but also that Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* belongs to the phase of imitation. Schreiner’s short stories often diverge from prevailing modes of expression, typically favouring allegorical tales, while also carrying a strong moral message in protest of the status quo and the values of the dominant male culture. Brontë exhibits many of these qualities, as her moral tale encourages criticism of marriage law, but she is ultimately bound by the established avenues of expression of the dominant culture and is pacified by her compliance with the ideals and tropes that dictate that the natural end for a woman’s story is marriage. With the tools she had access to, Brontë could not write the same stories that Schreiner could. Both authors are products of their eras. The changes that took place in the fifty years between them, and their effect on women writers’ expression are significant and should not be understated.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project has been to explore differing depictions of marriage in selected works by two British women writers from the mid- and late nineteenth century, Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Olive Schreiner’s short stories “The Lost Joy”, “Three Dreams in a Desert” and “Life’s Gifts”. Britain changed significantly during this time, and examining the changes in how marriage was depicted in fiction has brought insight into this development.

These works were chosen specifically because of the interesting connections between their critical views of marriage.

This exploration was done by using the framework of the three eras of women writers' literary subculture as presented by Elaine Showalter in 1977. Showalter was and is a well-established voice on the subject. Her timeline places Brontë's 1848 novel in the phase of imitation, characterised by reproduction and internalisation of the dominant culture and its values. Schreiner's fin-de-siècle short stories are placed in the phase of protest, characterised by rejection of the before mentioned. I approached the project with a critical view towards Showalter's theory, and re-evaluated it with the benefit of more recent research.

To provide a basis for this project, I accounted for the many changes in marital law, publishing industry, and social currents that took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century and how these changes influenced the boundaries within which women writers were capable of moving. Having established this context, I then presented a close reading of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the result of which showed that the story is forward thinking but weighed down by its reliance on dominant structures. This project was initiated with the assumption that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had broken free from the era which Brontë belonged to. However, Brontë's cautionary moral message of the dangers of marriage is repeatedly muddled by her insistence that marriage is the natural end to a woman's journey. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* contains elements of the phase of protest, but is, in my view, still part of the phase of imitation.

Olive Schreiner's three short stories, written fifty years after *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, were then read against Brontë's novel. Comparing these two authors' texts, I concluded that Schreiner benefited greatly from the changes that had taken place in the half a century between her and Brontë. Schreiner's critique of marriage is free from many of the shackles which weighed Brontë down and is elevated by the advantages afforded to her. While both authors write with the intent to critique marriage, their texts differ wildly. Explanations for these differences can be found in the changes that occurred in the fifty years between them. This result offers legitimacy to Showalter's framework, as understanding of both authors' works can be found through her theory and chronology.

Future research should focus further on the economic dimensions of depictions in marriage in British nineteenth-century women's literature. Showalter's decision to place the beginning of women's literary subculture in the year 1840 should also be questioned and investigated.

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