The earthly pleasures and the joys of heaven:
a comparative analysis of the influence of religion in Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Abstract

Religion is a central theme in both *The Wrongs of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë. The two novels, although seemingly unconnected, share a strikingly similar plot and moralist intent, but they differ in their portrayal of religion and in their treatment of legal and moral issues related to women. This study analyses how religion affects the way both novels address concerns about women's intellectual, moral, and legal autonomy, and in the solutions they propose. First, it addresses the religious context and events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England, and the way this context influenced Wollstonecraft and Brontë's conception of religion. Then, it analyses how religion is portrayed in both novels, how it affects the treatment of marriage and divorce laws, and how the moral progression of the characters is depicted. Lastly, it examines the critical response to both works at the time of their publication, and how the religious and moral elements were perceived by the critics.

Keywords: *The Wrongs of Woman*; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; religion; divorce; women's autonomy.

Resumen

La religión es una de las temáticas centrales en *The Wrongs of Woman* de Mary Wollstonecraft y en *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* de Anne Brontë. Ambas novelas, aunque a primera vista carentes de conexión, comparten una trama y una intención moralizante de sorprendente similitud, pero difieren en su manera de representar la religión y en su tratamiento de cuestiones legales y morales relativas a la mujer. Este estudio analiza como la religión afecta la manera en que ambas novelas abordan cuestiones sobre la autonomía intelectual, moral y legal de la mujer, y las soluciones que plantean. En primer lugar, aborda el contexto religioso y los hechos históricos de los siglos dieciocho y diecinueve en Inglaterra. Posteriormente, analiza la representación de la religión en ambas novelas, como ésta afecta la manera en que se tratan las leyes matrimoniales y de divorcio, y como se muestra la progresión moral de los personajes. En último lugar, examina la respuesta de la crítica hacia ambas novelas al momento de su publicación, y la manera en que los elementos morales y religiosos fueron percibidos por los críticos.

Palabras clave: *The Wrongs of Woman*; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; religión; divorcio; autonomía femenina.

1. Introduction

The bravery of Helen Graham, the protagonist of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), has left a deep impression in the history of English literature, and some critics have even regarded the novel as "the first manifesto for 'Women's Lib'" (Gérin, 525), overlooking the fact that five decades before, Mary Wollstonecraft had written *Maria or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), a novel with a very similar protagonist and plot.

Maybe due to the fact that Wollstonecraft was ignored by critics during the nineteenth century, and mainly studied for her life and not her works for most of the twentieth century, her works of fiction were vastly understudied. Beatriz Villacañas Palomo's article "Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft: A Case of Sisterhood" (1993) was the first to make a proper comparison between *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and to point that not only they were noticeably similar on the plot, but also on the didactic intention, and that this intention was made explicit by both authors in the prefaces to the novels. This connection allows Villacañas Palomo to establish a link between different generations of women writers and to suggest that "The female literature of the 18th & 19th centuries is perhaps more interrelated than we suspect. […] The Victorian voicing of feminine suffering can be traced back to the previous century" (192). Not only were Mary Wollstonecraft and Anne Brontë constructing a bridge between two generations of writers, but in doing so they were denouncing issues attaining to women that continued to be relevant: "The parallelism existing in theme and purpose of these two novels and the revolt of both novelists against a similarly unjust situation bear witness to a profound case of empathy which I have chosen to call ´sisterhood´" (Villacañas Palomo, 192).

In addition to pointing out the glaring thematical similarities, Villacañas Palomo compiled a list of parallelisms that, while not enough to prove a direct influence from one novel to the other, are indeed astonishing: the moral and didactic aim made explicit in the preface; the rash and romantic marriages of the naïve, unexperienced protagonists; the devotion shown by the protagonists (and the authors) towards motherhood and the concern about their children's upbringing; the physical degeneration caused by a life of excess; and the stark contrast between the virtuous wives and the reprobate husbands that leads to the abandoning of the marital home. For Villacañas Palomo, these similarities are a proof that "Wollstonecraft and Brontë share the same consciousness of social and legal injustice towards their sex and neither of them hesitates to expose it, choosing for

this an extreme —although perhaps not so infrequent— case" (198). Other smaller similarities regarding minor characters, places, and attitudes are also mentioned.

Where she does see a parallelism that is too specific to be a mere coincidence is in the fact that the men the protagonists encounter after their escape "learn about the suffering of the women they love reading the respective accounts of their lives. […] This narrative within the narrative device, […] makes *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, considering their unity of theme and purpose, still closer to each other" (Villacañas Palomo, 200).

The lack of certain proof of Anne Brontë having read Mary Wollstonecraft's writings forces Villacañas Palomo to leave the question of a direct link between both novels unresolved but open: "Some, perhaps too many, links have disappeared in the history of women's writings, but to look for them is no doubt worthwhile" (202). The undoubtable connection between both novels, be it by direct influence or by the similar denounce of a shared reality, makes possible the exploration of new points of contact, but also of points of divergence. How can it be that two novels that have a plot and explicit intention so remarkably similar execute this plot and intention in such a dissimilar way? The concerns regarding the issues faced by women in matters of autonomy, marriage, laws of property, civil representation, and custody of their children are the same, but the solutions proposed by the authors are different.

One underlaying point of divergence in the treatment of these issues is the authors´ approach to religion. Both Mary Wollstonecraft and Anne Brontë had deep religious beliefs that permeate their works, and these two novels are not the exception, as Faith and a moral based on religion are a distinctive trait of their protagonists. But their sense of religion differed: Anne Brontë was an Anglican but was raised with a strong Methodist influence that shaped some of her views in an unorthodox way, especially in matters regarding the doctrine of Salvation. Her connection to Methodism also made her a part of the doctrine of enthusiasm. On the other hand, Mary Wollstonecraft´s sense of religion was less structured and more personal, in spite of her Anglican upbringing. Her connections with the Enlightenment and with important figures of Rational Dissent influenced her beliefs and helped her shape a system of her own, heavily based on rationality but with a clear Christian foundation, and her strict adherence to this system prompted her husband, William Godwin, to refer to it as a religion.

The historical events surrounding religion in the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular those around Religious Dissent (or Non-conformity) and the Evangelical Revival, are key to interpret the way in which these authors conceived religion, as both Methodism and Rational Dissent are a direct result of these conflicts. The present study will focus on how religion, and the way Mary Wollstonecraft and Anne Brontë conceived religion, influenced the development of their works, their indictment against the legal system that categorized women as second-class citizens, and the solutions they proposed: First, it will discuss the causes and the development of Religious Dissent and of the Evangelical Revival in England, and how they influenced Wollstonecraft and Brontë's religious ideology. Then, it will make a comparative analysis of the portrayal of religion, the matrimonial and divorce laws, and the moral development of the characters in *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Lastly, it will explore the critical reception of both works in England and contrast it with their reception in other countries.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Religious Context: Religious Dissent and the Evangelical Revival

If we want to talk about religion, fiction, or women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England, or about the role that religion played in women written fiction in that time, we need to take into consideration two distinct but related phenomena: on the one hand, the series of events and ideas known as the Evangelical Revival. On the other, the multiple Dissenting or Nonconformist denominations and their fundamental beliefs. These two factors were crucial, although in an indirect way, in giving women a more active role in religion and a space where to write with authority.

Religious Dissent, also known as Nonconformity, is a broad term that encapsulates all the denominations that separated from the Church of England, though the motives of their separation were diverse: in some cases, it was caused by a doctrinal discrepancy. In others, by problems attaining to the government of the church or matters of ministry. The first Dissenter groups date back to the Elizabethan Church, though it is only after Charles II's restoration that they are officially persecuted by the state, with the passing of the Act of Uniformity, that required ministers, teachers, university lecturers and anyone holding

office in government to publicly submit to the church authority and to publicly accept the 39 articles of faith of the Anglican church. This mandate also prevented dissenting groups from having places of public worship.

In addition to already separated communities, an important minority within the official church refused to take the oath required by the Act and abandoned their positions, creating this way new dissenting groups. The Toleration Act of 1688 relaxed the penalties of the Act of Uniformity and allowed dissenting groups to register public places of worship and ministers, provided that they swore an oath of allegiance to the Crown. The Act still banned Dissenters from holding office in government or university positions, and specifically excluded Anti-Trinitarians (the more extreme Dissenters), Roman Catholics and Atheists from the exemptions.

In his study about women in early Nonconformity, Richard Greaves highlights the key role they played in the transmission of Nonconformist doctrine and in the creation and growth of the different communities. Starting from their role as housewives, they catechized those under their domestic authority: "Because this teaching had to supplement -and sometimes correct- what was learned in the parish church, the woman's pedagogical role could be critical in shaping the spiritual ideals and loyalties of her children and her servants" (Greaves 302). In addition, they also provided refuge and places of worship to persecuted Dissenter ministers and leaders: "Such women helped Separatist leaders create the kind of underground spiritual network so effectively utilized by English Catholics in that period, though the Catholics operated primarily among the aristocracy, not among the lower and middling social orders where the Separatists found their strength" (Greaves 302).

In the public sphere, they gathered funds to sustain the communities (or provided those funds, in the case of wealthy noble women), took part in public manifestations against the official church and the state, made use of connections to benefit Dissenter preachers and leaders, hid print shops in their homes, and took part in the production, printing, and contraband of Dissenter literature. This very public involvement caused many of them to suffer grievous punishments and even time in prison. But their contribution went beyond the material efforts, as

> women did more than encourage and subsidize Nonconformist works; they contributed directly to the corpus of religious writings by composing their own

> books and translating the works of others. […] Printing, writing, and translating religious works were manifestations of the growing desire by women to participate more fully in the life and work of the church. (Greaves 305-306)

While their intellectual contributions to the cause were well received by their male counterparts, the same cannot be said for female preaching endeavours: "Although there were probably more women who preached to Nonconformist congregations than has been realized, the practice did not win the general acceptance of most Nonconformists" (Greaves 308), as it was seen as a direct attack to the teachings of St. Paul and to male authority within those communities, where women constituted a big percentage of the adherents. As time passed, female preaching and prophesizing dwindled in Dissent, a major exception being the Society of Friends or Quakers, known for their egalitarian beliefs regarding ministry. After the Toleration Act was passed, the State relaxed its stance on Nonconformity, but continued to persecute Rational Dissent, not only because of their Anti-Trinitarian beliefs, but also for their connections to Enlightenment and their support and approval of the revolutions in the United States and in France.

Rational Dissent was the most heterodox extreme of Nonconformism: "Forged by and for the avant-garde educated middle class" (Taylor 108), they rejected all doctrine that they considered irrational, opposed the idea of a confessional state as threat to freedom of conscience, and disliked the hierarchical church structure. Sustained by a rational study of the Bible, "Its creed was anti-trinitarian (the divinity of Christ was denied) and its deity was a benign Supreme Being with a judicious regard for all His creatures and no taste for hellfire. Calvinism, with its savagely anti-humanist ethos, was repudiated in favor of a vision of mankind as essentially good and inherently perfectible" (Taylor 108). These radical doctrines provoked the rejection of Anglicanism and more orthodox dissenter groups alike.

The tensions and internal conflict caused by the frictions between the Church of England and the Dissenter denominations created a perfect landscape for the emergence of the Evangelical revival in the British Isles in the first half of the eighteenth century. However, the term Evangelical Revival does not refer to a unified historical event, but "a series of separately-generated but none the less interdependent international events […] that it could hardly be confined to one community, one state or even one continent" (Ditchfield 9), and that profoundly affected the Protestant world in the Eighteenth century, though its causes can be traced to the Seventeenth century.

The Catholic counter-reformation of the seventeenth century displaced many Protestant communities that could not or would not stay under the newly reinstated Catholic rule. Simultaneously, some Protestant authorities persecuted minorities within the Lutheran Church that criticized the Lutheran formality and rigidness of worship. In both cases the displaced groups sought refuge in neighbouring Protestant states and in the British Isles, from where some of them gained passage to the American colonies.

These displaced communities carried with them not only the stories of their persecution at the hands of Catholic rulers, but also a new strain of Protestantism critical towards the Lutheran Church, known as Pietism, that advocated for "a highly personal form of religion, with a strong emphasis on the individual's direct relationship with God and the need for a 'New Birth' to cement that relationship" (Ditchfield 11) and "promoted a domestic approach to religion which refused to confine itself to formal church services, […] proclaiming the 'priesthood of all believers'" (Ditchfield 12).

In conjunction with the displaced communities carrying these ideas, there was an even more important communicator, the print: "The crucial element in the evangelical network of communication was the printed word. […] A religious print culture which was both sophisticated and international was in existence well before the eighteenth century" (Ditchfield 20). A progressively growing literacy and the preaching zeal of the revived believers gave way to a flourishing of devotional literature in the form of sermons, autobiographies, journals, and diaries.

While the changes explained thus far were general to the whole of the Protestant world (Continental, Insular, and Transatlantic), there are specific characteristics that we can attribute to the British Revival in particular. Grayson Ditchfield describes four: A sense of expectation produced by social and political tension, or by theological controversy (mainly, the dissenter issue); the revival caused by the displaced persecuted minorities; the emergence of these revivals from within the established churches; and the lack of sectarian intention of the revivalists, whose criticism was aimed to renew the churches, not to create a schism.

The Evangelical Revival appealed to both Anglicans and Nonconformists as it went beyond "the 'established' versus 'dissenting' distinction. Revival movements criss-crossed this ecclesiastical divide and often adopted a 'one-foot-in, one-foot-out' posture toward Anglicanism" (McClymond 225). This negative to side with either faction

explains why members of all denominations were open to the reception of the revival, especially those in the Anglican church, where otherwise a novel attitude towards doctrine would have been regarded as dissenter behaviour.

Evangelicalism drew from the roots of Lutheran orthodoxy, as stated in the writings of John Wesley, one of the fathers of the Revival and the leader of the Methodist movement within the Church of England. He described the essence of the Evangelicalism as "I. Original Sin. II. Justification by Faith. III. Holiness of Heart and Life" (Wesley, *Journals*: 21, 456 in Ditchfield 26), that is, the fallen nature of man, unable to obtain salvation by its own means, the primordial role of Faith in the delivering from sin, and the pursuit of a holy life sustained by that Faith, all these teachings faithful to the Lutheran doctrine. Close to these teachings and central to Evangelicalism was the role of Scripture as the sole doctrinal authority, and the doctrine of Christ's atonement for humanity's sins, the latter a point of division between those who believed in predestination and those who believed in universal salvation. Evangelicalism did not regard itself as a doctrine, because it did not deviate from orthodoxy, but as a new attitude towards that orthodoxy.

Believers approached Evangelical doctrine through conversion first, usually a highly emotional personal experience that was perceived as transforming, and later through activism, as "the personal experience of the gospel led directly to the obligation to bring its benefit to others" (Ditchfield 30). In these two steps we can see the direct influence of the Pietist Protestantism: a personal and highly sentimental religion that urged the believer to preach and to give testimony.

Firmly set on a return to Protestant orthodoxy, Evangelicalism inevitably clashed with eighteenth century Enlightenment, that regarded to some extent religious belief as superstitious, but "other enlightenment characteristics, including the cult of sensibility, the elevation of nature, liberty of conscience and the cultivation of a public morality were far from inconsistent with the moral values of evangelicalism" (Ditchfield 32). On the other hand, revivalists "who had experienced persecution were glad to share the enlightenment belief in religious toleration. They strongly upheld the right of private judgement and freedom of the individual conscience. […] Evangelicalism placed a high value on the voluntary aspects of religion as the divinely inspired movement of the individual human conscience" (Ditchfield 33).

The Evangelical Revival functioned as a factor of union in a Britain fractured by internal divisions caused by religion, politics, revolutions, and industrial changes.

> Wherever in eighteenth-century Britain one found spiritual fervour, there was often some crossing of boundaries—between Established and Dissenting Churches, between geographical regions (England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, America), between clergy and laypersons, and between male and female leadership. 'Revival' overflowed institutional, geographical, chronological, and social class or gender boundaries. (McClymond 226)

By the second half of the eighteenth century, Evangelicalism had permeated the entirety of English society, becoming "the dominant form of faith in both orthodox and dissenting traditions, emphasized an almost emotional 'experience' of God in daily life and imbued the everyday with spiritual significance" (Styler 8). This domestic approach to religion offered women a unique social role that would not clash with the public roles that where traditionally male, through the possibility to influence society indirectly by influencing men. The idea of women as naturally sentimental and nurturing and their domestic authority contributed to the sacralization of the home and of the female figure: "Women and home became identified as redemptive forces in a society which needed reform, and the female character was interpreted in essentialist terms as innately more akin to Christian values than was the male" (Styler 8). And while both Evangelicalism and Enlightenment strongly adhered to the belief of the spiritual equality of the sexes, women started being regarded as more suited for religion:

> From the mid-century on preachers of all stripes could be heard arguing that female religious feeling was intrinsically more powerful than that of men, a view reinforced by the idealization of pity as the primary Christian sentiment. The cult of feminine sensibility, evident in both fiction and moral literature, derived largely from this source. (Taylor 104)

Women are strongly present in the literary scene of the eighteenth century when it comes to devotional literature, especially high-class, educated women like those that were part of the Blue Stockings Society, a female literary society with an interest in education and intellectual conversation. Though it was deemed unbecoming for this type of women to have a formal education like the one imparted at universities, they could access education through reading and through conversation with educated men. This education

and their stance in society gave them a natural authority over less educated women: "Leadership, and the fitness of certain women to be examples and guides to women in general, was the rationale for many kinds of writing" (Clarke 462). The devotional print culture already established provided a place for women to contribute to the religious education in a way that they could not in person, by "adopting the fictive voice of the preacher which gave them authority to address imaginary congregations in print" (Clarke 461). This literary freedom allowed women to delve into a variety of genres as the borders between "the periodical essay, the published sermon, devotional writings, moral tales and realistic and fanciful fictions were fluid, especially in the sense that the same people were often trying their hand at all these and other forms" (Clarke 461).

In addition to this new educational role attributed to women, the increasing literacy across all the levels of society highlighted the potential of fiction as a vehicle for religious education, as more traditional religious writings were difficult to understand or failed to appeal to the audience. In Clarke's words, "theology, 'seriously delivered', was less effective than fiction in delivering 'hints for correcting the morals of young persons'; and 'hints' were preferable to dogmatic enforcements, a view which fiction […] had helped bring about" (462). Of course, this view did not apply to all kinds of fiction and writers, especially in the case of women, both as readers and writers. As Clarke explains, "fiction-writing women, until they demonstrated otherwise, were assumed to be writing of love and the body and to be leading women readers astray" (462). As a genre, novels and novel writers were seen as the antithesis to moral-improving and didactic literature, an idea supported by the belief "that women needed to be improved and that the female tendency towards novels – as writers and as readers – was a cause for concern" (Clarke 464).

This negative view of fiction changed with the turn of the nineteenth century, with secular forms of writing being regarded as more effective theological vehicles than the devotional formats of the eighteenth century, and more in tune with the sentimentalism cultivated in religion. In the same way that Evangelicalism appealed to the sentimental connection with God, "literature was also felt to engage the reader's sensibilities more persuasively than dry intellectual discourse, because it appealed also to the imagination and emotions. Faith is embodied in narrative patterns and characters to whom the reader is drawn through empathetic response" (Styler 3), this way permitting an easier reception and internalization of the doctrine.

Be it a failure of the structure of the established church or, as Terry Eagleton (1996) proposes, a failure of religion itself to provide comfort to the middle and lower classes, in the nineteenth century the writer starts to take over the authority of preachers and ministers, assuming the task of not only transmitting the religious ideas, but also of constructing them through "patterns embodying meanings that cannot be reduced to statement" (Styler 6) This narrative approach to religion resonated with the core of an evangelicalism where scripture was central: "This metaphorical approach revives the method of the Bible itself. […] Biblical tradition is therefore closer to literature than to dogma, since its truths are embodied, or suggested, rather than categorically defined" (Styler 6).

With the literacy of the middle and lower classes rapidly rising, so was the common access to literary works: "Literary theology was potent because it was accessible and relevant, particularly to an increasingly secular sensibility" (Styler 7). This way the influence of the writer, that in the eighteenth century had been restricted to a specific sector, expanded to all spheres of British society.

2.2 The religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's writings

Critics and biographers have for a long time chosen to overlook the strong religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's thinking, as if the radicalism of her ideas made them incompatible with religion, a conception also supported by the tendency of modern scholars to analyse Wollstonecraft's writings and ideology detached from her historical context. As Browne explains, "the representation of Wollstonecraft as an Enlightenment rationalist or secular liberal not only anachronistically applies the category 'liberal' to a thinker whose political ideas stretched far beyond the bounds of liberalism as understood today; it also erases the centrality of religious themes and concepts in her work" (769).

Born in 1759 at the peak of the Evangelical Revival, Wollstonecraft was raised in the Anglican Church and her first work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), advocates for an education sustained by a very orthodox approach to religion, but shortly after its publication she stopped attending church. Her estrangement from the established church did not mean for her an abandonment of religion altogether, and her husband and biographer William Godwin describes her view of religion as highly personal and without need of intermediaries:

> Her religion was, in reality, little allied to any system of forms. […] When she walked amidst the wonders of nature, she was accustomed to converse with her God. To her mind he was pictured as not less amiable, generous and kind, than great, wise and exalted. In fact, she had received few lessons of religion in her youth, and her religion was almost entirely of her own creation. (Godwin 215)

Her friend Mary Hays also described her religion as something not relying on creeds or forms, but as a

> a sentiment of humility, reverence, and love; a sublime enthusiasm, the aspirations of a fervent imagination, shaping to itself ideal excellence, and panting after good unalloyed. […] She believed a being, higher, more perfect than visible nature, in her own conformity to that superior being, in a future state of exercise and gratification of those powers and sensibilities that, denied a scope for exertion, too often preyed upon herself. (416)

This connection with the creator through nature is particularly present in the protagonist of Wollstonecraft's first novel, *Mary, a Fiction*. Like Wollstonecraft herself, Mary is raised as an Anglican but eventually adopts a more rational, less orthodox way of feeling connected to the Creator: "Like her author, she feels closest to God not in church but in the contemplation of His works, particularly 'the grand or solemn features of Nature in which her sensitive heart delights" (Taylor 107).

In 1784 Wollstonecraft moved to Newington Green, home to a Unitarian community, where she came in contact with the dissenter minister Richard Price, in whose defence she would later write her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Wollstonecraft never became a Unitarian but she deeply respected Price and she studied his sermons. This close contact with Rational Dissent was very influential on her approach to religion and to her own brand of feminism through "Unitarianism's emphasis on private reasoned judgment as the foundation of true religion: a principle to which the circumstances of both Dissenters and women gave real political bite" (Taylor 108).

This Unitarian belief of a personal moral based of reason, a doctrine very much consistent with the Enlightenment ideals, is strongly present in Wollstonecraft's most important and well-known works, the *Vindications*. In *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (*VRM*), written as a response to Edmund Burke's attack on Richard Price, Wollstonecraft makes explicit her convictions about God's law being imprinted into every man's heart

and being accessible to all through reason, with no need of intermediaries: "I fear that sublime power, whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good; and I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces from this view of my dependence on him" (*VRM* 34). Wollstonecraft also postulates the idea that moral cannot be based on customs or man-made norms, as these are ever changing. On the contrary, she explains that it must be based on an immutable principle, common and accessible to all mankind, and this can only be God's law, present in the heart of every man: "The more man discovers of the nature of his mind and body, the more clearly he is convinced, that to act according to the dictates of reason is to conform to the law of God" (*VRM* 54). This way, the cultivation of reason becomes necessary to establish a connection with God and with God's law.

The conviction of an eternal law that every man can access through reason becomes the base argument to women's emancipation in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (*VRW*). If we believe in the universality of a law accessible through reason, it does not stand that women are denied the exercise of that same reason, and in consequence, the access to that law: "Universal reason is God's gift to all, the manifestation of His presence within, but men's jealous claims to reason's prerogatives would damn women to spiritual ignorance, and thus flout God's purpose" (Taylor 110). For Wollstonecraft, the main obstacle that women encounter is the lack of proper education, and the abundance of an instruction geared towards being appealing to men, which not only degrades women but prevents the betterment of humanity as a whole: "Truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous?" (*VRW* 68). At the same time that Wollstonecraft demands for the recognition of the equal rationality of women, she also claims that men be held to the same standards of virtue and public morality as females are and denies a virtuosity that changes according to the sex.

If reason is the only way to reach God and his law, denying women the opportunities to exercise their reason is denying them the chances to access the base of morality by their own means. "Seen in this light, women's emancipation is not only a desideratum for this life, but the chief prerequisite for women's eternal salvation" (Taylor 110). In advocating for women's equality Wollstonecraft tries to remedy an error that not only affects the material life of women, but that separates them from their Creator.

It is not hard to see the influence that Enlightenment and Rational Dissent had in Wollstonecraft's writings, but the impact of Evangelicalism is not as clear. The Evangelical ideals present in her works (truthfulness, a personal connection to God, private judgement, universal morality, etc.) can also be attributed to her connection to Enlightenment and Rational Dissent. But considering the way the Revival permeated the entirety of the English society, those communities were already affected by it at the time that Wollstonecraft came in contact with them.

2.3 Anne Brontë and the problem of Salvation

Compared to Mary Wollstonecraft, Anne Brontë had a much more orthodox approach to religion, but was still deeply influenced by Evangelicalism and Dissent, as in 1795 Methodism separated from the Church of England. Daughter of an Anglican vicar with Evangelical and Wesleyan influence and raised by a Methodist aunt, Anne Brontë was exposed from a young age to a variety of doctrines and lines of thinking: "[Anne] Brontë enjoyed a wide range of literary and religious influences in a household which encouraged 'astounding mental and spiritual liberty'. Patrick Brontë made his theological library available to his daughters, and had a 'distaste of indoctrination' which prompted him to encourage their individual intellectual development" (Styler 44). As seen earlier, Evangelicalism was not interested in the religious and political clash between the Church of England and the Dissenter denominations and promoted freedom of conscience and religion. Being raised in an Evangelical household gave the Brontë sisters the opportunity to deviate from Anglican orthodoxy in their beliefs and in their works, especially when it came to the doctrine of salvation. Their firm rejection of Calvinism and Predestination also evidences their knowledge of other dissenter doctrines.

The Evangelical influence can be noticed not only in their beliefs but in the need to express these beliefs in their works. As Thormälen explains, "All the Brontë novels are intensely concerned with tenets of Christianity and exhibit considerable boldness in their explorations of them. The Brontës stoutly defended what others regarded as religious and moral provocation in their novels, and they did so because they believed themselves to be expressing the truth" (42). The revivalist urge to give testimony manifests in the authors, but also in the characters of their books that adhered to these beliefs, as we will see in the subsequent analysis of the role of religion in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

In fact, scripture is central in the Brontës' writings, and Anne's works are not the exception. Her characters quote and discuss the Bible with confidence and make use of their right to personal interpretation when encountered with an opposing opinion. In true Evangelical fashion, scripture functions for them as a guide and as a source of comfort, and a place where to confirm the instincts of their consciences.

Anne Brontë's concerns about the doctrine of salvation were first evidenced in her poems, highly influenced by Methodist sentimentalism. A central tenet in Methodism was the knowledge of justification through one´s feelings, as "conversion involved the feeling of fear and anger, often with the symptom of paroxysms, followed by the sentiment of love or joy" (Ogawa 7). Anne's poems deal with the lack of certainty and the feeling of being abandoned by God, and since she "conceives of faith in emotional terms, the loss of felt assurance leaves the implication of divine withdrawal, even if her rational mind would seek to counter this […] even while doctrinally she does not believe that God has rejected her" (Styler 54). Her stance on salvation changes in her novels, especially in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as she deviates from the Anglican and Methodist belief that sustains that all men can be saved and states her own belief of God being capable of saving all, even the reprobates.

The adherence to *sola fide*[1] was a part of Evangelicalism, but it was strongly associated with Calvinism. Faith was the path to salvation, but "a personal response to the Atonement was required of every Christian; even if Christ extended the possibility of salvation to all men, it had to be actively embraced" (Thormälen 15). Fiercely anti-Calvinist, Anne Brontë believed in the need to actively live a virtuous life, not relying in the feeling of justification, and to actively avoid contact with sin to prevent corruption.

This personal response associated to the Justification by Faith poses a dilemma to Anne Brontë: no one can mediate between men and God but Jesus Christ. Presented with the image of a reprobate, her characters find no way to positively influence the unbeliever towards conversion, for justification cannot be achieved by men on their own: "Man does not as it were purchase justification by deciding to believe; God grants man pardon for his sins and bestows righteousness on him through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. […] It is thus God who acts and human beings who receive, not the other way round"

[1] *Sola fide* (only through the faith/by faith alone), also known as 'justification by faith', is one of the main tenets of Protestant Reformation. This doctrine supports the idea that the pardon for our sins can only be achieved through faith, and not through our good deeds.

(Thormählen 73). But to receive this pardon the men have to be willing, and reprobates have closed their hearts to God. Faced with the inevitability of condemnation for the reprobate, at odds with the idea of a loving God, Anne's belief in universal salvation is a way to reconcile these opposite ideas. Her personal doubts translate to her characters who, like her, rely on Scripture and on their own conscience to remain in the path of righteousness.

3. A Comparative analysis of *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

3.1 Portrayal of Religion

Though both having a strong religious base, *The Wrongs of Woman* (*WW*) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (*TWH*) differ greatly in the way that they portray religious life and its role in the protagonists' life. These differences can be explained mainly by the conception of religion of their authors.

In *The Wrongs of Woman*, the protagonist Maria alludes to church life in a passing manner when recounting her childhood, and structured religion is barely mentioned. Only in occasion of returning to her paternal home on the event of her father's death, she mentions religion and piety in an explicit way: "I recollected with what fervour I addressed the God of my youth: and once more with rapturous love looked above my sorrows to the Father of nature" (*WW* 134). This does not mean that religion is absent from the narrative. On the contrary, a profound conviction in God's law is what guides Maria's every decision. Is this conviction that prompts her to leave her family home at any cost after her mother's death, not only to evade her abusive father, but to avoid her father's mistress, whose attitudes she deems immoral.

Far from being an escape, her marriage to George Venables proves to be an even bigger attack to her convictions. Not only is Venables a failed merchant, riddled with debt, but he indulges in every vice imaginable. His moral degradation is such that Maria notices Venables only being capable of interacting with libertine women and that "he seldom looked twice at a modest woman, and sat silent in their company" (*WW* 130). He gambles, frequents prostitutes, and drinks in excess, to a point where the effects of his libertine life

in his physical appearance disgust Maria. She regards this kind of life as pernicious not only physically but emotionally, as she claims that "the heart of a libertine is dead to natural affection" (*WW* 132) after learning that Venables refuses to support an illegitimate child of his that he had abandoned.

Although she is unable to reform Venables' conduct, Maria remains with him, knowing that law and society are against her if she decides to leave and that, as a pregnant woman, she will have no means of survival. That is until Venables' libertine life puts her own virtue in danger by attempting to prostitute her to one of his creditors: "He assured him, 'that every woman had her price, and, with gross indecency, hinted, that he should be glad to have the duty of a husband taken off his hands" (*WW* 143). It is not only the immorality of the suggestion that angers Maria, but Venables' disdain towards a union that she had until then considered sacred: "I thought you unprincipled, but not so decidedly vicious" (*WW* 143).

Following Wollstonecraft's beliefs, Maria considers herself the only judge when it comes to morality and she acts according to this, unwilling to compromise her ideals to follow societal conventions and laws: "Was I, indeed, free?'—Yes; free I termed myself, **when I decidedly perceived the conduct I ought to adopt.** How had I panted for liberty—liberty, that I would have purchased at any price, but **that of my own esteem**!" (*WW* 144. The highlight is mine). This appeal to her private judgment clashes with the moral established by society, a moral that is hypocrite in its base, as it demands virtue from women, but it does not hold men to the same standard.

While this double standard allows Venables to sue Darnford for her wife's adultery, Maria holds him responsible in the trial. All her decisions were motivated by his actions, and it is his own moral corruption where Maria finds herself justified:

> While I lived with him, I defy the voice of calumny to sully what is termed the fair fame of woman. —Neglected by my husband, I never encouraged a lover; and preserved with scrupulous care, what is termed my honour, at the expence of my peace, till he, who should have been its guardian, laid traps to ensnare me. From that moment I believed myself, in the sight of heaven, free—and no power on earth shall force me to renounce my resolution. (*WW* 173)

Maria's views on morals and societal virtue embody the ideas explained by Wollstonecraft in her two *Vindications*. As an educated woman, Maria is able to

distinguish between right and wrong by herself, and to recognize when the societal ideal of virtue is flawed. Despite the absence of organized religion throughout the majority of the narrative, Maria clearly holds herself to a high standard of virtue and rational independence.

Though it might not seem an influence of religion at first, the fact that we learn Maria's story from her written word resonates with the Evangelical tradition. Not only were autobiographies and testimonials a central genre of protestant and dissenter literature, but her reasons for writing reflect the Evangelical ideal of passing onto others the testimony of one's experiences and feelings.

> Writing was then the only alternative. […] The events of her past life pressing on her, she resolved circumstantially to relate them, with the sentiments that experience, and more mature reason, would naturally suggest. They might perhaps instruct her daughter, and shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid. (*WW*, 75).

Though usually Evangelical testimonials would relate stories of conversions, Maria's story functions not only as another way of denouncing the injustices of society but provides the reader the reasons behind her actions, which have a religious base. Additionally, it has an explicit instructional and moralist intent, on a par with the moral literature of the eighteenth century.

The conception of religion in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* differs greatly from *The Wrongs of Woman*. Where Wollstonecraft presents us with a personal religion, Bronte's characters move within the parameters of a structured view of Christianity, with the Bible as the source of doctrine and moral. In the initial chapters of the narrative, when the reader's impression of Helen comes from farmer Gilbert Markham's perspective as he is reading her diary, she is presented as someone that feels justified in her beliefs, no matter how harsh they appear to others. In her first conversation with Gilbert, their discussion about the meaning of virtue is a testimony of her unwillingness to compromise her beliefs: "And why should I take it for granted that my son will be one in a thousand? —and not rather prepare for the worst, and suppose he will be like his— like the rest of mankind, unless I take care to prevent it?" (*TWH* 27). When reprehended by Mr. Millward for her alleged faults, his ministerial authority is brushed aside as Helen "offered no extenuation or defense; and with a kind of shameless calmness—shocking indeed to witness in one so

young—as good as told me that my remonstrance was unavailing, and my pastoral advice quite thrown away upon her" (*TWH* 98).

Helen's character in particular has a morality fixed in set principles but, unlike Wollstonecraft's Maria, these principles are not based on the rational appeal to an eternal law, but in her interpretation of Scripture. In the events recalled in her diary, we see a young Helen that has dedicated time to the study of Scripture, and who is able to counteract her aunt's arguments with her own. Her comments about translation and context evidence a deep analysis of the text, and her adherence to her own interpretation reflects the Evangelical belief in the authority of the Bible.

> "Oh, Helen! where did you learn all this?"
> "In the Bible, aunt. I have searched it through, and found nearly thirty passages, all tending to support the same theory."
> "And is that the use you make of your Bible? And did you find no passages tending to prove the danger and the falsity of such a belief?"
> "No: I found, indeed, some passages that, taken by themselves, might seem to contradict that opinion; but they will all bear a different construction to that which is commonly given, and in most the only difficulty is in the word which we translate 'everlasting' or 'eternal.'" (*TWH* 184)

Despite using her own interpretation of Scripture as the central argument for ignoring her aunt's concerns about Arthur Huntingdon, her future husband, Helen's choice of husband does not affect the strength of her beliefs. In fact, those beliefs are the force behind her election: her desire to attain salvation not only for her, but for those she cares about: "Even as a young girl in love for the first time, Helen Lawrence/Huntingdon does not forget her faith; she is and remains a devout Christian, and nothing in this world matters so much to her that she will even for a moment jeopardise her hope for salvation to obtain it" (Thormählen 82). But if this faith leads her to marry Huntingdon in an attempt of delivering him from sin, it is also the first cause of concern Helen has after her marriage, as Huntingdon general disregard of piety manifests in his complaints and attempts of manipulation:

> "But will you promise to reform if I tell you?"
> "Yes, if I can, and without offending a higher authority."
> "Ah! there it is, you see: you don't love me with all your heart."

> "I don't understand you, Arthur (at least I hope I don't): pray tell me what I have done or said amiss."
>
> "It is nothing you have done or said; it is something that you are: you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms; but then, like all other good things, it may be carried too far. To my thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord." (*TWH* 213)

Helen interprets this attitude not only as Huntingdon being arrogant and selfish ("What are you, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and all I am" [*TWH* 214]), but as a confirmation of their conception of love being based on different ideals: "I should *rejoice* to see you at any time so deeply absorbed in your devotions that you had not a single thought to spare for me. But, indeed, I should lose nothing by the change, for the more you loved your God the more deep and pure and true would be your love to me" (*TWH* 214). Considering the Evangelical advocacy of a personal relationship with God, Huntingdon's jealousy of Helen's piety and his own lack of religiousness are just another hint of his reprobate character.

Helen's certainty about her role as Huntingdon's saviour morphs into disillusion and later into despair as his attitudes progressively confirm his true nature. But even as her initial love vanishes and turns into hate, her main concern still remains the prospect of Huntingdon's condemnation, and her inability to change that outcome. In fact, she starts to realize that her remonstrations and tears only irritate Huntingdon and lead him to indulge more in his vices: "Thenceforth I restrained my tears and passions as much as I could. I spared him my exhortations and fruitless efforts at conversion too, for I saw it was all in vain: God might awaken that heart, supine and stupefied with self-indulgence, and remove the film of sensual darkness from his eyes, but I could not" (*TWH* 273).

As her hopes for Huntingdon's reformation dwindle, Helen is tormented by a new concern, that the contact with sin is beginning to corrupt her. Not only the physical proximity with Huntingdon and his companions, to which she attributes the loss of her instinctual horror towards sin, but also the sacramental union with her husband, which leads her to feel Huntingdon's degradation as her own: "And indeed I know not whether, at the time, it was not for *him* rather than myself that I blushed; for, since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and

transgressions as my own […] I am, debased, contaminated by the union, both in my own eyes and in the actual truth" (*TWH* 275).

Arthur's infidelity marks for Helen her lowest spiritual moment, as she feels abandoned by God, unable even to pray for help: "My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into prayer" (*TWH* 320). Considering Anne Brontë's Methodist beliefs, this feeling of despair would be a proof of God's abandonment, but Helen is driven out of her stupor by "a gust of wind" and finds a renewed faith through the contemplation of nature's wonders: "Their God was mine, and He was strong to save and swift to hear. 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,' seemed whispered from above their myriad orbs. No, no; I felt He would not leave me comfortless: in spite of earth and hell I should have strength for all my trials, and win a glorious rest at last!" (*TWH* 320).

Helen's lowest spiritual moments are marked not only by the feeling of abandonment, but also by the presence of temptation in the figure of Walter Hargraves, whose attempts of seduction are based on using Huntingdon's vices to justify an adulterous relationship with Helen. His insistence of regarding her as a supernatural being ("I worship you. You are my angel, my divinity!" [*TWH* 379]) mirrors Huntingdon's initial attitude when courting Helen, but where Arthur's argued that Helen's angelic nature was destined to save him, Hargrave fancies himself as destined to liberate her from a life of evilness.

After reading Helen's story, Gilbert (and the reader alongside him) is able to reinterpret her initial attitude and to see the error behind the town's gossip. Helen's diary functions in a very similar way as Maria's memoirs in *The Wrongs of Woman*, with the distinction of the diary being intended as a personal account of her life, but it functions as a testimony precisely because is not intended for others: "Her diary has the authority to overturn Gilbert's preconception and the gossip circulated in town, for it gives a full account of her inner truth. […] Anne Brontë has made the authority of a written narrative a key issue in her novels, for she has her heroines use their written voices as evidence of their truthfulness" (Ogawa 12-13).

Unlike with Walter Hargraves, Helen can form a bond with Gilbert Markham because he holds himself to the same moral standards. Even if she cannot accept his love, they are able to part ways sustained by the hope of a union in eternal life, but nonetheless, Brontë gives her faith a mundane reward as well.

3.1.1 The question about Universal Salvation

The treatment of the Doctrine of Salvation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* requires a separate analysis. A major concern in Protestant theology, every denomination had its own beliefs about salvation, determined by their approach to Scripture. Wesleyan Methodism adhered to the tenet of salvation being possible but not guaranteed for everyone, and while Helen supports this belief in the beginning of her narration, which leads her to strive for Huntingdon's reformation, her interpretations of the Bible show signs of Anne Brontë's concerns about the irrevocability of condemnation: "Helen, like her author, is also a Biblical exegete, and the ultimate end of all her reading and interpreting is an understanding of the word 'eternal': whether to be damned to eternal hellfire means 'for ever' or 'only till he has paid the uttermost farthing'" (Langland 126). Uncapable of accepting the possibility of someone she loves being condemned for all eternity, she assumes the responsibility of Huntingdon's salvation on herself. As we have seen earlier, Helen's attempts are insufficient, not because of a lack of effort on her part, but for Huntingdon's unwillingness. As Thormälen puts it, "Helen is not only being vain and stupid, as any lovesick teenager may; she forgets a central religious tenet, too. While human agents may well assist a fellow creature's efforts to live virtuously, the fundamental desire to improve must originate within the person himself/herself, and only God can inspire it" (83).

As Helen's love for Huntingdon morphs into disgust and hate, her concerns about salvation only increase. Her initial worries about her husband transform into worries about her own salvation, her child's, and even her husband's companions, as evidenced in her forgiveness of Hargraves' initial proposal: "Then go, and sin no more" (*TWH* 338), a direct reference to the scriptural passage where Jesus forgives the adulterer woman.

Helen's escape is also motivated by her concerns about salvation, this time regarding herself and her son, any possibility of influencing Huntingdon long forgotten. Learning this, her seemingly harsh stance about virtue and the education of children at the beginning of Gilbert's narrative can be reinterpreted as a fear based on her experiences, and not as "despising the gifts of Providence, and teaching [Arthur] to trample them under his feet" (*TWH* 37), as stated by Mr. Millward.

The narration of Huntingdon's last days is the exposition of a concern hinted through the narrative: Helen's (and by association Anne Brontë's) refusal to believe in an eternal punishment for the reprobates. As his physical suffering increases, Huntingdon's concerns about death and condemnation arise, his own beliefs clashing with Helen's.

> Yes, *now*, my immaculate angel; but when once you have secured your reward, and find yourself safe in heaven, and me howling in hell-fire, catch you lifting a finger to serve me *then*! No, you'll look complacently on, and not so much as dip the tip of your finger in water to cool my tongue!
> If so, it will be because of the great gulf over which I cannot pass; and if I *could* look complacently on in such a case, it would be only from the assurance that you were being purified from your sins, and fitted to enjoy the happiness I felt. — But are you *determined*, Arthur, that I shall not meet you in heaven? (*TWH* 472)

Huntingdon's words evidence both his knowledge of Scripture (he makes a reference to the biblical parable of Dives and Lazarus) and of Anglican doctrine, as he is sure that his behaviour in life will be punished after his death. Helen´s reply contemplates the possibility of the punishment being temporary, and a preparation for Heaven, but this fails in bringing comfort to Huntingdon, who lacks not the knowledge of his wrongs, but cannot comprehend its moral implications.

> He is sorry for his past misdeeds because they have brought him to such a wretched pass. […] His sins as such are simply not real to him.
> Deficient awareness of sin ('hardened' sinfulness) is a major stumbling block to salvation, which can only be granted to the genuine penitent. Remission of sins is impossible unless those sins are understood and regretted as such. (Thormählen 76)

As Huntingdon's condition worsens so do his fears about the afterlife, but he is still unable to feel remorse for his sins ("I *can't* repent; I only fear" [*TWH* 477]). If Helen, following the Methodist belief, is able to feel God in the nature that surrounds her and to feel in her heart the justification of her actions, for Huntingdon this is impossible. His heart, "hardened in his heartless depravity" (*TWH* 326), leads him into despair at the prospect of death, and he asks Helen to plead for him, in the same way that he asked her to reform him initially. But now Helen knows that this is impossible, and that only Christ can mediate between God and man: "No man can deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him,' I replied: 'it cost more to redeem their souls—it cost the blood of an

incarnate God, perfect and sinless in Himself, to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one; —let Him plead for you" (*TWH* 478).

Arthur Huntingdon's unrepentant death illustrates a doctrine that is a great concern for Anne Brontë, as the prospect of eternal punishment would seem incongruent with the idea of a loving God. But Helen´s final letter to her brother shows a willingness to reconcile these ideas: "Whatever fate awaits it—still it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, *will* bless it in the end!" (*TWH* 479), at the cost of deviating from Anglican and even Methodist orthodoxy.

After analysing how religion is portrayed in both novels we can affirm that, even though they from separate religious traditions, Mary Wollstonecraft and Anne Brontë's differences in religion translate to their works and especially to their characters. Maria Venables' defence of her private judgement and personal relationship with God illustrates the strong influence of Rational Dissent in her author, but her appeal to the sentiment connects her with Evangelicalism. Less dissident, Helen Huntingdon's religiosity is founded on Scripture, whose doctrinal authority she uses to support her deviation from orthodoxy when it comes to the matter of salvation. Both in *The Wrongs of Woman* and in *The Tenant of Wildfell* Hall the portrayal of religion is central to analyse the motivations and decisions of the characters.

3.2 Marriage and Divorce

At first glance it would seem that the issues surrounding marriage and its dissolution in both *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are a matter of law and have nothing to do with religion. But we should not forget the intricate way in which Church and State were still joined during the 18th and 19th centuries in England, and how this situation affected the laws passed by Parliament. After all, it was not until 1886 that the act banning non-Anglicans from the House of Commons was fully repealed (several repeal acts were passed throughout the 19th century, each one expanding access to Parliament.)

Despite Blackstone making a distinction between legal and religious marriage in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* by explaining that "law considers marriage in no other light than as a civil contract. The holiness of the matrimonial state is left entirely to

the ecclesiastical law: the temporal courts not having jurisdiction to consider unlawful marriage as a sin, but merely as a civil inconvenience" (Vol. I, XV), marital laws were especially affected by religion, and any attempt to repel existing laws or to introduce new ones more favourable to women encountered a fierce opposition in Parliament. As in the biblical "and they two shall be one flesh" (*The King James Version of the Bible*, Ephesians, 5:31), the English law considered husband and wife a unity where the woman became an extension of the man, and as such is described by Blackstone:

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme-covert*. (Vol. I, XV)

This legal inexistence affected a woman's rights over her children as well, as "a mother, as such, is entitled to no power [over her children], but only to reverence and respect." (Blackstone, Vol. I, XVI). English laws also allowed the husband to chastise his wife, in the same manner that it was allowed for a parent to correct their children. Even though by Blackstone´s time the physical punishment of a wife was frowned upon, the *Commentaries* clarify that "the courts of law will still permit a husband to restrain a wife of her liberty, in case of any gross misbehaviour" (Vol. I, XV).

The figure of Divorce existed in the law, but only as Divorce *a vinculo matrimonii* (annulment) and Divorce *a mensa et thoro* (legal separation), both procedures under ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Legal dissolution of a lawful marriage could be achieved through an Act of Parliament, but implied a lengthy and costly process, this way *de facto* restricting divorce to the wealthy men, as married women had no possessions of their own.

In *The Wrongs of Woman* Maria chooses to marry George Venables as a means to escape an abusive household. Her lack of acquaintances and of knowledge of the world lead her to regard Venables as someone better than he actually is, and she is promptly disappointed in her assumptions when she learns that he agreed to marry her encouraged by a great sum of money. At first Maria considers her marriage as indissoluble, even after discovering her husband's true nature. After her reformation attempts fail, she resigns to a life with Venables ("I had been caught in a trap, and caged for life." [*WW* 128]) where

she knows she cannot find enjoyment and from where she is unable to escape due to the law ("Marriage had bastilled me for life. I discovered in myself a capacity for the enjoyment of the various pleasures existence affords; yet, fettered by the partial laws of society, this fair globe was to me a universal blank." [*WW* 137]). But her views about the sacrality of matrimony are not an obstacle to consider herself free from that connection when her husband's viciousness affects her in an intimate way.

> Then, turning to Mr. S——, I added, 'I call on you, Sir, to witness,' and I lifted my hands and eyes to heaven, 'that, as solemnly as I took his name, I now abjure it,' I pulled off my ring, and put it on the table; 'and that I mean immediately to quit his house, never to enter it more. I will provide for myself and child. I leave him as free as I am determined to be myself—he shall be answerable for no debts of mine.' (*WW* 143)

Maria's 'divorce' from Venables is deeply symbolic, but it also has strong legal connotations, especially if we consider that she does this intentionally in front of a witness. She renounces his name and with it any right to alimony, to which she would have been entitled to in the case of a Divorce *a mensa et thoro* where the husband was to be found guilty of adultery. By quitting his house, she renounces his protection, and by considering him free she forfeits her right to sue him for adultery. Lastly, but not less important, by declaring him not responsible for her debts, she reclaims her own individuality before the law and renounces any privilege she had as a *femme covert*.

By abandoning her husband's house, refusing to return and to give up her child, Maria infringes the law, which in turn gives Venables the legal grounds to commit her to the asylum, as her actions would be interpreted as the 'gross misbehaviour' mentioned by Blackstone. Her posterior involvement with Danford also gives Venables the legal advantage, as it permits him to sue Danford for seduction, and to demand a monetary compensation in court.

Maria's symbolic divorce has no legal value, but its connotations are a proof that she considers her morals to be reason enough to bend the matrimonial laws. All her later actions and decisions are sustained by this idea. If she is no longer married, Venables has no right to her inheritance or to her unborn child, she is free to marry Danford, and she has the right to defend herself in trial, as she is the only one responsible for her own actions. Her defence in the trial confirms this:

> If I am unfortunately united to an unprincipled man, am I for ever to be shut out from fulfilling the duties of a wife and mother?—I wish my country to approve of my conduct; but, if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, **I appeal to my own sense of justice**, and declare that I will not live with the individual, who has violated every moral obligation which binds man to man. (*WW* 173. The highlight is mine)

Maria does not go against the law merely because she wants to, but because the law is unfair and clearly against her morality. Danford echoes this feeling when, after reading her memories, declares that "ties of this nature could not bind minds governed by superior principles; and such beings were privileged to act above the dictates of laws they had no voice in framing." (*WW*, 164).

It is also because of her adherence to her sense of justice that she decides to plead as guilty of adultery, but to refuse the charge of seduction in Danford's name. She recognizes that the law has not dissolved a tie that she considers inexistent and, even if she feels justified in her actions, she wishes the law to be on her side. But the accusation of seduction against Danford does not consider her as responsible of her own actions, but as a victim: "I was six-and-twenty when I left Mr. Venables' roof; if ever I am to be supposed to arrive at an age to direct my own actions, I must by that time have arrived at it. —I acted with deliberation" (*WW* 173).

The judge's verdict in the trial addresses the key element in Maria's (and Wollstonecraft's) sense of justice and moral. He condemns "the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings", instead of obeying "her parents and relations, who were qualified by their experience to judge better for her, than she could for herself'" (*WW* 174). These *feelings* mentioned by the judge are none other than Maria's exercise of her right to private judgement, without need or want of intermediaries. By juxtaposing Maria's feelings against the decisions of someone else, the law is not only continuing its infantilization of women, but it is also condemning a doctrine that was seen as pernicious to the state. The judge's comment about 'French principles' reinforces this connection as, at the time, any attempt to reform the law would be attributed to an influence of French revolutionary ideals.

In addition to the revindication of the female moral and intellectual autonomy, Maria's indictment against the matrimonial laws is also supported by anti-slavery arguments. The

comparison between women and slaves is a constant in Wollstonecraft's writings, which contain numerous moral and rational arguments against slavery itself. As Coffee explains, Wollstonecraft's use of the term 'independent' follows a tradition where independence is thought as opposite of slavery: "To be free was to be independent in the sense of having the capacity to act in one's own name without having to ask permission or rely on the goodwill of others. To lack this right was the mark of a slave" (910). Though Wollstonecraft poses the question of female oppression as slavery in several of her writings (and especially *in Vindications of the Rights of Woman*), in *The Wrongs of Woman* she exemplifies these arguments through her characters and tackles the issue of marriage as a form of slavery in particular.

In *Vindication of the Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft describes slavery as "a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, [an] inhuman custom" (13), and in *The Wrongs of Woman*, by equating marriage with slavery, she criticizes the social censure of the women that "resigning what is termed her natural protector (though he never was so, but in name) is despised and shunned, for asserting the independence of mind distinctive of a rational being, and spurning at slavery" (139). If we deem human slavery as immoral and inhuman it follows that we should apply the same moral weight to marital slavery. Maria's denunciation of "the rigid laws which enslave women" (*WW* 171) is not only a vindication of her intellectual and moral autonomy, but an accusation against a society where, at the same time, human slavery is outlawed[2], while marital slavery is sanctioned by the laws.

Compared with Wollstonecraft's approach, we find that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deals with these same laws in a very different manner. Helen's acquaintance with her husband's vices is much more progressive than Maria's, and even if she knows from the start about Huntingdon's debts, that he blames on his father, she decides to use her dowry to pay them off. It is only after learning of his affair with Annabella Lowborough that she demands a separation (that Huntingdon is not legally allowed to deny her, if she can prove the adultery), but also the remains of her fortune and the custody of her son, which by law are not hers.

"Will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune, and go?"

[2] While slavery in the totality of the British Empire was abolished in 1833, it was declared illegal in England in 1772.

"Go where?"

"Anywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and I shall be delivered from your presence, and you from mine."

"No – by *Jove* I won't!"

"Will you let me have the child then, without the money?"

"No, nor yourself without the child. Do you think I'm going to be made the talk of the country for your fastidious caprices?"

"Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised. But henceforth we are husband and wife only in the name." (*TWH* 323)

Even if Huntingdon cannot prevent Helen from leaving him, he can coerce her to stay by restricting her money and threatening to take away her child, as he is more concerned about his reputation than about his rights before the law. After learning of her escape plans, he not only confiscates all her money and valuable possessions, but also destroys the painting materials that could help her to support herself:

> He soon spied them out, and putting down the candle, deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire: palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish: I saw them all consumed: the palette-knives snapped in two, the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney. (*TWH* 387)

> There! you'll find nothing gone but your money, and the jewels, and a few little trifles I thought it advisable to take into my own possession, lest your mercantile spirit should be tempted to turn them into gold. (*TWH* 388)

Even after allowing Walter Hargraves to court Helen ('My wife! what wife? I have no wife,' replied Huntingdon, looking innocently up from his glass, 'or if I have, look you, gentlemen: I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her. [*TWH* 376]), Huntingdon still takes offense in the possibility of Helen accepting Hargraves advances, be it a matter of pride, or him trying to have legal leverage on Helen ("'She can't deny it!' cried the gentleman thus addressed, grinning in mingled rage and triumph." [*TWH* 381]).

Helen is aware of the legal implications of running away with her child ("Better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a **fugitive** mother." [*TWH* 372. The highlight is mine) but, as Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman*, she considers this a situation where the dictates of her conscience are above the law, as she feels "free to do anything

but offend God and my conscience" (*TWH* 334). What differences Helen's stance on the law from Maria's is that she does not consider herself free from the matrimonial tie, but from its obligations, and the argument of her husband's infidelity and abuse as an excuse to consider herself as free, (an argument used both in *The Wrongs of Women* by Maria and in *The Tenant* by Walter Hargraves and Gilbert Markham), encounters her firm opposition, as she considers it a break of her faith and an affront to her conscience.

Despite Helen's opposition to consider herself free from her husband stemming from a religious notion of marriage, Anne Brontë presents the reader with a contrasting outcome through the divorce of Lord Lowborough and Annabella. While being in the same situation as Helen, Lord Lowborough is on a different position regarding the law, as he is a man, he is wealthy, and he has the power to keep his children with him, a fact Helen is quick to remind him of: "Two years hence you will be as calm as I am now, -- and far, far happier, I trust, for you are a man, and free to act as you please" (*TWH* 363). The quick recount of his separation and later, of his divorce, bear witness of the way the laws favoured him, and those in his situation.

Anne Brontë's depictions of the matrimonial laws are less incisive than Wollstonecraft's, but the criticism is present, nonetheless. The inclusion of a contrasting case and the precautions that Helen has to take to ensure her escape are a proof of the disparity of rights under the law and of the lack of legal protection women had regarding domestic issues.

As we have seen in this chapter, both *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* address the inadequacies of marital laws in a different way: Wollstonecraft's personalist moral approach presents us with the idea of righteous individuals feeling justified before laws that are morally unjust, and the concept of an immoral society that has deprived half of its members of their freedom, while Brontë introduces the idea of individuals having to infringe human laws to ensure that they abide to divine mandates. From their different religious conceptions both authors tackle the same concern about laws and societal mandates that hold women to a higher standard of virtue, but simultaneously force them to compromise on their morals and convictions.

3.3 Moral Progression

In her preface to *The Wrongs of Woman* Wollstonecraft highlights a disparity she

encounters in the fictions of her time. She finds that in most novels heroes are "allowed to be mortal, and to become wise and virtuous as well as happy, by a train of events and circumstances. The heroines, on the contrary, are to be born immaculate; and to act like goddesses of wisdom" (*WW* 67). As the book was left unfinished, and its prologue with it, we can only assume from these words that her intention in creating the character of Maria was to depict a heroine that would follow the same path as her male counterparts, a heroine with a marked moral progression.

Maria's character fails to follow this path. Set on illustrating how matrimonial despotism and oppression "degrade the mind" and striving to depict "the wrongs of different classes of women" (*WW* 68), Wollstonecraft gives us a heroine that is nearly immaculate and wise. She is shown to the reader as strong, principled, educated and kind. Her only fault, if we could call it that, is being naïve to the ways of the world, and it is entirely attributed to her sheltered childhood and to societal conventions regarding women's education. But from the beginning Maria is able to exercise her private judgment freely, and all her elections are supported by it, even those with negative consequences.

Even after coming in contact with numerous vices and temptations after her marriage to Venables, Maria is shown to adhere to her morals and to not be affected by her husband's libertine life, even if she is disgusted by it. It takes Venables' attempt to prostitute her and make her abandon her morals for Maria to take matters into her own hands and to leave her husband. What she learns from her choices are those ways of the world that she previously ignored, while her morals remain unchanged.

While Maria, as a woman, does suffer the oppression referenced by Wollstonecraft in the preface, as a character she has no real moral progression because she does not need it. Having had access to a proper education thanks to her uncle's interest, she has from the start known what is right and wrong and she has acted accordingly, even if her lack of experience made her susceptible to deceit. The only suggestion of a questionable moral decision is in the hints added by Godwin at the end of the book, where a passage describes Maria's suicide attempt using laudanum, after being abandoned by Darnford and miscarrying her baby, but this passage not only is one of the scattered ideas left hanging by Wollstonecraft, but Godwin clarifies that it deviates from the other hints.

Moral progression is present in the narrative but in the secondary characters, especially Jemima. First regarded by Maria as cold and unmovable, she is shown to have risen herself from a state of misery and degradation, and to aspire to be educated and respectable. It is this desire to better herself what makes Jemima receptive to Maria's influence and affection:

> Jemima's experience exposes the truths concealed by ideologically loaded assumptions about and practices of female propriety and respectability, showing that prostitutes neither enjoy their work, nor pine for their heartless seducers, but are, like wives, an exploited class, despising the men on whom they are dependent. (Johnson 205)

Some authors have suggested that Maria's attachment to Darnford and their subsequent affair are proof of Maria repeating the mistakes of her marriage to Venables, but this time wilfully blind to Darnford's shortcomings. I do not believe this to be the case. Even when Wollstonecraft presents Darnford as someone superior to Venables and as Maria's intellectual equal, the reader is aware of his defects, and so is Maria. "Maria now, imagining that she had found a being of celestial mould – was happy, – nor was she deceived" (*WW* 165). Maria, in her happiness, considers Darnford a "being of celestial mould" after learning from his own mouth his story and defects, which are not an impediment for her to consider him her husband, and despite the fact that "with Darnford she did not taste uninterrupted felicity" (*WW* 168) she decides to defend him at court while defending herself. This idea aligns with Jordan's words:

> She [Maria] *was* happy, and she was *not* deceived in having this happiness, even if Darnford was not exactly of 'celestial mould' and might be liable to change. This is what the narrator says, not Maria in the grip of some delusion which the text parodies and invites readers to mock and avoid. It is a crucial passage for readings of *Maria* (231).

In the case presented in *The Wrongs of Woman*, the author tells us in the preface that "the history ought rather to be considered, as of a woman, than of an individual." (*WW* 67), but the development of said story does not show the moral progression of this woman. With a declared intention of demonstrating "the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" (*WW* 67), the narrative

is built around a character that, even though suffering this oppression, has the capacity of and intellectual freedom to identify and call out this oppression.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* we are shown a very different heroine. Like Maria, Helen is both principled and naïve, but her mistakes when choosing to marry Huntingdon are not to blame in her education or in society. She is made aware several times of Huntingdon's want of character by her aunt, her uncle, and Milicent Hargraves. Huntingdon himself does not completely hide his vices, appealing to Helen's desires to redeem him.

Helen's main fault then is her arrogance, which leads her to believe that it is not only her duty to reform Huntingdon, but that she will be capable of it, an arrogance that her aunt points to her: "He would soon learn, you think—and you yourself would willingly undertake to be his teacher? But, my dear, he is, I believe, full ten years older than you—how is it that you are so beforehand in moral acquirements?" (*TWH* 153). This arrogant behaviour is promptly shattered as Arthur continues to live the libertine life he had vowed to abandon, and he shows his true colours to a distraught Helen, who progressively loses all her influence on him and all her hopes of a happy life: "Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him, and if I loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him" (*TWH* 211).

In a different fashion from Wollstonecraft's heroine, Brontë shows how the principled Helen, initially so sure of her own righteousness, starts to feel in her own spiritual life the effects of being in contact with vice:

> Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which were given me by nature, or instilled into me by the precepts and example of my aunt. (*TWH* 276)

This corruption comes through the contact with her dissolute husband primarily, but also disguised in the friendly image of Walter Hargraves. Though Helen never considers him the epitome of virtue described by his sister Milicent, she highlights Hargraves' chivalry, and his attempts to control the other members of the group in their excesses. This semblance of goodness proves to be as deceitful as Huntingdon's initial claims, as Hargraves poses an insistent threat to Helen's virtue. Through his idealization of Helen,

and his offers of escape (offers that are sanctioned by Huntingdon, be it by his actions or by his words), Hargraves presents himself as a saviour and a solution to Helen's sufferings in her moments of utmost despair, resorting even to trying to manipulate her when she refuses. Although Helen never yields to temptation, she is harrowed by constant doubts about herself and about God's help. By allowing Helen to be somehow tainted by her contact with corruption, Brontë achieves a realistic depiction of life, and attains her goal of telling the truth, no matter how "unpalatable", as she explains in the Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* As Langland observes, "in this portrait of a woman struggling with an ideal self-conception against a powerful and pervasive social corruption, we discover genius of portraiture. A less insightful writer would have allowed Helen to remain static and pure" (143).

Helen's acquaintance with Gilbert Markham signals the last stage of her moral progression. Though they clash at first, they rapidly discover an intellectual likeness and affinity. But when Gilbert learns her backstory and utilizes the same arguments used by Hargraves to justify the abandoning of her matrimonial vows, Helen is horrified at the prospect of having misjudged him. The fact that Gilbert realizes the error of his argument and that he accepts unconditionally all her requirements, even when there is a possibility of never seeing each other again, is the confirmation that Helen has judged his character accurately and has made the correct choice. Helen's evolution is therefore shown not only through the reader's access to the feelings and thoughts narrated in her diary, but also through her connection with the different male characters: "Arthur represents Helen's disastrous first choice, Hargrave her seducer whom she rejects, and Gilbert her eventual choice, showing a moral progression in the heroine" (Ogawa 20).

Alongside Helen's story, there are two secondary plots in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that are also important in their depiction of moral progression because they function as a contrast to Helen's story: the marriage of Lord Lowborough with Annabella Wilmot and the marriage of Ralph Hattersley with Milicent Hargraves. Lord Lowborough is presented as a libertine who, unlike Huntingdon, wants to reform but that fails in his efforts for lack of willpower. His constant relapses into alcoholism and his addiction to laudanum leave him deeply troubled, and his friends, instead of supporting his efforts, encourage him to give in to temptation. His constant failures lead him to search for a wife, with the idea that settling down will help him control his vices, and he thinks to have found in Annabella the answer to his prayers: "She will save me, body and soul, from destruction.

Already, she has ennobled me in my own estimation, and made me three times better, wiser, greater than I was" (*TWH* 206). As we swiftly learn, this is not the case, as Annabella "loves nothing about him but his title and pedigree, and 'that delightful old family seat'" (*THW* 206), but maintains the appearance of a loving wife, while at the same time has an affair with Huntingdon.

The knowledge of her wife's infidelity is a great blow for Lord Lowborough, who still struggles with his fragile willpower and the consequences of his libertine past. But instead of challenging Huntingdon to a duel, as others recommend, or taking his own life, as he is tempted to do, he separates from Annabella (later divorcing her), and settles with his children and a new wife in his family home. The extent of his moral progression becomes apparent in the razor that is found in the garden after he discovers Annabella's affair, "snapped in two and thrust deep into the cinders of the grate, but partially corroded by the decaying embers. So strong had been the temptation to end his miserable life, so determined his resolution to resist it" (*TWH* 367).

Lord Lowborough functions as a foil of Huntingdon in the sense that, despite his lack of willpower, he is able to reform because he is willing to, and he truly repents from his sins. But his story also functions as a foil of Helen's: where she is unable to leave Huntingdon because she has no right to her child or her inheritance, and has to suffer his infidelities and his abuse, Lowborough has the legal power to separate from his wife and to shield their children from her influence, and being a man, he has the economic resources to ask the Parliament for an act of divorce.

The other secondary plot that also functions as a foil of Huntingdon and Helen's marriage is that of Ralph Hattersley with Milicent Hargraves, because it presents a situation where a positive outcome is possible. Hattersley belongs to Huntingdon's group of friends and is described as having the same attitudes and vices as his companions. Decided to marry "somebody that will let me have my own way in everything" (*TWH* 231), he chooses the shy Milicent, who marries him pressured by her family.

She grows to love him but, like Helen with Huntingdon, is unable to influence him. She suffers greatly from his libertine life, but she still believes that he has the chance to reform: "neither he nor I are perfect, and I desire his improvement as earnestly as my own. And he will improve, don't you think so, Helen? he's only six-and-twenty yet" (*TWH* 298). Despite his vices, Helen's observations about Hattersley show him to have a

better disposition than Huntingdon, his drunkenness and bad behaviour being a result of his companions' influence, and he appears to have real affection for his wife and children. He is also the only one from Huntingdon's companions that is willing to defend Helen's honour against any rumour of adultery.

Even though Hattersley claims to "*have* the sense to see that I'm not always quite correct, but sometimes I think that's no great matter, as long as I injure nobody but myself" (*TWH* 305), he blames Milicent for his repeated bad behaviour, saying that "I sometimes think I should do better if I were joined to one that would always remind me when I was wrong, and give me a motive for doing good and eschewing evil, by decidedly showing her approval of the one and disapproval of the other" (*TWH* 306). Helen confronts him about this attitude, as Lokke's words remark: "Helen paints a powerful portrait of the terrible price paid by the woman in a marriage founded on inequality when she asserts that Milicent's meek submissiveness and refusal to speak her mind encourage Hattersley's tyranny." (124). Helen observes how painful his behaviour is for Milicent, using her letters as proof, which causes Hattersley to reflect on his conduct and to vow to reform. Unlike Huntingdon, Hattersley is able to reform because he was, in Helen's words, "predisposed to amendment before I added my mite of exhortation and encouragement" (*TWH* 403), and only needed the encouragement that his wife was too shy to provide. He functions as a foil for Huntingdon because he lacks the 'hardness of heart' that characterizes Arthur, and he is receptive to Helen's positive influence.

Thus, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* does not intend, like *The Wrongs of Woman* did, to show a case built around an ideal protagonist, a case "representative (in both the political and the literary sense) of all British women" (Mellor 414), but the isolated case of a heroine susceptible to corruption that comes in contact with a libertine man. Anne Brontë's preface to the second edition addresses this specific intent, as it was an element deeply critiqued as coarse and brutal:

> I would not be understood to suppose that the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace, with his few profligate companions I have here introduced, are a specimen of the common practices of society—**the case is an extreme one**, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; **but I know that such characters do exist,** and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. (*TWH* xii. The highlight is mine.)

In their critique of a same social reality, Wollstonecraft and Brontë choose a very different approach to the moral development of their main characters. Wollstonecraft creates her argumentation around a female character that represents the archetype that she aspires all women to be and, subjecting her to the same social and marital oppression that degrades other women, allows her to highlight through her actions and decisions the disparity of rights existing in English society. On the other hand, Brontë presents us with a heroine that is flawed and susceptible to corruption, but whose heart is set in the right path. By allowing her to make mistakes and suffer its consequences, Brontë not only intends to set Helen as an example of virtue, but to warn the reader to incur into her errors.

4. Critical Reception

When discussing the reception of *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* it is important to note the fact that Wollstonecraft's book was not only published incomplete, but that it was also published posthumously and edited by her husband, while Anne Brontë's book had at least two editions during her lifetime.

The Wrongs of Woman was published by Willian Godwin in 1798, a year after Wollstonecraft's death, along letters, poems, and other fragmented works, in a 4-volume edition titled *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Simultaneously, Godwin publishes his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As Elisabeth Gibbels remarks,

> the effect of these *Memoirs* was disastrous in England and affected the reception of *Wrongs of Woman* as an autobiographical novel. Mary Hays, a close friend and disciple, for example, wrote a glowing obituary for Wollstonecraft in 1797, but omitted her from her *Female Biography* of 1803. (179)

To the damage caused by Godwin's *Memoirs* we have to add the already radical (by English standards) ideas presented in the text, that English reviewers interpreted as a direct attack to public moral and to the institution of marriage: "*Wrongs of Woman* was received as a scandalous book in England. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* attacked Wollstonecraft viciously, calling her a prostitute and a whore, and Hannah More referred to it as a 'vindication of adultery'" (Gibbels 178).

English reviews chose to focus their analysis of the text on the moral issues. Some, like the *British Critic*, condemned "the protagonist's hedonism, as it leaves no room for the solace of religion" (Bour 581), while others like the *Monthly Review* regretted the depiction of marriage as 'the greatest evil in society' and sternly remarks that 'it is better to persuade the sex to submit to some inconveniencies, than to encourage them to break down all the barriers of social virtue'" (Bour 581).

For a more comprehensive analysis of the reception of *The Wrongs of Woman* it is interesting to compare the English reviews with its translations and reviews in other European countries and especially in France and Germany, where Mary Wollstonecraft was an already known and respected author due to the translations of her *Vindications of the Rights of Woman*. In her study of the reception of *Vindications* and *The Wrongs of Woman* in France, Isabelle Bour remarks the swift translation and the positive reviews that both works had. In her opinion, the translator of *The Wrongs of Woman*, Basile-Joseph Ducos, made a very faithful translation, only occasionally cutting "a few outbursts by the desperate protagonist or a very few phrases he must have deemed improper; he also leaves out the prefaces and postscript. So what the French public read was very much the same work as that published in Britain" (Bour 581). Gibbels disagrees with this opinion and considers that Ducos' alterations of the text are more substantial and intentional, as he "softens or eliminates passages, in particular, references to sexual and physical abuse, pleas for women's freedom or attacks on marriage as an institution" (176).

Bour also analyses the only surviving French review, published in the *Journal de Paris,* the first French daily newspaper. This review, although published anonymously, was written by Pierre-Louis Roederer, who had known Mary Wollstonecraft personally. For Bour this review stands out from its English counterparts because, instead of analysing the novel from a moral standpoint, it discusses the text "within the broader topic of the genre of the novel as discourse on manners and passions, a kind of discourse which, just like sciences such as anatomy and physiology, has a cognitive function" (Bour 583). Roederer's analysis regards *The Wrongs of Woman* as a study of nature, and links it with the study of History and Medicine.

While the English reviewers also attacked Wollstonecraft's decision of writing *The Wrongs of Woman* as a novel, undermining the efficacy of the genre as a vehicle for education and social change, Roederer's review links it with other two important sentimental novels of the time, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Goethe's *Die Leiden*

des Jungen Werthers, considering Wollstonecraft's text as a '*roman mixte*': "Roederer understood that Wollstonecraft combined the pattern of a novel of sensibility (though she challenged the paradigm of sensibility through the plot) with that of a political novel or *roman à these*" (Bour 584). Roederer also recognises the novel's objective of implementing the ideas described in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

German reviews, according to Gibbels, are extremely varied, with both positive and negative outcomes. In her opinion, the German and French translations sever the link of the novel with the second *Vindication*, as the translations fail to replicate the obvious associations of both titles, and they eliminate the 'Author's preface': "The decisions on the part of the French and German editors of *Wrongs of Woman* to delete the 'Author's preface' and to tone down the title destroyed the connection to *Rights of Woman*; *Wrongs of Woman* thus failed to have the same impact as a political book" (178).

As Janet Todd (1976) remarks in her study of Mary Wollstonecraft's biographies, the scandal caused by Godwin's *Memories* had a profound effect in the reception of her writings in the English-speaking world, making her virtually invisible for nearly eighty years, until the publication of her biography by Charles Keegan Paul. But even then, and for the majority of the twentieth century, studies about Wollstonecraft were focused on her person rather than her writings. In France and Germany, according to Gibbels, the interest around her works disappeared not due to scandal, but because of her association with French revolutionary ideals.

As we can see, the English reception of *The Wrongs of Women* is deeply influenced by religion: on the one hand, by the adherence of English society to the more orthodox Anglican morality associated with the state and, on the other, to the rejection caused in these orthodox circles by Wollstonecraft's highly heterodox approach to religion and her association with rational dissenter ideas, a rejection multiplied exponentially by the scandalous life depicted in Godwin's biography.

In the case of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, it had a very different reception after its publication, but still lead to controversy. Published in 1848 under the pseudonym 'Acton Bell', its popularity made necessary a second edition that same year. Despite the image some critics had of the Brontë sisters as naïve provincial writers, Alexis Easley suggests that their negotiations with the press, especially on Charlotte's part,

denote she had "a sophisticated understanding of press genres and networks and used this knowledge to promote her sisters' work as well as her own literary career" (304).

The Brontës' decision of utilizing the same surname in their pseudonyms, the joint publication of their poems, and the fact that Emily and Anne published their first novels in a conjoined volume led to the constant comparison of their works and to the belief, on both the public and the critics part, that they were the same person. When Anne decided to publish *The Tenant* with a different editor than her sisters', her editor made the attempt to publish the novel as a work by the author of *Jane Eyre*, an idea that Anne categorically refused. Still, the different pseudonym did not discourage the critics from constantly comparing and contrasting both novels.

Despite the lack of data about the readers' response to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which Easley attributes to the fact that "so few letters or other papers have survived, most likely because Charlotte destroyed these materials during the period in which she was actively managing her sisters' posthumous literary reputations" (307), there are records of several critical reviews of the works from the years 1848 and 1849[3]. The reviews published after the first edition are torn between recognizing the literary abilities of the author and criticizing the faithful depiction of Huntingdon's libertine life: "The boldness of the realistic representation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* proved as offensive to contemporaneous tastes as did the romanticized gothicism of *Wuthering Heights*. The publication of *The Tenant*, in fact, intensified the negative commentary on all of the Brontë novels" (Langland 149). Reviews on the *Spectator* and the *Athenaeum* highlight the writer's "morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal" (Allott 250), and suggest that "The Bells must be warned against their fancy for dwelling upon what is disagreeable. The brutified state of Mr. Huntingdon might have been displayed within a smaller compass" (Allott 251), while at the same time commenting on the author's "considerable abilities ill applied" (Allott 250). The *Athenaeum* even gives an "honest recommendation of *Wildfell Hall* as the most interesting novel we have read for a month past" (Allott 251).

By this point, the success of *The Tenant* had made necessary a second edition, to which Anne added a preface. In it she clarifies the moralist aim of the book, as her intention "was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to

[3] All the critical reviews from the 19th century that I mention, as well as Charlotte Brontë's *Biographical Notice*, are compiled on Miriam Allott's *The Brontës, the critical heritage*, from 1974.

ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (*TWH* xi). In response to the accusations of her portrayal of Huntingdon and his companions being extreme or inaccurate, she argued that

> When we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain **it is better to depict them as they really are** than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but **is it the most honest, or the safest?** […] I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, **the book has not been written in vain**. (*TWH* xii. The highlight is mine.)

Lastly, she addresses the rumours and conjectures about her identity ("Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell, and therefore let not his faults be attributed to them" [*TWH* xii],) and about her sex, a subject that she deems irrelevant to the intent and purposes of the novel:

> Little, I should think, can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman, as one or two of my critics profess to have discovered. […] 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. All novels are, or should be, written for both men and women to read. (*TWH* xii)

The addition of the preface proved to be inefficient, as the reviews continued not only to attack the realism of the text but also to make a constant comparison with *Jane Eyre*, and to attribute all the books under the penname 'Bell' to the same author. A reviewer from the *Examiner* (1848) claimed that he "entertained a suspicion that all the books might have been issued from the same source" (Allott 254), and reviewer Charles Kingsley from *Fraser's Magazine* (1849) recognized a necessity of society to be warned about its vices, but declared that "I will revile Acton Bell for telling us, with painful circumstantiality, what the house of a profligate, uneducated country squire is like" (Allott 270).

From the reviews compiled by Allott, it is interesting to highlight the difference in tone when it comes to reviews published in the United States of America. Allott reproduces

two reviews from 1848: the first one, from *Literary World,* continues the British trend of linking *The Tenant* with *Jane Eyre*, but also claims that "we do not believe one word in the charge of immorality so often brought against these books" (260). The second one, by E. P. Whipple in the *North American Review,* is not positive and claims that Huntingdon's story is "a reversal of the process carried on Jane Eyre" (262), but its general tone is less vicious, describing the novel as "altogether less unpleasing" than *Wuthering Heights*, though similar in the "excessive clumsiness with which the plot is arranged", and as "a convincing proof, that there is nothing kindly or genial in the author's powerful mind" (261).

The review in *Sharpe's London Magazine* (1848), a publication ill-predisposed against the Brontës according to Allot, viciously attacks the novel, claiming that "so revolting are many of the scenes, so coarse and disgusting the language put into the mouths of some characters, that the reviewer to whom we entrusted it returned it to us" (Allott 263). The reviewer is determined to "warn our readers, and more especially our lady-readers, against being induced to peruse it, either by the powerful interest of the story, or the talent with which is written" (Allott 263), and this backhanded recognition of the author's abilities does not deter him from declaring that "we consider the evils which render the work unfit for perusal […] to arise from a perverted taste and an absence of mental refinement in the writer" (Allott 263).

An interesting characteristic of this review is its commentary on Helen's belief in Universal Salvation, a belief they correctly assume the author adheres to, and their indictment against the heterodoxy of this doctrine:

> The **dangerous tendency** of such a belief must be apparent to anyone who gives the subject a moment's consideration; and it becomes scarcely necessary, in order to convince our readers of the **madness of trusting to such a forced distortion of the Divine attribute of mercy**, to add that this doctrine is alike **repugnant to Scripture**, and **in direct opposition to the teaching of the Anglican Church**. (Allott 264. The highlight is mine.)

The *Sharpe's* review does not fail to interpret the eminently moralist intention of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which they consider "in many respects eminently calculated to advance the cause of religion and right feeling, the moral of which is unimpeachable and most powerfully wrought out", but they lament that such a well-intentioned book "should

be rendered unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be most useful, (namely, imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming a rake)" (Allot 265).

While most of the reviews compiled by Allott refer to the moral issues in *The Tenant*, *Sharpe's London Magazine*'s review is the only one to directly make a comment about the depiction of religion, which poses the question about to which extent the critics of the time identified the religious heterodoxy present in the text. As an example, the review of the *Rambler* (1848), that generally followed the same line as the others (a negative view of the realist narration and characters, and a comparison with *Jane Eyre*), signalled Mr. Millward as "one of the least disagreeable individuals who figure in the story" (Allott 268), while Brontë clearly describes him as a man of 'strong prejudices', 'intolerant of dissent', and as a general example of the defects of the Anglican clergy.

After Anne Brontë's death in 1849, the editorial rights for her works remained in the hands of her sister Charlotte, who published new editions of her sisters' works but refused to print a new edition of The *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In her *Biographical Notice* to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* (Allott 274), Charlotte refers to *The Tenant* as a novel that "had likewise an unfavourable reception" and, referring to Anne's inspiration in real life to create the character of Huntingdon, declares that "the choice of subject was an entire mistake. […] The motives which dictated this choice were pure, but, I think, slightly morbid. She had, in the course of her life, been called to contemplate, near at hand and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misuse and faculties abused" (Allott 274). Charlotte recognizes Anne's commitment to truth in her work ("She must be honest; she must not varnish, soften and conceal") and the criticism that this honesty brought her. Lastly, she mentions Anne's faith: "She was a very sincere and practical Christian, but the tinge of religious melancholy communicated a sad shade to her brief blameless life" (Allott 274).

Elizabeth Langland proposes several reasons why Charlotte would have regarded *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in such a negative light: a painful association with their brother Branwell's death, the toll the novel took on Anne's fragile health, and the attacks and critiques on *Jane Eyre* brought by the constant association of both novels. No matter the reason, Charlotte's attitude towards Anne and *The Tenant* marked their analysis during the rest of the nineteenth century, as "critics settled into a consensus about Anne, following Charlotte's lead in the 'Biographical Notice' and Mrs Gaskell's details in the

Life: Anne's novels were basically autobiographical, written out of a grim sense of duty and therefore devoid of artistry" (Langland 154).

The critical reception that *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* received at the time of their publication was not only influenced by the life of their authors, like in Wollstonecraft's case, or by their association with similar writers, like it happened with Anne Brontë. The profoundly moral and, by association, religious intent of both works determined their reception in a British critical space that saw in an unfavourable way the deviation of Wollstonecraft and Brontë from the religious norm, and how the heterodoxy in their works presented an indictment against the established religious consensus of the English society and state In comparison, we can see that critics from societies with a less-marked religious structure, like the French, or more accepting of the religious differences, like the German and those from the United States, were more open to the religious heterodoxy present in the text and to the discussion of the legal system, even if they still had reservations about some aspects of the novels. As can be seen, religion and the different perspectives about religion are present at the core of the reception of *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, be it in the appreciation of their themes and intent or in the way their authors' life shaped the way in which both novels were approached after their deaths.

5. Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, the subject of the undoubtable connection existing between *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was introduced, despite the decades that separated the authors and the lack of circulation of Mary Wollstonecraft's works in English society during Anne Brontë's life. The series of parallelisms enumerated in Villacañas Palomo's article leave no doubt about the existence of said connection, no matter what its bases are, but at the same time it poses the question about the dissimilar treatment both authors make of a very similar topic, and the difference in the solutions presented.

As we have seen, religion is a key element in the construction of the ideology of both authors, but their approach to religion differs vastly, even when influenced by the same factors. The impact that Religious Dissent and Evangelicalism had in the English society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be overlooked, as their impact

transformed not only the societal concept of religion, but also the literary world, and it motivated a reform on female issues through a new spiritual conception of the female soul. The influence of both Evangelicalism and Nonconformity (be it Rational Dissent or Methodism) in the life and works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Anne Brontë can be traced in the deviation of their ideas from Anglican doctrinal orthodoxy, and in the characters that embody those new doctrines. Their resulting clash with English society and legal system is a result of the intricate way in which the Anglican church and the state were interwoven at the time, any attack to this system interpreted as a direct indictment to the public religion and moral.

Wollstonecraft and Brontë pose this indictment from two different perspectives: on the one hand, from the perspective of a heroine that embodies the ideal to which women should aspire to be in terms of intellectual and moral autonomy; on the other, a protagonist that is deeply flawed, whose erroneous decisions force her to bear with the terrible consequences, and whose system of beliefs is constantly shaken and questioned. Despite the different perspectives assumed by the characters, both novels highlight the secondary role assigned to women, and especially to married women, in an English society where laws were deeply rooted in the religious belief of a spiritual difference between men and women. From this difference stems the infantilization and relegation of women in the matrimonial and divorce laws, and the double standard of virtue denounced by Wollstonecraft and, in a less direct way, by Brontë.

The way in which both authors depict the moral progression (or lack thereof) of their protagonists showcases the intention of the novels, as they reflect the objective expressed in the prefaces: on Wollstonecraft's case, the representation of all women and of their oppression in a flawless heroine that, by having no faults, reinforces the contrast between a morality based on reason and a false morality based on human conventions. On Brontë's, the truthful depiction of the ways in which a good-intentioned but naïve young woman can be in moral danger by associating with libertine men. The depiction of the moral progression of the secondary characters functions as a reinforcement of the moral and intellectual autonomy of the protagonist in *The Wrongs of Woman* and, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as a way of showing how the outcome of a similar situation can be determined by the legal status and the personal disposition of the characters.

The critical reception of both works demonstrates that society felt the attack directed by these novels towards the public system of beliefs, but these reactions were also highly

influenced by external factors: mainly, the shift in public opinion caused by their relatives after both the authors' deaths. To which extent the critics of the time comprehended the religious implications of both works is a question that is left open.

Lastly, this analysis of religion and the way it influenced *The Wrongs of Woman* and the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* poses the question of other possible analysis about points of contact between the two works, the most significant being the investigation of a certain influence from Wollstonecraft's text in the development of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

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