Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman

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The visual arts played an important role in the lives and education of the Brontë family from their earliest youth. Although, as discussed above, painting and drawing were included in most young girls’ education as suitable pastimes and accomplishments (or, in the case of the Brontës, important skills for a governess), for Charlotte art was her first chosen career. Before moving to writing as her vocation, Charlotte saw her future as a professional painter, probably of miniatures, and in 1834 she exhibited two drawings at the summer show of the Royal Northern Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in Leeds (where Rolinda Sharples had also shown her work). The exhibition included images by Turner, and Charlotte’s professional ambitions are underscored by the fact that her drawings were both marked for sale. The oldest of the surviving Brontës, Charlotte influenced her younger siblings in myriad ways, and it is worth noting that the earliest extant example of her art is an illustrated story she wrote for Anne. Like Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne sketched illustrations for their stories, journals, and letters throughout their lives, and alongside the copying that constituted artistic training of the period, the Brontës individually and collectively paired their own words and images in a wide variety of hybrid creations.
The collaborative paradigm, so important in the written works of the Brontës from the composition of Gondal and Angria forward, also pertained to their drawing and painting. Thus, just as they wrote childhood stories together and would later read their writings to one another, they also sat as models for each other. Anne, the youngest and most docile, was perhaps the most willing participant as there are today four portraits of her by Charlotte, one by Emily, and two by Branwell.1 Upon her return from Roe Head in 1832, Charlotte spent two years at home teaching her sisters not only how to write, but also how to draw. Her artistic accomplishment was well known enough for Smith Elder to invite her to illustrate the second edition of Jane Eyre in 1848. Anne would thus have seen first-hand in her sister Charlotte a woman who envisaged a career first as a professional painter and later as a professional writer. In stark contrast to the popular image of her retiring modesty, Charlotte embraced the Romantic cult of genius and saw her art as a means “to be for ever known.”2

If Charlotte’s ambition outstripped her artistic skills in painting and drawing, her only brother, Branwell, had superior talent but little motivation. In 1834 it was decided that he would become a professional painter, and William Robinson, a former student of the renowned portraitist Sir Thomas Lawrence, was hired as his master. Unlike his sisters, Branwell was trained in oil painting and under the tutelage of Robinson would have been exposed to the theory and practice of contemporary “high art.” Yet despite his facility and training, Branwell lacked the drive to pursue the career his sister longed for with the necessary energy and determination. His bid for a place at the Royal Academy in London was aborted and he settled for a career as a provincial artist in Bradford, only to give that up as well before he ultimately found a job as a tutor at Thorp Green with Anne. In this reverse trajectory, Branwell ended up in the very profession that his sisters sought to escape. Despite his training and the privileges of his gender, Branwell failed as a professional painter; despite their lack of training and the interdictions presented by their gender, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne found success as professional writers.

Like her siblings, Anne had some talent for painting and drawing, as well as a gift for observation of nature and people. In Agnes Grey, the protagonist includes art among her accomplishments, much as Jane Eyre did, and the fictional governesses draw and paint both as part of their teaching and for personal enjoyment. But with The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Anne makes a dramatic—and controversial—departure from her sisters when she creates a female hero whose art serves as a means of financial support and personal liberation from an oppressive marriage. Helen Huntingdon, among the most overlooked of the Brontë protagonists, is also the only professional artist among them and in this sense shares a distinctive quality with Charlotte, Emily, and Anne not found in Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, Agnes Grey, Lucy Snowe, Caroline Helstone,
or Shirley Keeldar. Importantly, Helen’s rebellion against her lot takes the form also employed by the Brontë sisters: the secret creation of art sold under a false name. And like the Brontës with their writing, Helen enjoys her painting but sees it not simply as a pastime, but as a profession, creating landscapes—much as they created novels—for public consumption. Here, as in no other novel by Charlotte, Emily, or Anne, artistic creation plays a central role in the self-creation of the heroine.

As Lucasta Miller demonstrates in *The Brontë Myth*, the public personae of the Brontë sisters were self-conscious constructions begun with the invention of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. But as the real identity of the three authors became known, a more complex mythology developed, spearheaded by Charlotte’s perspicacious grasp of the social implications of their identities. The figure of the nineteenth-century “authoress,” almost always conflated with her heroines, was vulnerable to personal attacks on her morality. Thus, as the critics assailed the Brontë novels as “coarse,” “offensive,” and even “revolting,” Charlotte and her supporters took care to separate the woman from the artist, attributing the unmistakable transgressions of social mores in their novels to their isolated upbringing on the moors. Miller explains that the myth of the shy spinster, “which eventually inspired the saintly heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, was a quiet and trembling creature, reared in total seclusion, a martyr to duty, and a model of Victorian femininity, whose sins against convention, if she had unwittingly committed any, could be explained away by her isolated upbringing and the suffering she had endured.”

Like any myth, there is a kernel of truth to this image, but Miller, Stoneman, and others have revealed a Charlotte Brontë who was as ambitious and savvy as she was inventive.

Charlotte’s “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” which appeared in 1850 (following Emily’s death in December 1848 and Anne’s death in May 1849) gives a vivid sense of the early construction of the Brontë myth, both in the desire to separate the authors from authority and in the centrality of their collective identity as sisters. Appended to a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte’s “Biographical Notice” announces once again that the works of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell were not “the production of one person.” Yet, they are initially described as “we,” and their formation as siblings and authors is shared. Currer Bell explains that “he” and his two sisters (thus revealing Ellis and Acton’s true gender but still veiling her own) had grown up “Resident in a remote district, where education had made little progress, and where, consequently, there was no inducement to seek social intercourse beyond ourselves and our own domestic circle.” Charlotte, in the persona of Currer, goes on to say that “we were wholly dependent on ourselves and each other, on books and study, for the enjoyments and occupations of life” (30).
This hermetic image of domestic isolation elides, of course, the Brontës’ actual engagement with the world, via journals and periodicals, boarding schools, travel, and jobs, but as a fictional construct serves to promote an idea of Romantic genius blossoming almost *ex nihilo.* Yet unlike previous myths of Romantic artistry, they are neither male nor solitary, but instead three women living and working together (for, indeed, despite Currer/Charlotte’s pose, there was little doubt at this point of her gender as well).

The “Biographical Notice” rehearses the publication history of their volumes, beginning with *Poems* by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, emphasizing again the collective nature of their endeavor and the conflict between “the dream of one day becoming authors” and their aversion to “personal publicity,” for “we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked at with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise” (31). But in the remainder of the Notice, Charlotte shifts her focus away from authorship to the personal, sketching out her sisters’ natures and their weaknesses in a bid for sympathy and exoneration. Thus, in declaring *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* “an entire mistake,” Charlotte takes pains to separate the novel from its author, insisting “nothing less congruous with the writer’s nature could be conceived” (34). Emphasizing Anne’s “brief, blameless life” and her Christian melancholy, Charlotte denies Anne the very power of creation and self-determination when she pathologizes her ill-advised “choice of subject” (as Gaskell and Martineau would subsequently pathologize Charlotte’s own novels after her death), attributing it to the harm she suffered when “called on to contemplate, near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused” (34). By reducing the story to a reflection of personal experience and trauma, Charlotte removes *The Tenant* from the realm of the political. Anne’s deliberate realism and her pointed critique of marriage and the patriarchy are not read in terms of her artistic and/or aesthetic decisions, but rather through the lens of biography, thus rendering this resolutely feminist novel a *roman à clef* about Branwell’s descent into alcoholism and addiction. While Arthur Huntingdon’s debauchery may well have been modeled after her brother’s, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is ultimately the story of Helen Huntingdon and her own journey from child to wife to independent woman.

The final pages of the “Biographical Notice” evoke the deaths of Emily and Anne, thus effectively diminishing the threat of these “authoresses” and rendering them tragic, Romantic figures. “Two unobtrusive women,” Emily and Anne manifested “retiring manners and habits” (35) that stand in implicit contrast to their passionate and headstrong heroines. Where Emily’s simplicity and lack of worldly wisdom left her “unadapted to the practical business of life,”
Anne was “long-suffering, self-denying, reflective, and intelligent . . . Neither Emily nor Anne was learned; they had no thought of filling their pitchers at the well-spring of other minds; they always wrote from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition, and from such stores of observation as their limited experience allowed them to amass” (36). Thus, the profoundly original sisters are transformed into paragons of Victorian womanhood, their disturbing novels subordinated to their mythologized lives.

Charlotte’s objections to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, voiced here and in letters, led her to suppress its publication after Anne’s death. While she consistently couched her discomfort with Anne’s radical tale in terms of its “unfortunate” subject,⁶ she does not specify what precisely it is about the subject that she does not like. Although it has been understood by critics to be the disquieting image of the alcoholic husband, at once abusive and unfaithful to his young wife, the strength of Charlotte’s resistance to *The Tenant* and her active effort to keep it out of print, hint at perhaps more personal motivations behind this response. Anne’s novel, moving from the image of unmarried virgins to unhappily married women, entered a more threatening arena of female identity for the reading public, only exacerbated by the decision to make Helen an artist. As Charlotte carefully crafted a Romantic Brontë persona for herself and for her sisters—for at some level the Bells/Brontës also functioned as one—Anne subverted the image of the innocent and socially unengaged authoress with her Realist study of the consciousness of a female artist that announced its criticism of the status quo. With *The Tenant’s* Helen Huntingdon, Anne threatened to expose not only herself, but also her sisters, as female authors whose works emerged from financial necessity and social rebellion, rather than spontaneous expression of genius. Anne’s final novel, maligned by her family as well as the critical press, worked at counter-purposes to Charlotte’s project of protective myth-making. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and its hero, Helen Huntingdon, participated instead in the ongoing construction of a new image of the female artist in the mid-nineteenth century as neither accidental nor apologetic, but instead as a woman whose identity is deliberately chosen and defiantly located in an unromanticized world of contemporary reality.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall:*

**PORTRAITS OF RESISTANCE**

Much attention has been lavished on the “clumsy” narrative structure of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which uses a framing technique to tell the story of the woman painter from two distinct perspectives.⁷ This “awkward split narrative” juxtaposes male and female voices in such way as to reflect what Rachel
Carnell has identified as “the intractable cultural rift between public and private spheres.” Gilbert Markham’s framing narrative takes the form of a series of letters to his friend and brother-in-law, J. Halford, Esq., while Helen Huntingdon’s contained narrative takes the form of a diary written before her marriage to Markham. This familiar gothic strategy, shared by Emily in Wuthering Heights, serves to highlight the multiple versions of truth and reality, effectively destabilizing the gendered ideologies of domesticity, while at the same time demonstrating the shaping role played by gender in experience and perception. For indeed, as contemporary feminist critics concur, the jarring bipartite structure lies at the heart of Brontë’s social commentary in the novel. I will argue, however, that the tension between Gilbert’s epistolary narrative, written as a “man speaking to men,” and Helen’s journal, addressed to herself, further generates aesthetic and artistic as well as political critique. These contrastive “self-portraits,” set off in their formal “frames,” function within the thematics of painting to give the reader insight into Brontë’s vision of the role of women’s representation of women in art and literature.

In keeping with Naomi Jacobs, I will read the framing and framed narratives in The Tenant as “competing works of art,” and like Jacobs, concur that “We cannot see or experience the buried reality of the ‘framed’ story without first experiencing the ‘framing’ narrative. There is no other way in.”99 Gilbert’s self-portrait frames Helen’s in a way that provides a dialectic image of each—only through the contrast between the two voices and their constructed representations of self and other does a clear “picture” emerge of the two characters. Gilbert’s “techniques of representation” are fully evident only when the reader “sees” Helen’s own, both in her narrative and in her painted portraits, and the tensions between these three distinct forms of representation subtend Brontë’s meaning. For if The Tenant proposes a critique of the female condition in Victorian Britain, Brontë’s target is both the injustice of the laws oppressing married women10 and the social structures that uphold them by obscuring the reality of this oppression with constructed, romanticized fantasies of gender and domesticity. Brontë’s embedded narratives reflect a belief that art, representation, and narrative play no small role in the perpetuation of dominant ideologies and what Rancière identifies as the “police order,” establishing the “borders between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable” (PA 89). If Gilbert’s version of events, filtered through the consciousness of an indulged and privileged “country gentleman,” put forth a skewed and inaccurate picture of Helen, it is only her corrective self-portrait that renders visible the reality of women’s experience. Rancière’s borders, suggested by the “frames” of the double narrative, are crossed by the readers who synthesize their own portraits of the characters and come to see what was invisible to Gilbert: the real existence of the married woman.
Gilbert’s epistolary self-portrait thus begins (and ultimately ends) Brontë’s novel of the female visual artist. As discussed in chapter 7, the portrait as an artistic form reflects contemporary ideologies of subjecthood, as identity is performed and represented for an audience. Here, in a closed homosocial circuit, Markham paints his own image through words exclusively for Halford’s consumption, and this structure mirrors the macrocosm of nineteenth-century art and fiction focalized through a male subject and addressed to a male audience (the popular female reader notwithstanding). The intimate and familiar missive proposes “a full and faithful account of certain circumstances connected with the most important event of my life” and is penned to “atone” for not having shared confidences with Halford on a previous occasion. Tying narrative to sin and redemption, this opening letter establishes intimacy between men, while Markham’s voice—at once ruminative and slightly melancholy, identifies him as a Romantic narrator. As he sets the scene of his own composition he explains, “It is a soaking, rainy day, the family are absent on a visit, I am alone in my library, and have been looking over certain musty old letters and papers, and musing on past times” (8). Markham’s Romantic subjectivity, established at the very outset of the novel, will stand in stark contrast to Helen’s own voice in the middle section of the tale and play an important role in Brontë’s own counter-discourse.

Gilbert’s retrospective narrative is shaped by teleology (“the most important event of my life”) and the distancing mechanisms of memory: while the letter is dated June 1847, the story takes place twenty years earlier, in 1827, immediately placing his claims to “a full and faithful account” in question. Lacking immediacy, Gilbert’s version of the story is told with the end in mind, while the constitutive relationship between self and other within the narrative (Gilbert and Helen) is dominated by that without (Gilbert and Halford), as the narrator portrays himself with an eye to his audience. What Markham sees, how he sees it, and how he subsequently represents what he has seen to his male reader will be central to the ironic portrait that Brontë herself offers of the character. As Andrea Westcott contends, Markham “shapes his past to portray himself in the most advantageous light,” and Brontë “presents an intentionally mixed portrait of her ‘hero,’ a critique of the ideal country gentleman.”11 In a larger sense, Gilbert represents representation from the dominant male perspective, with its attendant self-reflexive prejudices and inevitable blindness. As a Romantic viewer and reader of the world, he can see and read Helen only through Romanticism’s distorting and unrealistic lens.

Gilbert begins his self-portrait with the disjunctive lessons of his father, who urged him to a life as a gentleman farmer, and his mother, who instilled in him greater ambitions. Though he followed the paternal dictum, his mother’s encouragement leaves him convinced that he is “hiding his light under a
Part III: The Portrait

bushel” (9) by abandoning higher aims and “great achievement” for life in the country. Thus, accepting the patriarchal role “not very willingly” (9), Markham feels superior to his own situation and to those around him (again, a Romantic position), and when his mother and sister begin their tale of a new woman in the neighborhood, Gilbert and his brother, Fergus, can barely contain their contemptuous amusement. As his sister Rose recounts the rumors circulating about the new tenant living alone at the abandoned Wildfell Hall, Helen is introduced as an invisible presence who is both as yet unseen and in many ways incomprehensible. Relegating the news to the realm of the feminine, Markham filters the introduction of the new neighbor through his mother and sister, who are troubled by “the apparent, or non-apparent circumstances, and probable or improbable history of the mysterious lady” (13). Even after meeting her, they cannot locate her within the traditional confines of class and gender, for she displays a shocking “ignorance on certain points” of “household matters, and all the niceties of cookery, and such things, that every lady ought to be familiar with,” and worse still, “had not even the sense to be ashamed of it” (13). The reader’s first introduction to Helen, before she is even named, is to a woman removed from the world of domesticity who actively rejects the expectations of local society; indeed, when Mrs Markham assures the young widow that she will be married again, she responds, “almost haughtily, ‘I am certain I never shall’” (14). Unable to see parallels between his own distaste for farming and the widow’s for domesticity, Gilbert portrays Helen’s difference in unsympathetic ways that reflect his mother’s judgment as much as his own.

Markham’s response to his mother’s account of the stranger reveals above all his own view of the world. He observes: “Some romantic young widow, I suppose . . . come there to end her days in solitude, and mourn in secret for the dear departed” (14), a radical misreading of Helen and her situation that not only marks the reader’s own horizon of expectation, but also sets up a contrast between the perspectives of the two central characters. When he does finally see her in church, he notes her hardness, her thin, compressed lips and reads in them “no very soft or amiable temper” (15), an observation many critics have noted might just as easily be attributed to the pugnacious Markham himself. Despite her avowal that she is not interested in remarriage, Gilbert, like his mother, can see women only as potential wives and he reflects as he gazes upon her “I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home” (15). Yet rapidly the tables turn, and Helen answers his gaze “with a momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn, that was inexpressibly provoking to me” (15). Their preliminary exchange establishes Helen’s position as a viewing subject who answers and even resists the romantic Markham’s gaze with her own direct and challenging vision. The scene proposes Helen’s “provoking” usurpation of Gilbert’s presumed domination as master of the
gaze, while the lexicon (“indefinable expression” and “inexpressible”) indicates a visual dynamic that Gilbert is unable or unwilling to decipher. The Romantic narrator cannot find words to describe the woman who refuses to inhabit the object position and instead returns his look with her own defiant stare.

In a similar fashion, Wildfell Hall is presented through the romanticizing filter of Gilbert’s consciousness as he passes it one day on a hunt. What is for Helen a refuge is perceived by her neighbor as a Gothic ruin, complete with ghosts. In an echo of Wuthering Heights and Thornfield Hall, her sisters’ fictional dwellings, Gilbert comes upon the “gloomy” Hall and “withered” garden and muses “to my young imagination, they presented all of them a goblinish appearance, that harmonized well with the ghostly legends and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted Hall and its departed occupants” (20). Gilbert, a Romantic reader, approaches the building as if it were a structure in one of Currer or Ellis Bell’s novels, a world further associated with childhood and nursery tales. As this novel progresses, however, his imaginative fantasies of youth will be confronted with Helen’s realist vision of the far more frightening experiences of adulthood. Indeed, as he is lost in daydreams, “leaning on my gun, and looking up at the dark gables, sunk in an idle reverie, weaving a tissue of wayward fantasies” (20), a noise awakens him. Looking up, he encounters Helen’s son, Arthur, the reality of her living child interrupting his childish dreams of Romantic specters.

On his first visit to Wildfell Hall, the narrator and his sister are escorted not into the sitting room, as they expected, but instead into Mrs Graham’s studio:

To our surprise, we were ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter’s easel, with a table beside it covered with rolls of canvass, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints, etc. Leaning against the wall were several sketches in various stages of progression, and a few finished paintings—mostly of landscapes and figures. (42)

Through the accumulation of visual signifiers, the reader learns, along with Gilbert, that the tenant of Wildfell Hall is a painter, while her greeting—“I must make you welcome in my studio, said Mrs Graham; there is no fire in the sitting room today”—hints at a substitution of art for domesticity. The very fact that Helen Graham has a studio of her own, testifies to her professionalism and dedication, for as discussed in chapter 1, few women in Britain could boast such a space devoted to art. Even as she entertains her uninvited neighbors, Mrs Graham remains standing beside her easel, “not facing it exactly, but now and then glancing at the picture upon it while she conversed, and giving it an occasional touch with her brush, as if she found it impossible to wean her attention entirely from her occupation to fix it upon her guests” (42). As Gilbert and his
sister, Rose, become an audience watching her paint, her art takes precedence over convention. Eschewing the role of hostess, Helen Graham follows her own inclinations and desires, continuing her engagement with the painting rather than subordinating her work to her social “duty.”

The painting on the easel is an early morning view of Wildfell Hall, “very elegantly and artistically handled,” but when Gilbert approaches the canvas, he observes that she has attached another name and place to the painting. Mrs Graham explains that she hopes to keep her whereabouts concealed from friends who might recognize her style. Significantly, the image of Wildfell Hall represented and circulating under a false name prefigures Helen’s own hidden identity (Helen Huntingdon) and assumed moniker (Graham is her mother’s maiden name), while both the building and its occupant are misread as Romantic, mysterious figures by viewers who project their own fantasies. In perhaps the closest evocation of the Brontës’ own artistic modus operandi, young Arthur refutes the Markhams’ assumption that his mother is an amateur, painting for her own amusement. She claims that she cannot afford such a luxury and Arthur adds “Mamma sends all her pictures to London . . . and somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money” (43). A female artist who sends her creations to London to be sold under a pseudonym mirrors Anne’s own endeavor and that of her sisters, much as Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre had shared their authors’ experiences as governesses. But in the transition from governess to painter, Anne exchanges an acceptable occupation for an unmarried woman of the middle class for a more controversial one. Where a governess, though paid for her labor, remained in a subordinated position within the domestic sphere and devoted herself to the education of children, a female artist entered the public sphere through her production, competing with men, albeit indirectly, with her creative or expressive output. Here, Helen’s anonymity is chosen, rather than imposed, and the tinge of shame or dishonor so eloquently evoked in Emily Osborn’s *Nameless and Friendless* (figure 30) comes from the perception of vulnerability that clearly links the sale of the body of art to sale of the female artist’s body. Indeed the very question of sexuality is also raised here, for like the woman in Osborn’s painting, Helen has a child and is thus ineligible for a position as a governess. Whether a spinster, a widow, a fallen woman, or, in Helen’s case, a married woman in search of (illegitimate) income, a professional female artist embraced a level of independence in her labor considered dangerous and even threatening, for her work could circulate independently of its producer and thus free of the identifying markers of gender, class, and marital status. Through the simple adoption of a pseudonym, the female artist could separate her gender from her art, inducing much of the anxiety seen in the reviews of Currer’s, Ellis’s, and Acton Bells’s novels. Indeed, if a woman could produce a novel or a painting and sell it as the work of a
Figure 30
Emily Osborn, Nameless and Friendless, 1857. Oil on canvas. 86.4 x 111.8 cm. Private collection. Bridgeman Art Library International, New York, NY.
man, undetected, then some of the most fundamental beliefs about gender and identity were subverted or even destabilized.

Helen’s paintings, as first presented in this chapter on “The Studio,” are primarily landscapes and portraits, “a sad dearth of subjects” (43) she proclaims, limited not only by her lack of training in other genres, but also, importantly, by her unromantic desire to paint from experience rather than imagination. Like the Impressionists to follow, Helen paints Wildfell Hall in different lights and weather and, in this theme and variation, highlights the changefulness of perception. In an “obscure corner,” Gilbert finds a portrait of a small child sitting in the grass with his lap full of flowers, an image he recognizes as Arthur “in his early infancy.” When he lifts it up he discovers another picture with its face to the wall: “It was a portrait of a gentleman in the full prime of youthful manhood—handsome enough, and not badly executed; but if done by the same hand as the others, it was evidently some years before; for there was far more careful minuteness of detail and less of that freshness of colouring and freedom of handling that delighted and surprised me in them” (44). Although this portrait of the father, hidden behind that of the son, will only be positively identified later in the story, Gilbert and the reader can gather as much from the likeness. The layers of images, with the son superimposed over the father, point to layers of meaning both in Helen’s paintings and in Brontë’s novel that call for interpretation, comparison, and retrospective consideration. They also point to Helen’s self-appointed role as the creator of her husband’s image; if the image of her child corresponds to traditional conflations of artistic and maternal (re)production, the portrait of the child’s father foregrounds the female painter’s subjectivity, heretofore invisible in the tale. Not only is Helen the mysterious and romanticized object of Gilbert’s fantasies; she is also a representing subject who shapes the image of her husband as well as of her son.

The detailed description of the hidden portrait reveals multiple insights into the subject of the painting, the artist herself, and the viewer, demonstrating some of Brontë’s own narrative strategies. Examining the picture, Gilbert observes:

I surveyed it with considerable interest. There was a certain individuality in the features and expression that stamped it, at once, a successful likeness. The bright, blue eyes regarded the spectator with a kind of lurking drollery—you almost expected to see them wink; the lips—a little too voluptuously full—seemed ready to break into a smile; the warmly tinted cheeks were embellished with a luxuriant growth of reddish whiskers; while the bright chestnut hair, clustering in abundant, wavy curls, trespassed too much upon the forehead, and seemed to intimate that the owner thereof was prouder of his beauty than his intellect—as perhaps he had reason to be;—and yet he looked no fool. (44–45)
Chapter 8: Brontë’s Portraits of Romantic Resistance

Gilbert, who has devoted considerable time in these early pages to reading—or misreading—Helen’s physiognomy, now turns his attention to her interpretation of another man’s face. The interest he claims indicates the gradual transition from curiosity about Mrs Graham to romantic inclination, for here he is confronting a rival for her affection. Although he has been critical of his neighbor, finding her “too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste” (39), Markham readily admits to the success of her painting, a testimony to her talent. Helen has captured not simply the features of this unidentified gentleman, but the character and personality—qualities that have escaped Gilbert in his own examination of her, thus marking her as a better “reader” of faces than the male protagonist.

The image of “youthful manhood” is later revealed to be her husband, Arthur Huntingdon, and is our first introduction to the villain of the tale. Significantly, our perception is mediated through the visions of both Helen and Gilbert, and art is closely tied to truth and revelation. The subject’s mocking, irreverent nature is read in his eyes and his smile, while his voluptuous lips and luxuriant hair on his face and head communicate animal appetites and virility. Helen’s portrait communicates his vanity and intelligence, allowing the viewer to perceive the simultaneous attraction and threat of his overt sexual potency. The successful image shows the strengths and weaknesses of her subject, marking its resemblance to Brontë’s own intent, signaled in her Preface, to depict things “as they really are.” If every portrait reveals as much of the painter as it does of her subject, this image also manifests Helen’s youthful desire for the dangerous figure of Huntingdon, while on a symbolic level it indicates her later desire to contain and control this figure who retains legal and social rights over her body, her property, and her life. The painting delineates the complex relationship between Helen and Arthur, and even as Arthur remains absent from the narrative, he is present to his wife in numerous ways. Ironically, the very artifact that she keeps to remind herself of what she is escaping belongs not to its creator, but to her husband, thus embodying the laws of coverture that Brontë is contesting.

The fact that Gilbert finds Helen a better painter now than she was when she executed the earlier portrait, demonstrates that professionalism has granted her more “freedom” and “freshness” in her work than was possible in her subordinate positions as a ward or wife. Implicitly, independence has improved, rather than diminished her art. Both then and now, the very act of representation has allowed Helen to take the subject position, giving her at least a vestige of power over the object of her gaze as well as her audience. The symbolic role of the painting is thus played out as Helen removes it from Gilbert’s hands and refuses to explain to him whom it portrays. Retaining control over representation, she also controls the system of interpretation and will not relinquish the key to the signified.
As the novel progresses, Helen and Gilbert’s relationship continues to be mediated through art. On a trip to the shore with a picnic party, Helen quits the group to sketch in solitude on “a narrow ledge of rock at the very verge of the cliff which descended with a steep, precipitous slant, quite down to the rocky shore” (62). Her position alone on the edge of the precipice defines both her social and psychological states, but importantly, it is a spot she has chosen, for it allows her access to a sublime scene at once terrifying and inspiring. Gilbert, ever in pursuit of her company, follows her uninvited and when he asks if he may watch her draw, she resists, ever jealous of her independence. She allows him to join her only when he promises to look at the scene, rather than at her, and she continues to work, absorbed by the seascape and her labor. Here, Brontë uses the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful to highlight the different temperaments of her two protagonists, while further destabilizing the gendered associations of art. Following Burke’s influential formulations, the experience of the sublime is induced by contemplation of size, force, and magnitude that dwarf our very existence and engage the imagination, suggesting a power greater than our own; in this dangerous and intellectual capacity, the sublime was almost inevitably gendered male. The beautiful, for Burke, is conversely linked to qualities that bring sensations of pleasure and inspire love: smallness, smoothness, delicacy, and grace, most often associated with the feminine. Yet as they sit on the ledge overlooking the wild sea, it Helen who focuses on the sublimity of the scene while Gilbert shifts his gaze to the beautiful, turning away “from the splendid view at our feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over the paper” (63).

Where Gilbert is idle, Helen is happily and gainfully employed (“few people gain their livelihood with so much pleasure in their toil as I do” [80]); where he is a Romantic dreamer, she is a realistic pragmatist, and where he is innocent and ignorant, she is experienced in the ways of the world. Much like Corinne and Oswald before them, Helen and Gilbert represent the inversion of gendered stereotypes of male strength and female weakness, while at the same time raising the unspoken question of female purity. In a redux of *Corinna*, there is an impediment to the love between this female artist and her suitor that Helen postpones telling him for fear he will blame her. And like Corinne she gives her lover a written text to explain her past, unsure whether or not after reading it he will not “willingly resign [her] as one no longer worthy of regard” (97). Gilbert, in turn, reproduces Helen’s diary in his narrative, taking care however to alter the order and saving the beginning for a later chapter. This purposeful rewriting of her story for his own ends prefigures the end of the novel and in some sense reveals Gilbert’s ultimate inability to read and fully understand Helen.
The shift from Gilbert’s letter to Helen’s diary brings with it other significant narrative changes. Where the former was addressed from one man to another, the latter is self-addressed from a woman to herself and not meant for others’ eyes. Where Gilbert’s epistle is written from a present moment looking back at an entire story, Helen’s diary charts her story as it progresses. Dated 1821, the journal begins six years before Gilbert’s framing narration, returning to a time when Helen, at 18, is still a young girl dependent on her aunt and uncle. Her voice here is humorous, insightful, lively, and opinionated, while its warmth and passion stand in stark contrast to Gilbert’s vision of Helen. From the outset, Helen’s independence is marked by her rebellion against convention and hierarchy. When her aunt reports to Helen Mr. Boarham’s request for her hand, she responds: “I hope my uncle and you told him it was not in your power to give it. What right had he ask any one before me?” (130), later adding “in such important matters, I take the liberty of judging for myself” (133).

The headstrong young woman falls instead for Arthur Huntingdon, and once again her art provides an important gauge of the power relationship between the protagonists. On a hunting party at Helen’s uncle’s house, Arthur looks at her drawings after dinner and “hearing him pronounce, sotto voce, but with peculiar emphasis concerning one of the pieces, ‘This is better than all!’—I looked up curious to see what it was, and, to my horror, beheld him complacently gazing at the back of the picture—it was his own face that I had sketched there and forgotten to rub out” (146). Mirroring the scene at Wildfell Hall, a hidden image of Arthur is discovered against her will, but here Arthur wields the power and tucks the picture into his waistcoat. These works of art (and others like them, for nearly all of her drawings bear traces of his image) reveal aspects of Helen’s inner life—her love and her past—against her conscious will. Even where she erased her sketches, pentimenti remain, and Helen’s art expresses thoughts, desires, and meanings at odds with social expectations that she hopes to keep hidden. In this sense, the art works function as metonymies for their creator, rendering visible and concrete precisely that which cannot be seen. Again, we see the importance of interpreting the work of art to find the artist’s hidden meanings, and by extension, Brontë’s own creation, the novel we are reading, must be considered in the same terms.

Arthur both understands and demonstrates this function, giving him leverage over Helen in his ability to penetrate her paintings to read her innermost thoughts. Helen devotes a long section in the diary to describing the “master-piece” she is working on in highly Romantic terms that reflect her youth and innocence. The scene in a forest glade depicts a young girl gazing at a pair of turtledoves and is seen by Huntingdon through an open window, thus doubly framed by Helen and Brontë. The interloper aptly analyzes her image as “a very fitting study for a young lady.—Spring just opening into summer—morning
just approaching noon—girlhood just ripening into womanhood—and hope just verging on fruition. She’s a sweet creature! But why didn’t you make her hair black?” (150). Her future husband gently mocks Helen’s transparent translation of her own dreams and fantasies, and reads the artist herself in her painted figure: “Sweet innocent! She’s thinking there will come a time when she will be wooed and won like that pretty hen-dove, by as fond and fervent a lover; and she’s thinking how pleasant it will be, and how tender and faithful he will find her” (151).

After penetrating her meaning, Huntingdon goes further and begins rummaging through her portfolio of unfinished sketches which she allows no one to see. Ignoring her protests, he grabs the “bowels” of the portfolio from her hand, metaphorically violating Helen and once again finding his own image hidden inside, this time in the form of a carefully finished miniature portrait. Again he slips it into his waistcoat pocket, but this time she responds in defiant anger. Asserting her rights of privacy and ownership, Helen cries: “I insist upon having that back! It is mine, and you have no right to take it. Give it me directly—I’ll never forgive you if you don’t” (152). Setting the stage for future conflicts, Helen makes it clear that she will not be bullied and her belief in her rights is stronger than her desire for Arthur or his admiration. Taking the miniature away from its subject, she rips it in two and throws it in the fire in order to thwart him. Arthur’s “mute amazement” at her reckless independence marks a shift in power, as Helen regains control of her own creation and demonstrates her willingness to sacrifice her own treasure—and indeed, his own image—to resist his domination.

Helen’s consignment of her romantic head of Arthur to the flames prefigures the death of her own Romanticism during their marriage. As she loses her illusions, she comes to see Arthur’s cruelty and degradation, to which she will not submit quietly. Helen actively resists her husband’s desire to turn her into a “household deity” and voices her resistance in no uncertain terms: “I am tired out with his injustice, his selfishness and hopeless depravity—I wish a milder word would do—; I am no angel and my corruption rises against it” (256). Brontë’s Helen refuses the idealized role of the angel of the house, and in so doing voices a critique of marriage and the idealization of female suffering. When she witnesses her husband’s unfaithfulness, Helen moves from resistance to hatred (“it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband—I HATE him!” [297]) and they enter a new phase of conjugal life with “no love, friendship, or sympathy between them” (307). Helen will be his wife “in name only,” implicitly refusing him the “right” to her body or soul. Echoing Indiana’s speech to her husband in Sand’s groundbreaking novel, Helen distinguishes between her duties as a wife and her prerogatives as a human: “for as long as I discharge my functions of steward and housekeeper, so conscientiously and well, without
pay and without thanks, you cannot afford to part with me. I shall therefore remit these duties when my bondage becomes unbearable” (308). Highlighting the parallel between wives and slaves, Brontë, through Helen, portrays a woman who refuses to accept her role as victim of an abusive husband and of a social structure that subordinates her life to his. When Arthur contends that she drives him to depravity with her “unnatural, unwomanly conduct” she again refuses to accept the role assigned her. After she has done all in her power to help him, she absolves herself of responsibility: “he may drink himself dead, but it is not my fault” (309).

Helen’s decision to leave the marriage is motivated by her desire to protect her son from his father, for she deems it “better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father” (226). While Arthur’s comportment is indeed repugnant, Helen’s response was even more shocking, as she makes clear that “the world’s opinion and the feelings of my friends must be alike unheeded here” (336) for her own sense of duty lies outside of acceptable social mores and legal parameters. Ready to break the laws of country and society, Anne Brontë’s Helen transgresses the boundaries of her class, her gender, and her nation in a manner far closer to one of Sand’s heroines than to those of her sisters. Like Indiana, Helen carefully plans her escape from her husband, determining how she will finance the movement from legitimate wife to outlaw, for in each case the flight is not conceived in a moment of passion, but is rather a deliberate and thoughtful response to an intolerable situation. But where Indiana leaves Delmare for her lover Raymon, trading one man for another, Helen runs away and supports herself through art. From the beginning, her scheme of freedom depends on her painting, and thus art is closely tied to independence. Hoping at first to find asylum in New England, she reflects:

I would support myself and [my son] by the labor of my hands. The palette and easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now. But was I sufficiently skillful as an artist to obtain my livelihood in a strange land, without friends and without recommendation? No; I must wait a little; I must labor hard to improve my talent and to produce something worth while as a specimen of my powers, something to speak favourably for me. (337)

As Helen begins her move away from dependent wife to independent woman, she shifts her attitude toward painting from idle amusement to paid profession and recognizes the need for improvement in her skills before she can support herself and her child through her craft. The canvases will be her ambassadors, entering the world as testimony to her talents and “powers” and will “speak” where she cannot. Resolutely unromantic, she does not hope for “bril-
liant success”; her goal now in painting is to achieve “some degree of security,” food for her child, and “money for the journey, the passage, and some little to support us in our retreat” (337). Thus, her professional aspirations begin before she leaves home, and Helen paints pictures that her servant Rachel will sell to dealers while she is still living with Huntingdon.

The threatening nature of her endeavor and its close association with Helen’s rebellion is made clear when Arthur discovers her plan by reading her diary. (The fact that both husbands read Helen’s diary is noteworthy, drawing another parallel between Arthur and Gilbert.) Reversing the earlier scene with his portrait, here it is Huntingdon who takes the upper hand. Entering her studio, in a second violation of her private space, he casts all of her painting materials—“palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish”—into the fire, just as she had thrown the miniature of his head into the hearth several years earlier. In a deliberate evocation of hell, Helen notes “I saw them all consumed—the palette knives snapped in two—the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney” (350) as her husband destroys the tools she was using to forge her freedom. Telling a servant to burn all her easels, canvases, and stretchers, Arthur takes all of her money and jewels as well, so she cannot escape and “disgrace him” by supporting herself and their son by the “labour of [her] hands . . . a low, beggarly painter” (351). This metaphoric rape, anticipated by Arthur’s earlier violations of her portfolio, reminds the reader that as his wife, Helen belongs to Huntingdon, just as her possessions—paintings, artistic tools, money, jewelry—are in fact his possessions, and the parallel between woman and object is central to Brontë’s protest.

Trapped once again in her marriage and deprived of artistic agency, Helen sees herself as “a slave, a prisoner” (352). She counsels her young friend Esther to abandon romantic fantasy and enter into marriage only for affection and esteem. Helen contends, “You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life” (359). When she finally escapes Huntingdon, she adopts her mother’s maiden name (Graham), thus freeing herself both from her marriage and from her immediate patriarchal identification.

With her arrival at Wildfell Hall, Helen’s own narration catches up with Gilbert’s and the reader is presented with their differing versions of similar scenes and circumstances. Thus, the edifice first presented through the filter of Gilbert’s Romantic imagination as gothic and foreboding, is for Helen something entirely different. The house and its surroundings “might have struck me as gloomy enough at another time, but now, each separate object seemed to echo back my own exhilarating sense of hope and freedom: infinite dreams of the far past and bright anticipations of the future seemed to greet me at
every turn” (376). The mocking portrait of Arthur Huntingdon that Gilbert happened upon in Helen’s studio is also an unstable signifier, whose meaning changes both for the characters and for the readers in the course of the novel. Painting, as an activity, is the means to Helen’s independence, while the concrete artifact—the painting as object—stands as a constant reminder of what she has left and why. If the first portrait of Arthur, the miniature that she destroyed, symbolized Helen’s willingness to sacrifice her idealized vision of her lover, this later portrait, painted during their first year of marriage and carried along mistakenly into her new life, symbolizes her awakening to the reality of her husband and the subjectivity of perception.

Helen muses on the contrast between her feelings when she painted the image and when she gazed upon it six years later: “How I had studied and toiled to produce something, as I thought, worthy of the original! What mingled pleasure and dissatisfaction I had had in the result of my labours!—pleasure for the likeness I had caught; dissatisfaction, because I had not made it handsome enough. Now, I see no beauty in it—nothing pleasing in any part of its expression” (377). The painted image is a gauge not only of its subject and its author, but also ultimately of its viewer as well, and the same portrait—unchanging in its representation—is perceived in entirely different ways by Arthur, Gilbert, and Helen, each of whose readings are shaped by their sensibilities, desires, and experiences. Helen’s own metamorphosis, chronicled in her journal through words, is thus perceptible to herself, as to the readers, when she becomes her own audience. Importantly, though, she retains her position as observing subject while Arthur remains the object of the evaluative gaze.

The passage continues: “The frame, however, is handsome enough; it will serve for another painting” (377), linking Helen’s endeavor to Brontë’s own. For indeed, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, like *Sisters in Art, Elle et lui*, and other contemporaneous novels in this study, presents a model for a new image of the female artist, and Helen is both the subject and the object of artistic representation. Helen’s mobility, her resistance, and her independence designate the female painter as a woman with agency and resilience, whose creations may be generated by necessity as well as inspiration and whose desires may be professional as well as romantic. The narrative frame, like that of the painted portrait, may be suited for other subjects, and unlike the Romantic artist, neither Helen nor Brontë makes any claim for uniqueness or singularity. Instead, as Brontë seems to indicate, the frame will fit any number of women artists, whose invisible presence will be seen differently by those who have experienced Helen’s life through the pages of the book.

While she cannot fully escape from Arthur, for indeed she remains his wife even in her absence, his portrait remains a reminder of the bond she is legally unable to break. Nevertheless, Helen retains a level of mastery over the past not
only because it is an image she herself has shaped, but also because she uses it for her own ends. She explains, “The picture itself I have not destroyed, as I had first intended; I have put it aside; not, I think, from any lurking tenderness for the memory of past affection, nor yet to remind me of my former folly, but chiefly that I may compare my son’s features and countenance with this, as he grows up, and thus be enabled to judge how much or how little he resembles his father” (377). Thus her art plays a corrective role, holding up a negative image against which future lives might be shaped. Similarly, *The Tenant* itself must be read in a socially corrective vein, providing readers with images or models of marriage, of art, and of gender.

Indeed the images of her son embody a final level of critique through contrastive portraits, pointing to other forms of female intervention and creation. Mothers and sons are central to both the framing narrative and the framed, and the dyad of Helen and young Arthur are mirrored by Gilbert and Mrs Markham, as alternative images of maternal influence. In an echo of *Indiana*, Brontë draws a direct connection between an indulgent mother and a self-indulgent son, delineating an arena of women’s power and influence despite their legal and social subjugation. In describing Raymon de Ramière, the man who seduces and abandons both Indiana and her maid, Sand attributes his moral weaknesses to his adoring mother:

> The character of her son, impetuous yet cold, calculating yet passionate, was the result of her limitless love and her generous tenderness for him. He would have been better with a mother who was less kind; but she had let him become used to taking advantage of all of the sacrifices she made for his sake; she had taught him to seek and protect his own happiness and well-being as ardently and as strongly as she did for him. Because she thought she was made to protect him from all suffering and to subordinate all of her interests to his, he had become used to believing that the entire world was made for him and would be placed in his hand at his mother’s word. By dint of her generosity, she had only succeeded in making a selfish, egotistical heart. (*Indiana* 223)

Similarly, Gilbert’s mother cossets and adores him, encouraging in him the “self-conceit” (9) that leads him to see himself as superior to his station as a country gentleman and to the marriageable women in the neighborhood. Like Mme de Ramière, Mrs Markham teaches her son that, within a marriage, husband and wife have proper roles: “it’s your business to please yourself, and hers to please you” (54), a formula she also follows as his mother. Gilbert’s egotism, pride, and blindness to the plight of the other, are attributable to the lessons he learned as a child, and even he is forced to admit “Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister” (32). Implicitly establishing
a parallel between Gilbert and Arthur, Brontë moreover traces the weaknesses of Helen’s first husband to misguided maternal solicitude. Even before she marries Arthur, Helen vows “his wife shall undo what his mother did” (166). Attributing Arthur’s sins to “his madly indulgent mother,” she later writes in her diary “If ever I am a mother I will zealously strive against this crime of over indulgence—I can hardly give it a milder name when I think of the evils it brings” (214). Helen’s decision to leave Arthur is predicated on her desire to save their son from his father’s corrupting influence, privileging ethical duty over legal obligation, and as Antonia Losano and others have noted, Helen’s son Arthur is her most vivid creation. Demonstrating woman’s ability to conceive and produce both artworks and children, Helen transcends the classically gendered structures of artistic production and reproduction by succeeding at both. As Losano explains, “Helen succeeds in rearticulating the Aristotelian and traditional dynamic of both aesthetic and sexual generation by claiming the right to be the master framer and form-giver rather than the passive vessel. By the end of the novel, Brontë has put Helen in control of her son, her artwork, her now deceased husband’s property (which originally came from Helen’s family anyway), and her erotic life” (94).

The remainder of the novel is narrated once again from Gilbert’s point of view. Even as he recounts Helen’s misfortunes and noble sacrifice, as she returns to nurse Arthur through his final illness, the focus falls almost entirely on Markham’s feelings, while the misunderstandings arise from his pride and self-absorption. Brontë exposes the feminized nature of the Romantic persona, as her male hero weeps and suffers in passive sway to his love for the independent and self-determined Helen. Gilbert’s self-indulgent Romanticism, clearly evident in the first part of the novel, is all the more noticeable following Helen’s own more restrained and clear-headed narration. Reversing the traditional gender hierarchies, Brontë allows Helen dominance over Gilbert, first emotionally, and then financially, when she inherits a fortune upon her uncle’s death, thus making her far wealthier than he. Despite his love for her, Gilbert feels he cannot ask for her hand due to the inequality in their status, so in the end it is Helen who proposes, offering Gilbert a rose in a gesture that echoes Jane Eyre’s proposal to Rochester.

In Anne’s novel, however, the hero is metaphysically, rather than physically, blind, and when Gilbert is unable to understand Helen’s gesture, she throws the flower out of the window, once again signaling her independence in a move that recalls her immolation of Arthur’s portrait. At the same time, Gilbert’s continual misreadings present a contrast to Arthur’s astute analyses, and while Markham may love her more than Huntingdon, he may understand her less well. Indeed, as Helen controls symbols and meanings, tearing out the final pages of her journal so that Gilbert could not read what she thought of him,
he remains almost entirely incapable of penetrating her thoughts, feelings, and intentions, blinded by his Romantic self-absorption. Just as she chose Arthur Huntingdon against her family and friends’ advice, so too does Helen marry Gilbert against her aunt’s wishes, as the older woman maintains “Could she have been contented to remain single, I own I should have been better satisfied” (470).

The novel ends not only with the marriage of Gilbert and Helen, but also with her silence. Gilbert will continue to speak for her and about her, but within his own Romantic narration there is no room for the voice or feelings of the female artist. Elevated to the realm of his domestic fantasy, Helen is a wife and mother embedded in Gilbert’s world as symbolized by the closing of the letter to Halford with his declaration of their collective marital bliss. Where nineteenth-century critics were troubled by Brontë’s “coarse” subject matter, twentieth-century critics have been almost universally disturbed by the conclusion of the novel, which pairs Helen with the “unimpressive” Gilbert in “a lightweight ending”17. But if we consider the novel in terms of Helen’s own artistic prescriptions and aesthetic—and read Helen Huntingdon and Anne Brontë as sister artists—then the two narratives that comprise The Tenant of Wildfell Hall must be understood and interpreted contrastively. The story that Gilbert tells at the beginning and end of the novel portray a Romantic version of Helen that is distinctly at odds with the woman found in her own self-narration. The gaps between how Gilbert sees Helen and how she, and the readers, see her, serve to remind us of the subjectivity of portraiture, in both its execution and its reception, much as the portrait of Arthur served to remind Helen of the changes both she and her first husband had withstood. Just as Helen saw only what she wanted to see when she fell in love with Arthur, so too is Gilbert’s vision shaped by his desires and fantasies, presenting his readers with an image that bears the shaping trace of his Romanticism. By framing their narratives in distinctly different styles, Brontë offers a critique of the laws that deprived a married woman of her rights and independence in a way that also links politics, gender, and aesthetics. Gilbert’s egoism and conservative view of women as wives, sisters, and mothers are reflected in a Romanticism that continues to privilege male emotion and values while obscuring female identity. We cannot truly perceive or understand Helen as an artist or a woman until she is given her own voice, a voice whose unflinching realism gives the reader a fully developed portrait of the artist as a young woman. Thus Brontë makes it clear that Romanticism, an essentially masculine construct, is antithetical to a fully developed understanding of the female artist. Instead, only a female voice in a Realist mode can give life and expression to the new figure of the female artist, as Brontë herself has done, thus illustrating the need for sisters in the sister arts.