

Saviors, Survivors, Mothers of Men, and Manly Women
Women's Responses to Nineteenth Century Toxic Masculinity in the Novels of Anne

Brontë

by

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ABSTRACT

Though the term toxic masculinity has only been defined and in use in recent years, the type of masculinity that emphasizes characteristics that are harmful (to women, society, or to the men themselves) is not exclusively modern. I locate toxic masculinity depicted in nearly all of the male characters of Anne Brontë's novels, *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), whose practice is legitimized and supported by male dominance in the nineteenth-century British middle-class. While the nineteenth-century British middle-class encouraged domestic masculinity, which emphasized caring for the home and family, many of Brontë's male characters opt to practice toxic masculinity instead in order to assert their masculine identity and exercise authority, particularly over women. The characters in the novels associate characteristics of toxic masculinity—indulgence, brutality, superiority, and exclusively male spaces—with masculine identity. In these novels, toxic masculinity often leads to the men's mistreatment of women's bodies, emotions, possessions, and labor, or even outright abuse and physical violence. Because of the socially, legally, and culturally sanctioned dominance of men and common expectations for women's subservience in the nineteenth-century British middle-class, toxic masculinity was essentially inescapable for women, and because they had no option for legal recourse in the face of abuse by men, they were forced to respond to toxic masculinity themselves. While all of the women in the novels experience toxic masculinity, it is not always to the same extent, and thus the women are not unified in their responses, but each responds in the way most beneficial to herself. While many women opt for the path of least resistance and meekly accept their treatment under toxic masculinity, others choose to try to utilize it for their own gain by

either appropriating or indulging it, while the heroines of the novels attempt to challenge toxic masculinity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 CONTEXTS AND BACKGROUND.....	4
3 MASCULINITY IN THE NOVELS	10
Indulgence and Excess.....	12
Violence and Brutality	18
Superiority, Self-importance, and Arrogance.....	23
Camaraderie and All-male Spaces.....	26
4 WHY WOMEN MUST RESPOND TO TOXIC MASCULINITY	31
Men’s Domination over Women	33
Women’s Subservience	41
5 WOMEN’S RESPONSES	46
Opposition (Saviors).....	47
Acceptance (Survivors).....	53
Indulgence (Mothers of Men).....	55
Appropriation (Manly Women).....	59
6 CONCLUSION	66
REFERENCES	67

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Anne Brontë insists on the truth in both of her novels, *Agnes Grey* (1847)¹ and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848),² despite the extremity of their content for the time, such as their depictions of drunkenness, physical violence, and extramarital affairs. Brontë begins her first novel by having Agnes tell the reader “All true histories contain instruction,” and writes in the preface to the second edition of her second novel that “My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to 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” (*Agnes Grey* 61; *Tenant* 3). Both novels follow the story of a middle-class woman victimized by a society that enables toxic masculinity, the type of masculinity that emphasizes harmful characteristics (a modern term, but not an exclusively modern occurrence), which leads to male domination and abuse of women. While *Tenant* provides a more direct critique of its many and more explicit examples of toxic masculinity, *Agnes Grey* completes Brontë’s exploration of the extent of its effects and influence, as well as how it is taught, learned, adopted and appropriated. Despite the centrality of marriage in the novels (and the centrality of marriage in nineteenth-century women’s lives), these stories are not constrained to depictions of the effects of toxic masculinity between husband and wife; rather, they depict interactions between men and women in all relationships (including between siblings, parents and children, and

¹ Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Agnes Grey*.

² Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Tenant*.

neighbors). As these novels illustrate, women were not only reliant on men in all aspects of family and social life, but their legal and economic identities were dependent on their male relatives. Their relationship with men becomes strained, however, when many of these men practice toxic masculinity and subject the women to degradation and abuse. Forced to respond to toxic masculinity because of the legal, social, and cultural sanction of male domination over women, as well as the common expectation that women would devote themselves to serving, obeying, and gratifying men, the individual women in the novels either oppose, accept, indulge, or appropriate toxic masculinity.

Agnes Grey is narrated by the titular protagonist, a young woman who works as a governess after her family is financially ruined by a failed investment made by her father. She first works for the Bloomfield family, and, struggling to control the spoiled children who torment her (especially their son), is fired in less than a year. She then works for the Murray family, with two teenage daughters at home, until she is able to leave to join her mother working at a girl's school. *Tenant* is a letter written by Gilbert Markham to his brother-in-law, recounting how he met the woman he eventually marries. His letter begins in 1827 with the arrival of a single mother, Helen Graham, with her young son at Wildfell Hall, near Gilbert's home, and his growing romantic interest in her despite his family and neighbor's suspicions and rumors about her character. Included in the letter is a transcription of Helen's diary, which begins in 1821, and reveals that her name is truly Helen Huntington, and has escaped her abusive, adulterous, drunkard husband Arthur Huntington to save both herself and her son from his influence.

Contemporary reviews of *Tenant* in particular expressed shock at the coarse, brutal, and vulgar content and depictions of male behavior in the novel. *The Literary*

World called the novel “crude” and “coarse almost to brutality,” *Rambler* described Brontë’s characters as “commonplace, vulgar, rough, brusque-mannered personages” and Helen’s diary as describing “with offensive minuteness the disgusting scenes of debauchery, blasphemy, and profaneness” (426, 427; 436). *The Spectator* published claims that the author (both of Brontë’s novels were originally published under the name Acton Bell) had “a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal” (440). *Agnes Grey*, though similar to *Tenant* in its portrayal of women’s experiences with toxic masculinity, remained free from many of those same criticisms. Anne Brontë’s novels are very similar to one another in both their depictions and reproof of toxic masculinity, and in what they achieve in terms of exploring women’s responses to it.

Brontë claims in the preface to the second edition of *Tenant* that she hopes it will serve as a sort of warning for girls, saying “I know that such characters do exist, and if I have prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (*Tenant* 4). The “natural error” to which Brontë refers is the mistake of rushing into a marriage with an unsuitable man after failing to heed the warnings of friends and family. She is warning her young female readers against making the same mistake by showing the potential consequences that may befall them if they do through the example of Helen Huntington. Her assertion that she knows “that such characters do exist” speaks directly to contemporary critics’ claims that *Tenant*’s material and characters were needlessly and excessively crude. Brontë sheds light on the often unspoken of practice of toxic masculinity in the middle-class of nineteenth-century Britain, and the reality of women’s experience navigating and surviving it.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTS AND BACKGROUND

Masculinity refers to the practice of those characteristics (traits, behaviors, attitudes, etc.) that are considered essential, natural, or otherwise associated with being a man, and femininity as those characteristics associated with being a woman. There are different types of masculinity, each emphasizing different characteristic and subject to its time and place. I will be focusing on toxic masculinity, which I am defining as the type of masculinity that emphasizes the practice of characteristics by men that are harmful to women, society, or the men themselves. As I will discuss in more depth further in this paper, the characteristics of toxic masculinity are not confined to male bodies, but I am focusing on the practice of toxic masculinity by white, British, middle-class men in the nineteenth century. The type of masculinity that a man practices is not always clear, however, as he may present one sort of masculinity but truly practice another. A man's *practice* of a type of masculinity refers to those characteristics that he actually believes in and exercise in private, while his *presentation* of masculinity refers to the type of masculinity that he chooses to appear to practice in public, and while these are expected to align, in the male characters of Brontë's novels, they often do not.

In nineteenth-century Britain, gender was understood as rigidly defined, and men and women were considered opposites with different characteristics associated with, and exclusive to, each. Gender identity, for both men and women, "refers to a continual process whereby meanings are attributed by and to individuals through social interaction," and gender roles are the "behavioral expectations associated with more or less static social positions" (Bird 121). One's gender identity was typically dependent on

the fulfillment of their gender role. Gender identities were expected to reflect the “presumed rigidity and stability” of sexual differences, which were understood as fundamental opposites, and did not allow for transgression (Davidoff and Hall xxxv). Before the eighteenth century, women were seen as “incomplete or inferior examples of the same character” as men, but, as Britain moved into the nineteenth century, differences between men and women became more recognized, and women were seen as fundamentally different than— but still inferior to men (Connell, *Masculinities* 68; Tosh, *A Man’s Place* 43). This persistent belief in the inferiority of women led to the overall privileging of men over women.

The understanding that there were fundamental differences between men and women, and that the characteristics of masculinity and femininity were incompatible, resulted in the separation of men and women and rigid distinctions in gender roles. The separation between men and women in the nineteenth-century British middle-class is often understood in terms of “separate spheres,” referring to the “public sphere,” which was considered to be for men and included business, industry, politics, and the “private sphere” which was considered to be for women and referred to domesticity and the home.³ The private sphere was considered fundamentally feminine, and the rightful place of women, while the public sphere was considered fundamentally masculine and the natural place for men. Middle-class gender roles were further influenced by the middle-

³ Although the concept of separate spheres dictates that men and women are to be constrained to their appropriate spheres, that was not exactly the case. Recent work on gender and domesticity in the nineteenth-century British middle-class by John Tosh as well as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall has noted that the concept of separate spheres is misleading, as neither men nor women were entirely constrained to their own appropriate sphere (“Domesticity and Manliness” 50; xxxi). Because I am examining novels which replicate these same ideas (though without the explicit terminology of separate spheres), I think separate spheres is a useful and accurate way to explain the ideas of gender roles and expectations in the nineteenth century that inform the depictions of gender in the novels.

class's sense of their own moral superiority in comparison to the upper- and working-class and their efforts to establish and maintain that superiority. Women were considered the center of morality in the home and a moralizing influence, which was seen as a natural part of their femininity, and one of their main responsibilities was the management and care of the home with the purpose of making it a comfortable sanctuary for men after they return home from work in the public sphere.⁴ The middle-class began to grow in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth began to claim a moral authority over other classes (Davidoff and Hall 23, 30). The existing political, economic, and social power of the upper-class was increasingly questioned by the middle-class who valued morality, domesticity, and moderation. The growing middle class was becoming the most visible and influential group in nineteenth-century Britain, and established itself as culturally and socially dominant.

Middle-class masculinity was increasingly linked to domesticity in the early nineteenth century. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall assert the importance of occupation to a middle-class man's identity, while John Tosh argues that familial relations were just as important to a man's middle-class identity as the home became considered the proper sphere of the husband, "the spouse who was more exposed to the moral degradation of the world of work, and therefore more in need of refuge and refreshment" (30; "Home and Away" 567, 561). Brontë's novels, primarily written from the perspective of women, almost exclusively show men in domestic settings and reveal

⁴ These responsibilities primarily applied to wives for the benefit of their husbands, but I use the more general "woman" as there are, as Davidoff and Hall have pointed out, many examples of daughters taking over these responsibilities to take care of their father after the death of their mother, or sisters taking care of bachelor brothers' homes (347, 350). I am discussing relations between men and women as a whole, not exclusively husbands and wives.

their private practice of toxic masculinity. Not only was a man's home his property, it was "where his emotional needs were satisfied" and thus a man's domestic life, his home and family, became integral to his identity more than ever before in the nineteenth century (Milne-Smith 797). I will be referring to the type of masculinity that was being encouraged in the nineteenth-century British middle-class, which emphasized care for the family and home and men's position as family provider, as domestic masculinity.

Middle-class, domestic masculinity was heavily influenced by the moral superiority and growing authority of the middle-class, and was defined by its opposition to working-class and, especially, upper-class masculinity. Upper-class masculinity was associated with a "more traditional and aggressive concept of masculinity, defined in opposition to the domestic," that often contradicted domestic expectations for companionship and support (Hammerton 87). As the middle-class grew in size, power, and influence, society held up domestic masculinity as the ideal type of masculinity, while upper-class and working-class forms of masculinity were associated with immortality and degradation. The shift in dominant socioeconomic class and thus dominant form of masculinity in the nineteenth century has been recognized by scholars, who cite "the spread of industrial economies and the growth of bureaucratic states" as the reasons for the decline in "the economic and political power of the landowning gentry" (Connell, *Masculinities* 193). The middle-class gained significant political power after the Reform Act of 1832, which reformed the British electoral system and enfranchised middle-class men. By the 1830s, middle-class ideology and views that emphasized morality and domesticity were becoming the dominant common sense (Davidoff and Hall 28). Domestic masculinity in Britain in the early to mid-nineteenth century, as the

dominant and culturally exalted form, can be understood as what R.W. Connell termed hegemonic masculinity.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful for my discussion about representations of different types of masculinity in Brontë's novels because it illuminates the way that one type of masculinity may be seen as dominant and have power, while other types of masculinity may be more commonly practiced; as well as how all men benefit from and enjoy the privileges of hegemonic masculinity whether they practice it or not. Hegemonic masculinity is the type of masculinity that, at a certain point in time, is idolized within a culture; and Connell defines it as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women," and stresses that hegemonic masculinity "embodies a 'currently accepted' strategy" of its time and place (*Masculinities* 77). It is not necessary for the majority of men to practice a type of masculinity for it to be hegemonic (very few men might do so), but the "majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (*Masculinities* 79). If, according to Connell, hegemonic masculinity "embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men," then it would be middle-class, domestic masculinity that was hegemonic in the nineteenth-century British middle-class

(“Hegemonic Masculinity” 832). As the middle-class as a whole moved into a more dominant position, so too did middle-class, domestic masculinity.⁵

⁵ It is also worth noting that there is a wide variety of types of masculinities acknowledged by Connell and recent men's studies scholars, and I am only focusing on a specific group of those masculinities— Western ideas (European and American, but British specifically) of white, cis masculinity, and even more specifically for my discussion, middle-class masculinity.

CHAPTER 3

MASCULINITY IN THE NOVELS

The greater prominence and discussion (or rather, critique) of toxic masculinity and women's relationship to it in *Tenant* has led to multiple critical debates about Brontë's representations of different types of masculinity in the novel. Some critics even argue that by containing Helen's diary and her own account of her story within Gilbert's letter, *Tenant*'s structure reflects the social separation of genders, privileging of men, and silencing of women. The best discussions of this are from N. M. Jacobs, who claims that the structure "replicates a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the center of the fictional world," and Carol Senf, who argues that Brontë "carefully manipulates narrative and narrative silences to focus the reader's attention on questions of gender, particularly on the manner in which male authority shapes women's lives" (204; 447). Juliet McMaster and Gwen Hyam both read Helen's husband, Huntington, and his group of friends as enacting the masculinity of aristocrats, while Priti Joshi recognizes in *Tenant* a disavowal of those forms of masculinity and claims that the novel "tackles precisely these questions of competing forms of masculinity and masculine self-fashioning" (917). I add to these discussions by exploring the male characters' practice of toxic masculinity, and will attempt to identify specific characteristics that Brontë is criticizing.

Joshi further argues that Huntington and Gilbert both present and practice completely different types of masculinity, with Huntington representing upper-class masculinity while Gilbert represents a more respectable middle-class type of masculinity. As I will show, both men actually practice the same type of masculinity— toxic

masculinity. Scholarship on masculinity in *Agnes Grey* is much sparser than that on *Tenant*. Maggie Berg, who has done work on *Agnes Grey*, has argued that the cruelty of men towards women in the novel is similar to their cruelty towards animals, indicative of the similar attitudes that men held towards both women and animals.⁶ Despite the fact that the same sort of toxic masculinity is displayed gratuitously in each, few critics have worked on representations of masculinity in *Tenant* and *Agnes Grey* together. Judith Pike has recognized in both novels the similarities in the ways that masculinity is taught between men, and in particular from father to son, and notes that the novels show how the detrimental effects of a father raising his son to practice toxic masculinity is far more dangerous than the possible danger of a mother's indulgences of her son (114). There has been little work done on the fears and concerns that women had in the novels about the dangers of toxic masculinity and its influence, which I explore.

The majority of Brontë's middle-class male characters practice toxic masculinity instead of domestic masculinity, to the detriment of themselves and their families. Their behavior is more associated with the upper-class, as the men engage in "hunting, gambling, drinking, and [womanizing]," which were considered antithetical to domesticity and improper for middle-class men (Nelson 29). Brontë's male characters are primarily upper middle-class, and thus do not actively work (though some still gained their income through land ownership), preventing them from defining their sense of masculine identity through their occupation as middle-class men were commonly expected to be able to do. Tosh claims that middle-class masculinity was defined through

⁶ For more on the similarities between men's treatment of women and animals, see Berg (117), Langland (*Anne Brontë* 111), and King (137).

“home, work, and all-male association” (*A Man’s Place* 2). This fundamental lack of one of the major features of middle-class masculine identity—work—may play a role in the way that Brontë’s male characters so aggressively and intently attempt to assert their masculinity in the ways that were left—the home and their all-male associations. The men in Brontë’s novels still heavily benefit from the dominance of hegemonic masculinity even though they do not practice domestic masculinity, and utilize the benefits to excuse their practice of toxic masculinity. Jack Halberstam notes that “historically it has become difficult, if not impossible, to untangle masculinity from the oppression of women” (4). With toxic masculinity, doing so becomes impossible. Though the toxic masculinity practiced by the male characters in Brontë’s novels may not be the hegemonic form, its characteristics are the ones that are associated with manliness and masculine identity and are taught, acquired, developed, and reaffirmed throughout men’s lives. I have outlined four characteristics—behaviors, traits, values, or attitudes—that are emphasized by the toxic masculinity depicted in these texts: indulgence and excess; violence and brutality; superiority, self-importance, and arrogance; and camaraderie and all-male associations.

Indulgence and Excess

The majority of the middle-class men in Brontë’s novels frequently indulge themselves in food, drink, womanizing, overspending, gambling, swearing, and other forms of pleasure or vice in a way unmatched by (and even offensive to) the women in the novels, and associate their indulgences with their masculine identities. They lack the ability or desire to refrain or to moderate themselves after a lifetime of middle-class male

freedom, authority, and privilege that never required or even asked them to do so. The men's constant excess, however, often proves harmful and occasionally even deadly to themselves and others. A man's class position is affirmed through his refusal to moderate his appetites, and the men behave in these ways principally "out of a sense of social obligation" (Hyman 456; McMaster 354). While in London with his male companions, Huntington is pressured by his friends to remain "week after week, and to plunge into all manner of excesses to avoid being laughed at for a wife-ridden fool," showing that excess was a way to differentiate oneself from women and feminine influence (*Tenant* 226). To not indulge in these forms of excess—food, drink, swearing, womanizing, and gambling—would be to ignore the privileges of their gender and class, and fail to assert that privilege.

The most prevalent form of excess in the novels is the amount of drinking in which the men engage, and they often directly connect doing so to their masculine identities. Huntington critiques his companion Lord Lowborough for not drinking "like an honest Christian man," and accuses him of being a "ninny" for abstaining from alcohol (*Tenant* 192, 194). Even women recognized drinking as important to a man's masculinity, as Lady Lowborough insists that her husband join the men drinking in the dining room rather than stay with the women, telling him that he "might stay with them a little: it looks so silly to be always dangling after the women," and she later claims that drinking is a part of having a "bold, manly spirit" (270, 271). Helen complains that Huntington's friends encourage him to drink and undo her efforts to influence him otherwise; especially Grimsby and Hattersley, who she claims "destroyed all of my labour against his love of wine. They encourage him daily to overstep the bounds on

moderation, and, not infrequently, to disgrace himself by positive excess” (270). The association between excessive drinking and masculinity was a commonplace idea of nineteenth-century Britain, when “The ability to drink one’s neighbor under the table was a sign of masculine prowess” (Davidoff and Hall 400). Grimsby brags about his ability to drink vast quantities of liquor, claiming it to be due to his superiority to the other men (*Tenant* 275). It was the amount that a man could drink, not just the fact that he did, that was associated with his masculine identity.

This expectation even extended to young boys, who are seen being taught by men and women alike that their ability to drink alcohol is evidence of their manliness. After Huntington encourages his son, Arthur, to drink alcohol, Helen teaches him to despise the taste of it to prevent him from becoming like his father. Her attempts are ridiculed and criticized by her neighbors, who see it as a threat to Arthur’s masculine identity. Mrs. Markham, Helen’s neighbor, tells her, “The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make, of him, if you persist...” (*Tenant* 31). Young boys in the novels are encouraged by older men (their fathers, uncles, and father’s friends) to drink as much as possible in order to assert their masculine identity. Agnes complains that the uncle of one of her charges, seven-year-old Tom Bloomfield, teaches him to “believe that the more wine and spirits he could take, and the better he liked them, the more he manifested his bold and manly spirit, and rose superior to his sisters” (*Agnes Grey* 103). This claim that drinking would make Tom “superior to his sisters” reinforces the idea that being a man is more valuable or superior to being a woman. For both adult men and young boys, drinking alcohol was a means of distinguishing themselves from women.

Middle-class men in the novels appear unable to control their appetites for food and drink in general, indulging in it to the point of illness. Helen says of Huntington, “He has no more idea of exerting himself to overcome obstacles that he has of restraining his natural appetites; and these two things are the ruin of him,” and she fears he “would give himself up to luxury as the chief good, and might ultimately plunge into the grossest excesses, but for the fear of irredeemably blunting his appetites” (*Tenant* 226, 284). Grimsby puts an excessive six lumps of sugar in his tea, an obvious example of middle-class men's inability to control their own impulses, as he boasts about how he can drink more than the other men (275). This lack of moderation in appetite for both food and drink in middle-class men causes gout in several of Brontë's male characters. Since the seventeenth century, gout has been seen as a “manifestation of gentlemanly blood” because of its prevalence among wealthy men who could afford the amounts of food and drink necessary to cause the ailment (Hyman 460). Lesa Scholl notes that it “haunts [*Tenant*] with its broader causes than excessive alcohol consumption, including excessively rich food high in protein and sugars” (157). The tendency of these men to indulge is not only a result of the privilege they feel as men, but specifically as middle-class men. Helen's uncle, Mr. Maxwell, dies from gout towards the end of *Tenant*, and by the end of *Agnes Grey* Mr. Murray, one of the fathers for whom Agnes works, is suffering from gout that makes him “ferocious,” but still refuses to moderate his appetites despite doctor's claims “that no medicine could cure him while he lived so freely” (*Agnes Grey* 231). Huntington's illness at the end of *Tenant*, though not gout, is still a disease caused and aggravated by his excess—it is dramatically worse because of his past indulgences, and his recovery is prevented by his refusal to stop drinking despite his

doctor's advice (*Tenant* 440). Gilbert reports that Huntington experiences a "serious relapse... entirely the result of his own infatuation in persisting in the indulgence of his appetite for stimulating drink" (439). Even in the face of disease or death, these men are unable to stop themselves from indulging lest doing so takes away from their sense of their own manliness.

Many of Brontë's adult male characters indulge in sexual excess, often pursuing extramarital affairs, married women, or women who they have no real intention of marrying. Huntington in particular appears unable to moderate his sexual desire, bragging about past and current affairs to his wife, Helen, including one with a married woman (209). He has an affair with Lady Lowborough during his marriage that goes on for years, as well as an affair with the governess he hires for Arthur, moving her into his and Helen's home shortly before Helen's escape. Hargrave relentlessly pursues Helen despite her marriage to Huntington and tries to convince her to leave her husband for him. Gilbert Markham's continues his relationship with Eliza Millward despite having to intentions to marry her, only withdrawing his affections when he becomes interested in Helen instead. As we will see, this indulgence in sexual excess is also emulated by women appropriating toxic masculinity, and their inability to freely do so proves the degree to which this sort of behavior was comparably acceptable in men. Men's sexual excess is often at the expense of the women, such as the wives they cheat on or the women they mislead, but also occasionally of other men whose wives the men have affairs with.

The middle-class men in Brontë's novels spend so gratuitously and frequently gamble so extensively that it hurts themselves or their families. Hargrave spends

excessively for the sake of his masculine identity, and Helen describes him as “one who likes to have ‘everything handsome about him,’ and to go to a certain length in youthful indulgences – not so much to gratify his own tastes as to maintain his reputation as a man of fashion in the world, and a respectable fellow among his own lawless companions” (231). His spending hurts his mother and sisters, who are forced to sacrifice their own comforts to allow his lavish lifestyle. Gambling, another form of monetary excess, also proves harmful to the men who indulge in it. Grimsby plunges deep into the depths of depravity at the end of *Tenant*, “from bathos to bathos of vice and villainy, consorting only with the worst members of his club and the lowest dregs of society—happily for the rest of the world—and at last met his end in a drunken brawl, from the hands, it is said, of some brother scoundrel he had cheated at play” (457). Lord Lowborough loses all of his wealth due to gambling, but it is important to consider that his inability to regulate his gambling habits are a result of addiction more than efforts to assert his manliness.⁷ These monetary indulgences prove to be just as harmful when practiced to excess as bodily consumption.

Brontë’s male characters frequently swear, and despite their awareness that they should refrain from doing so around women, are often unable to control their impulses to do so. When Hattersley uses the word “damned” around Helen, Hargrave tells him “I

⁷ Though the words “addiction” or “alcoholic” are never used to describe him, it is clear that Lord Lowborough suffers from addiction. He has an “unfortunate taste for gambling” he struggles to repress, and then “got hold of another habit that bothered him nearly as much, for he soon discovered that the demon of drink was as black as the demon of play, and nearly as hard to get rid of” (*Tenant* 187, 189). “The Victorians often failed to distinguish between alcoholism, drinking, and drunkenness,” and the word “alcoholism” did not even appear until 1860 (Harrison 23). This is why I do not include Lord Lowborough’s drinking in my discussion of men’s indulgence in alcohol. His lack of control is not motivated by a desire to prove his manliness (he actively is trying not to drink and often refuses his friend’s offers of alcohol), but by a desire to not succumb to his addiction.

would *refrain* from such language in a *lady's* presence, at least" (*Tenant* 292). Hattersley seems especially unable to control his impulse to swear even when he seems to be trying to. When he denounces his past abuse of his wife, Millicent, to Helen he continuously swears—practicing the characteristics of the exact type of behavior that he is trying to distance himself from (380). In *Agnes Grey*, the men are apparently even less able to control their swearing around women, as they are profane so frequently in the presence of teenage Matilda Murray that she begins to swear herself, and is described as “unlady-like” by her sister and mother for doing so (124). Like drinking, swearing is taught to young boys. For instance, Arthur is taught by his father not just to swear, but to swear around and even at his mother: “the little fellow came down every evening in spite of his cross mamma, and learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him” (*Tenant* 350). Though not as harmful as the other forms of excess, men’s inability to stop themselves from swearing is considered harmful to the woman who hear it, or, like Matilda, replicate it.

Violence and Brutality

Physical aggression, violence, and brutality is common among the men in Brontë’s novels, ranging from the casual use of physical force to violent attacks and animal torture, and always associated with the perpetrator’s assertion of male authority. This behavior is exclusive to the middle-class men in the novels, as no women engage in physical violence, even as an act of self-defense or in response to the abuse of men. Agnes is occasionally forced to hold Tom down when he is in “his most violent moods,”

but still determines “to refrain from striking him even in self-defense” (*Agnes Grey* 85).

In nineteenth-century British divorce case proceedings, most women opted for humiliation⁸ rather than physical abuse as a means of self-defense (Hammerton 91).

Physical strength has long been considered a masculine trait or important to man’s gender identity, but in these novels it is not physical strength that makes a man but the use of that strength—often unfairly, excessively, and against those who are unable to defend themselves.

While there are few examples of physical domestic abuse in the novels (which I will explore in a later section), the use of casual physical force against women is far more common, and not exclusive to married couples. Men grab women’s arms, squeeze their hands and arms, hold them in place, and refuse to let them go, even when the women protest or indicate that they are in pain. Much of this physical force is for the purpose of controlling the women’s behavior, and especially to restrict their movement. After one of their first meetings, Gilbert gives Helen’s hand a “spiteful squeeze,” and Huntington at one point seizes her hand and refuses to let go despite her “desperate effort to free [her] hand from his grasp” (*Tenant* 36, 157). When Eliza Millward tells Gilbert that she has heard Helen is going to get married, he “seized her arm and gave it... a pretty severe squeeze, for she shrank into herself with a faint cry of pain or terror” (461). Violence against women is not just considered by men to be a male right, but in some instances even considered an obligation. Tom claims that he must strike his younger sister Mary, telling Agnes “I am obliged to do it now and then to keep her in order” (*Agnes Grey* 77).

⁸ “More revealing, though, was physical resistance which was humiliating rather than violent. A husband’s wounded dignity did not readily recover from the pulling of his whiskers – a frequent target among Victorian husbands – or the emptying of the contents of a chamber pot over his head” (Hammerton 91).

Agnes comments that he uses physical force as a means to try and control her as well, explaining that “Master Tom, not content with refusing to be ruled, must needs set up as a ruler, and manifested a determination to keep, not only his sisters, but his governess in order, by violent manual and pedal applications” (84). Physical force is linked to men’s understandings of their right to control women, though it is never meant to control other men’s behavior, which was also common.

Violence between men often seems less purposeful than violence against women and seems to be a natural part of male relationships. Much of this violence, however, certainly occurs while the men in question are drunk. Huntington and his companions, who are always drinking, are an excellent example of this. In a scene in the humorously titled chapter “Social Virtues” in *Tenant*, the men (Hargrave, Hattersley, Lord Lowborough, and Grimsby) join the women (Helen, Lady Lowborough, and Millicent) in the library after getting drunk in the dining room, and the women are witness to some of the most depraved behavior by men in either novel. At one point, Hattersley holds Lord Lowborough down and refuses to let go, forcing him to enlist the aid of Helen (after his own wife refuses) to bring him a candle in order to burn Hattersley’s hand off of him (*Tenant* 277). Gilbert and his brother, Fergus, are often depicted hitting one another, and the men even strike one another in church, indicating a lack of self-control (18). Gilbert and Fergus are just as consistently violent towards one another throughout the book while remaining entirely sober, and their almost casual physical violence towards one another seems to be a part of their fraternal relationship.

The most extreme example of violence, Gilbert’s attack on Frederick Lawrence, is driven by jealousy and male rage and shows how quickly and easily men resort to

violence. When he sees Mr. Lawrence for the first time after seeing him with Helen and believing they are having an affair, Gilbert says that “Instinctively the fingers of my whip-hand tingled, and grasped their charge with convulsive energy” (*Tenant* 115). He assaults Mr. Lawrence by hitting him in the head with his whip and knocking him off his horse, saying that “It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead,” and “It served him right — it would teach him better manners in future” (*Tenant* 116). He even goes back moments later to offer his help, which Mr. Lawrence refuses, and then leaves again, saying “I left him to live or die as he could, well satisfied that I had done *my* duty in attempting to save him — but forgetting how I had erred in bringing him into such a condition, and how insultingly my after-services had been offered” (118). While Gilbert’s motives for this act of violence are not particularly tied to his masculine identity, as he is motivated by romantic jealousy, his reaction—satisfaction, trivialization, and lack of remorse—certainly is.

Brontë’s middle-class male characters often hunt, not because they need to, but in order to assert their male dominance over animals as part of their masculine identity. The bloodiness of hunting in particular is associated with manhood and masculinity because it gives the appearance of brutality, which was also important: “Ruggedness of features, certain disdain for appearances, even brusqueness, were signs of manliness” (Davidoff and Hall 414). Huntington flirts with Helen and Anabella (the future Lady Lowborough) after returning from hunting “all spattered and splashed as he was, and stained with the blood of his prey” giving him a rugged appearance and showing his brutality (*Tenant* 161). The relevance of blood remains important not just in the context of hunting, but in

the eating of meat as well. Berg argues that eating meat is a feature of masculine tyranny, focusing on blood as symbolic of male domination over animals. In *Agnes Grey*, Agnes joins the Bloomfield family for a very uncomfortable dinner, during which Mr. Bloomfield chastises his wife and servants for the state of the serving of meat he is given for dinner, which he claims is not bloody enough: “Don’t you taste, Mrs. Bloomfield, that all the goodness is roasted out of it? And can’t you see that all that nice, red gravy is completely dried away?” (82). Mr. Bloomfield prefers his meat still bloody, suggestive of barbarism, cruelty, and violence — he wants his meat to more closely represent flesh (Berg 185). Men are concerned with primarily aesthetic parts of hunting and eating meat because the appearance of brutality is as important as the actual practice of brutality.

Abuse of and cruelty towards domesticated pets and working animals is also a common behavior among the middle-class male characters. Huntington hits his dog and then throws a book at its head for going to Helen for protection, and Gilbert holds Mr. Lawrence’s pony until Mr. Lawrence calls him “coarse and brutal” for hurting it (*Tenant* 212, 92). Even minor male characters that are briefly mentioned include mentions of their cruelty towards animals. The village ratcatcher to whom Snap is given in *Agnes Grey*, for example, is noted for being “known for his brutal treatment of his canine slaves,” and when Fergus Markham is first introduced in *Tenant*, he talks about attending a badger-baiting show (202; 13). The prevalence of men abusing animals is so extreme that when a man is not depicted abusing animals it marks him as better than the other men, as is the case with Mr. Weston in *Agnes Grey*. The most extreme practice of this characteristic is Tom’s hobby of torturing and killing small animals, with not only the permission of his mother, but the encouragement of his father and uncle, who calls Tom a “fine boy” after

seeing him pull the wings, legs, and heads off of baby sparrows that his father had given him (*Agnes Grey* 78). He shows Agnes his toy horse, asserting that he will use his whip and spurs on a real horse just as he does on his toy horse, saying “I’ll cut into him like smoke!” (77). Tom is taught by the men in his life that cruelty is a part of being a man, especially given his father’s assertion that “it’s just what *he* used to do when *he* was a boy” (78).

Superiority, Self-importance, and Arrogance

Not only do the middle-class male characters understand themselves to be superior as a group, but as individuals, and are often selfish, conceited, and overconfident. Gilbert, after reading Helen’s diary, can only think of himself and Helen’s opinions of him, is upset that the diary cuts off right before she mentions him, and says he had a sense of “selfish gratification” reading about Helen growing to hate Huntington (*Tenant* 396, 397). Huntington displays some of the most egocentric and selfish behavior in the novel, and is constantly upset that Helen is giving him less attention than he thinks he deserves. After they return from their honeymoon traveling abroad, Helen recalls Huntington’s jealousy of the attention she paid the tourist sites instead of him, and says “it had been displeasing to him in as much as it proved that I could take delight in anything disconnected with himself” (203). He is even jealous of the attention that Helen pays to their own son, telling her “As long as you have that ugly little creature to dote upon, you care not a farthing what becomes of me” (241). His sense of ego is so extreme that he even argues that Helen should pay more attention to him than to God, and he

complains to her that “To my thinking, a woman’s religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord” (*Tenant* 204).

A number of the male characters show disbelief and indignance when a woman fails to show interest in them or appear to not think as highly of the men as they themselves do, being overconfident in their intelligence, abilities, and attractiveness. Gilbert, annoyed at Helen’s apparent lack of interest in him, complains that “Without knowing anything about my real disposition and principles, she was evidently prejudiced against me, and seemed bent upon showing me that her opinions respecting me, on every particular, fell far below those I entertained of myself” (*Tenant* 36). Helen is earlier met with similar reactions from possible suitors prior to her first marriage. Mr. Boarham, who expresses outright refusals to accept her disinterest and declination of his proposal, and Mr. Wilmont, who is overconfident in his wealth or appearance (and too convinced of feminine weakness) to understand her hints at her disinterest (139, 144). Men believe that they not only deserve women’s attention, but *all* of their attention by virtue of being a man.

A necessary consequence of men’s belief in their own superiority based on their gender and class is the firm belief in the inferiority of those who do not share those traits—namely, women and servants. Berg aptly uses Judith Butler’s idea of “bodies that matter” to describe the privileged status of white, middle-class men in nineteenth-century Britain, “whose coherent identities depend upon cruelties exerted on those beneath them” (194). I will address the effects of this specifically on middle-class women, who are the main victims in these novels, in a later section, and focus here on the treatment of servants, who are frequent victims of men’s inability to recognize the full humanity of

those who are not in the same social position as they are. Helen describes Huntington's "injustice and ill humour towards his inferiors, who could not defend themselves" when he yells and swears at a servant for tripping (*Tenant* 259). When Helen excuses the servant, Huntington yells at her for taking the servants side over his own, asking her, "Do you think I could stop to consider the feelings of an insensitive brute like that...?" (254). Even Gilbert fails to respect servants, complaining that no one else will "bully" the coachmen for not going fast enough on the way to what he thinks is Helen's wedding (463). Both fathers for whom Agnes works verbally abuse their servants. Though Agnes rarely interacts with Mr. Murray, she often hears him "swearing and blaspheming against the footmen, groom, coachman, or some other hapless dependent" (*Agnes Grey* 119). When his meat is not properly cooked, and Mrs. Bloomfield blames the kitchen for cutting it wrong, Mr. Bloomfield says "No *doubt* they cut it wrong in the kitchen – the savages!" (83). As a governess, Agnes is not subject to verbal abuse like many of the other servants, and instead men largely ignore Agnes and refuse to acknowledge her presence in a way that makes it clear that the men see Agnes as below them, unworthy of their notice or their time. Agnes says that Uncle Robson "seldom deigned to notice me; and when he did, it was with a certain supercilious insolence of tone and manner that convinced me that he was no gentleman, though it was intended to have a contrary effect" (102). Their coldness towards Agnes is directly related to their sense of their own status as middle-class men, and their efforts to assert their perceived superiority.

Camaraderie and All-male Spaces

Camaraderie and all-male spaces are where all of the other characteristics I have described meet and overlap, as it is within these all-male spaces and relationships that the other characteristics of toxic masculinity are taught, shared, and encouraged. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her foundational work on homosociality (the social bonds between members of the same sex), connects male homosocial desire to the social dominance of men and argues that relationships between men are based on their unity in their efforts to promote the interests and dominance of men (2). Sedgwick does not, however, thoroughly explore how relationships between men may be harmful to the men themselves. In the context of both camaraderie and all-male spaces, masculinity and femininity are seen as competitors. Camaraderie becomes harmful when it results in the increase of the practice of the other characteristics, and all-male spaces become toxic when their exclusion of women and femininity includes excluding expressions of femininity in the men.

Camaraderie is vital to a man's sense of gender identity because it allows for the validation of his manliness by other men. Manhood is not something one simply achieves, it must be proven by to his peers and "perpetually achieved, asserted, and renegotiated" (Tosh and Roper 18). The presence of women was often seen as a threat to male camaraderie. As the first member of his friend group to become engaged, Huntington's friends, angry and concerned that a women's presence will ruin their fun, blame Huntington for what they see as a betrayal of their exclusively male company. Huntington complains to Helen:

Helen, you witch, do you know that you've entailed upon me the curses of all of my friends? I wrote to them the other day, to tell them of my happy prospects, and now, instead of a bundle of congratulations, I've got a pocketful of bitter execrations and reproaches. There's not one kind wish for me, or one good word for you among them all. They say there'll be no more fun now, no more merry days and glorious nights — and all my fault— I am the first to break up the jovial band, and others, in pure despair, will follow my example. (*Tenant* 183)

The men are concerned at the idea of a feminine influence interfering with their practice of toxic masculinity and influence on one another. Helen says that she believes Huntington and Hattersley have “mutually corrupted each other,” and Millicent “affirms that her husband never did such things before [Huntington] came, and would certainly discontinue them as soon as you departed and left him to the guidance of his own good sense” (258). When one member of the group fails to join the others in their behavior, they are ostracized. For example, when Lord Lowborough returns to the club, but doesn't drink with the other men, Huntington says “But some of our members protests against this conduct. They did not like to have him sitting there like a skeleton at a feast, instead of contributing his quota to the general amusement... and some of them maintained that he should either be compelled to do as others did or expelled from the society” (192). It is only through the practice of the characteristics of toxic masculinity that a man is accepted by, and his manhood is consistently affirmed by, his peers

The descriptions of Huntington and his friends in *Tenant* show that the men primarily view their camaraderie and all-male groups as way to exercise and validate their masculinity. Huntington and his companions, at least, don't actually seem to like

one another but continue to spend time with one another for the sake of having an all-male group to drink, gamble, swear, hunt, and discuss their sexual and romantic lives with. Even those few examples of loyalty between the men are negated by the fact that the loyalty the men show is inconsistent. Grimsby, Hargrave, and Hattersley all aid Huntington in hiding his affair with Lady Lowborough— but at the expense of Lord Lowborough. One of the main purposes of these male relationships is to enable men to display “non-femaleness” with one another (Bird 122). It does not matter who a man’s companions are or if they actually like one another, only that they are fellow men with whom to be manly.

Many of the men spend time at all-male clubs and in other places that were deemed “masculine” and necessarily excluded women, which were often attractive to men precisely because they were free from women and feminine influence. Helen complains that Arthur is degrading himself while he is away at his men’s club in London, “amid the dust and smoke of London – perhaps, shut up within the walls of his own abominable club” (*Tenant* 224). The target customers for clubs were men whose identities were “always defined in relation to the dependent and the subjected—women, children, servants, employees, slaves, and the colonized” (Sinha 496). Additionally, clubs that welcomed both men and women and all-female clubs never reached the same level of popularity as men’s clubs, which became a fixture of British culture, suggesting that clubs were specific solely to the establishment of masculine identity (Sinha 498). All-male spaces certainly served to bolster a man’s sense of his masculinity, but when that sense of masculinity is toxic, these spaces serve to drag the men further into degradation.

The encouragement of the characteristics of toxic masculinity is not exclusive to camaraderie between adult men, but occurs between fathers and sons and well. Tosh claims that fathers had a stake in their son's masculinity because it was reflective of their own (*A Man's Place* 3). Relationships between fathers and sons in the novels are based on fathers teaching and encouraging their sons to practice the characteristics of toxic masculinity. In addition to drinking, violence, and superiority, which I have discussed, men directly encouraged the contempt of women and femininity that was essential to camaraderie in their sons. Huntington teaches Arthur to insult his mother in order to "make a man of him" (*Tenant* 350). Uncle Robson⁹ praises Tom's disdain for women and rejection of their authority and influence, saying "Curse me, if I ever saw a nobler little scoundrel than that. He's beyond petticoat government already: — by G—, he defies his mother, granny, governess, and all!" (*Agnes Grey* 105). A boy's masculine education included clear lessons about how proper middle-class men were meant to perceive and treat women and femininity.

Despite the fact that women were commonly understood to have a moralizing influence on men in this period, and the idea that femininity was inferior, many men saw feminine influence as a threat. Helen overhears Grimsby tell Hattersley "It's all these cursed women!... They're the very bane of the world! They bring trouble and discomfort wherever they come, with their false, fair faces and their d-d deceitful tongues" (*Tenant* 295). Huntington teaches Arthur to "hate and despise his mother and emulate his father's wickedness" (370). Furthermore, this disdain for women expanded to a disdain for femininity, expressions of which were essentially forbidden in all-male spaces, for both

⁹ Uncles often served as substitute or additional fathers in the nineteenth century (Nelson 141).

boys and adult men. Even expressing emotion was condoned as a sign of feminine weakness as opposed to strong, masculine emotional detachment and stoicism (Bird 125). Huntington complains to Helen about Lord Lowborough's expressions of sadness around his male companions, saying that "he was such a damper upon us, sitting there, silent and glum, when he was under the threefold influence of the loss of his sweetheart, the loss of his fortune, and the reaction of last night's debauch" (*Tenant* 190). Men in the novels are severely limited in their all-male spaces and relationships to behaving only in ways that aligned with the narrow definitions of acceptable masculine behavior.

CHAPTER 4

WHY WOMEN MUST RESPOND TO TOXIC MASCULINITY

Nearly all of Brontë's male characters practice toxic masculinity to some degree, making it nearly inescapable for women, who were essentially unable to live independently of men in nineteenth-century Britain. Even the narrator and love interest of *Tenant*, Gilbert Markham, is strikingly similar to the novel's primary villain and strongest example of toxic masculinity, Arthur Huntington.¹⁰ Langland also argues that the similarities between Gilbert and Huntington reflect Brontë's refusal to create an ideal hero, and her understanding that no man is exempt from the effects of "society's indulgence of men" (*Anne Brontë* 134). I argue that it is not just society's indulgence of men, but specifically of their toxic masculinity, that makes the men so similar. Juliet McMaster and Joshi Priti have suggested that unlike Huntington, Gilbert shows the ability to change, and improves through the reading of Helen's diary (365; 915). Any sympathy or sensitivity that Gilbert learns through reading Helen's diary, however, is minimal—his thoughts after finishing her diary still revolve around himself, what Helen thinks of him, and, crucially, what he thinks Helen owes him. His apparent inability and lack of desire to change (or even consideration that he perhaps should try to change) after reading Helen's diary highlights the difficulty for men so thoroughly ingrained in the practice of toxic masculinity to change if they don't want to, or even to recognize that they should change.

¹⁰ The best examples of Gilbert and Huntington's similarities are pointed out by Joshi, who says that by "positioning Huntingdon's and Markham's uses of Helen's diary as mirror images of one another - one uses it to imprison her, the other to expose her - Brontë indicates a continuity in the men's attitudes and behavior toward women," and Elizabeth Langland, who argues that Gilbert "seems different only in degree not in kind from Huntington" (914; *Anne Brontë* 133).

Mr. Weston, the romantic interest of *Agnes Grey*, who Agnes describes as kind, generous, faithful, and benevolent, also displays the superiority and authority of toxic masculinity, emphasizing that it is often practiced by men who present themselves differently (*Agnes Grey* 156). Mr. Weston appears to abstain from drink, indulgence, violence, and male camaraderie, but displays a sense of superiority over others, and treats women in particular as objects of charity or pity. Though he may be kind to Agnes, he does not treat her as an equal. Instead, his treatment of her is more akin to how he treats her dog, Snap, like a pet to be cared for and controlled rather than a companion or partner.¹¹ Her marriage to Mr. Weston at the end of *Agnes Grey* enters her into the service of a “good master,” reflecting language typically used to describe dogs and further showing the similarities between Mr. Weston’s treatment of Snap and of Agnes (Berg 190). While the marriage between Agnes and Mr. Weston outwardly appears to be one of equality, it is truly a reflection of the gender hierarchy, as Mr. Weston retains male authority.

It is not only the heroes of the novel who prove this discrepancy in the type of masculinity that men present and the type that they actually practice, as other seemingly “good” men are revealed to truly practice toxic masculinity. Hargrave presents himself in a way that wins him the friendship of Helen, who considers him “a real friend to the family, a harmless companion for Arthur... and a useful ally to me,” and a “model of

¹¹ The similarities between women’s position and the position of domesticated dogs in particular has been examined at length in the context of Brontë’s novels. In addition to Berg’s work on *Agnes Grey*, Elizabeth King identifies the similarity in the language men use to describe women and animals, as well as the frequency with which women are often the victims of violence meant for dogs, linking both of these to a “more subtle form of domination” in *Tenant* (128). Lisa Surridge even argues that men’s abuse of their pet dogs is in fact the “deflection of marital violence from the body of woman onto the body of a domestic animal,” linking this to men’s view of their wives, like their dogs, as their property (4).

decency, sobriety, and gentlemanly manners *in comparison* with the rest” (*Tenant* 261, 349). His true practice of toxic masculinity is revealed when he assumes Helen’s interest in him and then attempts to force himself on her when she claims not to be, and she must defend herself with a palette-knife (358). The novels suggest that no man, no matter how “good” he presents himself, is totally free from the influence of toxic masculinity.

The fact that Helen, who is upper middle-class, is a victim of toxic masculinity just like Agnes, who is a governess, suggests that no woman is better able to protect herself from it than another. Through the downfall of Helen, Brontë shows that no woman (even those with economic and social advantages) is able to reform a man to be a better person, or change his core, when these negative traits are already established and he has no desire to change himself (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 52). Helen and Millicent, as they discuss their husbands with one another, appear to agree that it is harder for men to change as they grow older, as Millicent asks about Hattersley “And he will improve – don’t you think so Helen? – he’s only six and twenty yet” and Helen describes him as having “five years the advantage” over Huntington, who she thinks is too old to improve (*Tenant* 284, 284). It is also not just the heroines who are victims of toxic masculinity, but all middle-class women in the novels, further emphasizing the universal victimhood of women.

Men’s Domination over women

Few women in Brontë’s novels manage to make independent livings or live without the help of male relatives, demonstrating how women were dependent on men in almost all aspects of their lives. Women were identified and defined through their

relationships with men: “the Mother, the Wife (the Mistress) who hovers in the background with warm milk, and a warm bed, if not a warm body” (Davidoff and Hall xl). In the early nineteenth century, there was a change in how the census was done, and by 1831 it focused more on the individual man as the representative of a family, rather than the family as a whole, and considered women dependents of male relatives (Davidoff and Hall 230, 279). Legally, it was essentially impossible for a woman to be considered independent, and they needed to have connections to men to participate socially and economically. Helen is dependent on her brother to help her find a home and sell her paintings to support herself and her son, and while Agnes and Mrs. Grey succeed in starting a girl’s school (one of the few acceptable options for middle-class women) after the death of Mr. Grey, they rely on his family’s connections to find students. Even Agnes’s work as a governess required the consent of her father, and she also finds her first position through his family connections (*Agnes Grey* 69, 70). In these texts, even women who want to work or earn their own income must rely on men’s permission, connections, and help in order to do so.

Wives were defined specifically by their relationship to their husbands, who legally owned their wife’s property. Wives were subject to the law of *couverture*, under which “most of a woman's property became her husband's absolutely when she married, whether she brought that property into the marriage or acquired it subsequently” (Poovey 71). Law regarding married women’s property in Britain was not changed until long after the release of Brontë’s novels with the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, which respectively “conceded to wives control of any income earned after marriage” and “allowed wives full control over property which they had possessed at the

time of marriage; this included all forms of capital” (Tosh, *A Man’s Place* 157). *Tenant* depicts the effect that this lack of legal identity had on individual women through Helen’s disastrous marriage to Huntington. Huntington takes Helen’s money and jewels and destroys her painting supplies (which she was planning to use to support herself financially after leaving him) after reading her diary and discovering her plot to escape his house, and claim that he acted “like a man” in doing so (*Tenant* 365). While his invasion of Helen’s privacy, theft, and destruction of her property is certainly morally wrong, it is perfectly legal, and Huntington is easily able to exercise his legal right to her belongings to prevent her from leaving him. While Huntington takes advantage of the law’s bias towards men to be purposefully cruel and controlling of Helen, other men utilized their legal rights over women in order to maintain their domestic authority and control. Agnes’s father, Mr. Grey, insists on controlling the family’s finances himself, despite the fact that “saving was not [his] forte... while he had money, he must spend it,” and refuses Mrs. Grey’s request that he should trust her to manage it in order to maintain his male authority over their household (*Agnes Grey* 62, 64). Brontë challenges the default legal and domestic authority given to men by depicting situations in which a man is clearly unfit for that responsibility (either because of his cruelty or inability), and women are the victims.

The wives in these texts had little option for legal support when they wanted to leave their marriages— almost no women were able to ensure a separation for themselves, and even when they did, it was often the husbands who came out of such situations “on top.” It was not until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (years after Brontë’s novels are set and published) that divorce proceedings were transferred to the

jurisdiction of the civil courts from the Church, and securing a divorce became much more accessible for women (Tosh, *A Man's Place* 158). Before the Act of 1857, "the first major piece of British legislation to focus attention on the anomalous position of married women under the law" which established the Divorce Court, only four women were able to successfully secure a divorce from Parliament (Poovey 51, 56). Set decades before the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, *Tenant* addresses the differences in men and women's legal positions through the Lowboroughs and the Huntingtons after the discovery of the affair between Arthur Huntington and Lady Lowborough by her husband. Lord Lowborough, wealthy and titled, is able to secure for himself a full divorce that allows him to remarry. Before 1857, only wealthy men like Lord Lowborough were able to afford divorces because of the cost involved in petitioning Parliament (Poovey 56). Helen Huntington, the other victim of the same adulterous affair, however, is unable to secure a separation or even her husband's permission to leave his home with their child. *Tenant* is set before the 1839 Infants Custody Act, which allowed separated wives to petition for custody of their children under seven (Hammerton ix). Before the 1839 Act, custody of children in separated marriages was automatically granted to the father; even in cases, such as in *Tenant*, where the father is clearly unfit for parenthood. Huntington utilizes not only his legal right to Helen's property, but his legal custody of their child in order to control her.

Even when men have no legal right to women's property, it was still subject to male control and jurisdiction because their sense of ownership is legitimated by the social norm of male domination over women. Huntington ignores both Helen's and Millicent's requests that he not look through their art, and rudely looks through Millicent's drawings

despite her protests, throwing them on the table carelessly as he goes, steals a small portrait of him that Helen painted despite her obvious embarrassment and attempts to grab it from him, and goes through Helen's art again later, physically grabbing them from her (*Tenant* 144, 155, 160). The rifling through of Agnes's possessions by the Bloomfield children, with Tom as their leader, indicates his feeling of ownership over and entitlement to Agnes's belongings. Tom tells his sisters to burn Agnes's work bag and throw her desk, "containing [her] letters and papers, [her] small amount of cash, and all [her] valuables" out of the third story window so that they may run out into the snow (*Agnes Grey* 94). His feeling of ownership is clearly a result of his understanding of his superiority over her and right as a man, as he expresses similar sentiments about the things that he shares with his sisters. He claims the school room and its contents to be his, disregarding Mary's claims that they are hers too, and he even lifts "his fist with a menacing gesture" when she comments that the garden he has just called his is hers as well (77). Not acknowledging or respecting women's ownership is tied directly to his position as a man, because as the only son Tom knows that he will inherit the house and its contents.

In the texts, a woman's property was never truly her own, and was under constant threat of being taken, destroyed, or shared by men who feel entitled to the property of women. Even the inclusion of Helen's diary itself is proof of this, as Gilbert transcribes it in its entirety in his letter to Jack Halford, including it on the very same page on which Helen tells Gilbert to "Bring it back when you have read it; and don't breathe a word of what it tells you to any living being – I trust to your honour" (*Tenant* 129). He also divides Helen's diary into chapters, and as one critic points out, "not only removes

portions of the text but also, it seems, adds chapter headings to it" (Jay 40). Helen says that she "cannot doubt" that Huntington regularly shared the letters she writes to him while he is in London with his friends (*Tenant* 226). Huntington also shows his letters from Lady Lowborough, with whom he is having an affair, to Helen, and they are full of "extravagant protestations of affections; impetuous longings for a speedy reunion" (323). The right that men feel to women's letters is illustrated by Huntington's rage in response to Helen's refusal to share Millicent's letters with him. She only tells him that Millicent expresses anxiety about her husband in them, prompting Huntington to call her a "detestable little traitor!" (258). The fact that Huntington demands to see Millicent's letters shows that men feel entitled not just to the property of their wives, but of all women.

The men in *Tenant* and *Agnes Grey* misuse women's bodies almost as often as they misuse women's property, illustrating that the ownership men feel over the women themselves, and how this entitlement can lead to violence. There is remarkably little explicit, physical domestic abuse in *Tenant*, and apparently no mention of it in *Agnes Grey*. The prevalence of domestic violence in the middle-class became publicly known through the publication of Divorce Court proceedings in the mid to late nineteenth century (Hammerton 59, 87). In the drunken chaos of the chapter "Social Virtues," Hattersley physically assaults his wife, Millicent, in front of the other men, "shaking her and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the gripe of his powerful fingers" (*Tenant* 277). This instance of abuse is the closest either novel gets to explicit physical domestic abuse, as Millicent begs Hattersley to "remember we are not at home," which suggests that she is imploring her husband to consider what their company will think of his

actions, implying that Millicent likely experiences much worse abuse at home in private where her husband's behavior is not subject to the judgment of his companions (277). Millicent's brother, Hargrave, tries to intervene at Helen's insistence, but Hattersley knocks him in the chest to the floor telling him "Take that for your insolence! – and learn not to interfere between me and mine again," and later tells him "You wanted to interfere between me and my wife... and that is enough to provoke any man" (278, 292). Hattersley's insistence that no man had a right to "interfere" in his treatment of his wife, who he calls "mine," suggests that a husband abusing his wife was a part of his right do what he saw fit with his property.

Although Huntington mistreats Helen emotionally and psychologically, he never does so physically. While Lisa Surridge argues that Brontë disguises domestic abuse in the Huntington marriage in Huntington's abuse of their dog in order to make the novel more palatable to the general public, Brontë's claims in the preface to the second edition of *Tenant* suggest that she had little concern for making her novels "palatable" to her readers:

I may have gone too far, in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but 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? (4)

Instead, the absence of physical domestic violence in the Huntington marriage emphasizes that there were other legitimate reasons for a woman to require a divorce

other than physical abuse. Helen may not be subjected to physical abuse, but the degradation she is subjected to should be enough to grant her a separation.

Brontë's novels are rife with depictions of men verbally and emotionally abusing their wives for their own entertainment, seemingly unable to take women's pain seriously. McMaster has pointed out Brontë's "alignment of fun and laughter with the men, moral earnestness and tears with the women" and the frequency with which male laughter is accompanied by female tears (357). Huntington's main source of entertainment, it seems, is to torment Helen with recollections of his debauchery with his friends as well as past and current affairs. He takes great pleasure in her distress at his actions, and Helen says that:

...his favorite amusement is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa and tell me stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl or the cozening of some unsuspecting husband; and when I express my horror and indignation, he lays it all to the charge of jealousy, and laughs till the tears run down his cheeks. I used to fly into passions or melt into tears at first, but seeing that his delight increased in proportion to my anger and agitation, I have since endeavored to suppress my feelings. (*Tenant* 208)

And that is not the only time Helen's distress is met with Huntington's laughter. When she tries to retrieve her sketches that he has taken, she says that "the more vehemently I insisted, the more he aggravated my distress by his insulting, gleeful laugh," he laughs at her obvious embarrassment as he takes one of her paintings and puts it into his waistcoat, clearly enjoying humiliating and degrading her, and even laughs as he asks her "What! So bitter?" after she catches him kissing Lady Lowborough's hand (161, 155, 233). This

dismissal of and amusement at women's pain evidentially starts young, as Tom Bloomfield torments Agnes for entertainment, encouraging his sisters to destroy her belongings and then "shouting and screaming in exultant glee" (*Agnes Grey* 95). Huntington and his friends encourage young Arthur to laugh with them when Helen is upset, prompting Arthur to ask "Mamma, why don't *you* laugh? Make her laugh, papa – she never will" (*Tenant* 350). Men's abuse of women purely for their own entertainment reflects their inability to recognize women's humanity, as they treat them more like objects that exist for their own personal use.

Women's Subservience

The women in these novels are expected to ignore or trivialize their own desires and prioritize men's, which were considered more important. This ideology is nicely summed up in Mrs. Markham's advice to her daughter, Rose: "You know Rose, in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what's proper to be done, and secondly, what's most agreeably to the gentlemen of the house — anything will do for the ladies" (*Tenant* 57). John Stuart Mill writes about women in 1869, just over twenty years after the publication of *Tenant*, that "It requires an illness in the family, or something else out of the common way, to entitle her to give her own business the precedence over other people's amusement." Sidelineing their own emotions for men was considered to be a part of woman's nature, as well as a wife's duty. Huntington views Helen's refusal to submit to his every whim and insistence on challenging his broken promises and infidelity as against her nature as a woman, blaming her "unnatural, unwomanly conduct" and calling her a "she-tiger" and his "pretty tyrant" (*Tenant* 321,

257). When Helen complains about Huntington's behavior, he accuses her of breaking her vows to "honor and obey him" (235). Helen acknowledges this expectation for her as a wife, and says, at multiple points, that she knows that she has no right to complain about Huntington's behavior because it is her duty to obey him (209). The more submissive a woman was, the more desirable she was as a wife. Hattersley is upfront about his desire for such a wife, "I must have some good, quiet soul that will let me just do what I like and go where I like, keep at home or stay away, without a word of reproach or complaint" (221). Huntington claims that he and his companions are jealous of Hattersley, and tells Helen "you'll make me regret my choice in good earnest, and envy my friend Hattersley and his meek little wife" (257). Millicent constantly suppresses her emotions about her husband's abuse of her, and is praised because "She has no will but his, and is always contented and happy as long as he is enjoying himself" (258). Even though being submissive and obedient was seen as a natural part of womanhood, some women were evidently better at it than others, which made them better wives.

Women in the novels are expected to suppress the display of their emotions or the assertion of their opinions in order to not impact men's comfort. After the death of Helen's father, Huntington complains about the idea of her wearing black because it would bother him, and was "vexed to hear of it, because he saw that [she] was shocked and grieved, and he feared the circumstances would mar his comfort" (*Tenant* 267). Gilbert complains about how Eliza reacts to him moving his affections from her to Helen, and says that he would prefer her to be angry, instead of the "gentle melancholy, a mild, reproachful sadness that cut me to the heart" that she does display, angry that she is

expressing emotions that infringe on his own comfort (69). When Helen rejects Boarhams proposal, he doesn't seem to even care about Helen's feelings towards him, telling her "Therefore, my dearest girl, since *I* am satisfied, why should *you* object on my account, at least" (141). Even outside of marriage and family, men expected women to prioritize their comfort above the woman's own.

Furthermore, men in the novels often blame women for their emotions and reactions to their own behavior which infringe on the men's own comfort. Huntington frequently turns the blame for his own misdeeds (drunkenness, broken promises, and infidelity) onto Helen for catching him and feeling upset, rather than accepting the blame himself for his actions. When Helen first catches Huntington with Lady Lowborough, he claims that "If you had not seen me... it would have done no harm" and blames Helen for choosing "to make it a subject of accusation and distress" (*Tenant* 204, 235). Even when women's emotions are positive or supportive, if they suggest fault in the man, it is often viewed as an attack. After Mr. Grey loses all of their money, Mrs. Grey "thought only of consoling" him, but he twists everything she does to help him to victimize himself, they "were all perverted by this ingenious self-tormentor into further aggravations of his suffering" (*Agnes Grey* 65). The novels show how secrecy is a "survival skill" for women who must suppress their own emotions in order to carry out their roles (Jacobs 211). Helen recounts trying to ignore her own feelings, or even convincing herself her emotions were wrong, for the sake of Huntington. After a fight with Huntington before their engagement after he tries to take a portrait of her that she drew, she regrets upsetting him by tearing the portrait in two "He meant no harm—it was only his joyous, playful spirit; and I, by my acrimonious resentment—so serious, so disproportioned to the offence—

have so wounded his feelings, so deeply offended him, that I fear he will never forgive me—and all for a mere jest” (*Tenant* 162). She does this only after he moves away from her to sit with Anabella (the future Lady Lowborough) and “never glanced towards me, but with a cold unfriendly look I thought him quite incapable of assuming,” punishing her for expressing her displeasure at his behavior (162). Women often suppress their emotions and reactions as a way to protect themselves from backlash from men.

Women were not just expected to obey men, but simultaneously to improve them and be a moralizing influence on them, especially wives, and a woman’s “goodness” was judged directly by her ability to serve and improve the men in her life (her father, husband, brother, son). A woman’s maternal instinct, whether she was a mother or not, was believed to give them “extraordinary power over men” and “theoretically, accounted for the remarkable fact that women were not self-interested and aggressive like men, but self-sacrificing and tender” (Poovey 7). A woman’s husband’s behavior was seen as their responsibility and reflective of their success as a wife. When the 1851 census revealed that there were a great number of unmarried women in Britain, contemporaries worried that women would not be able to “perform those tasks nature and their instincts assigned to them”— suggesting that becoming a wife was essential to being a woman and fulfilling its duties, primarily the moral influence and improvement of men (Poovey 4). Lord Lowborough sets out to find a wife with this explicit goal in mind after realizing that his friends will never help him with his gambling, drinking, and opium addictions and will “take the devil’s part against me” (*Tenant* 195). After meeting Anabella (Lady Lowborough to be), he tells his companions “She will save me, body and soul, from destruction” (197). He not only expects a wife to help improve him, but to *save* him. A

woman is a man's "moral hope and spiritual guide" (Poovey 10). This is also certainly what Helen expects for herself to do for Huntington in their marriage, stating that "I long to deliver him from his faults" before they are even engaged (*Tenant* 176). Women were expected to be directly involved in their husbands behavior, which, for many of the men in these novels, means their practice of toxic masculinity, which emphasized characteristics that are often antithetical to the moralizing influence women were meant to have.

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN'S RESPONSES

Despite the fact that the women in the novels share their gender, class, and the experience of toxic masculinity, they are not unified in their response to it, or even the belief that should be changed. I have identified four different types of responses to toxic masculinity seen in the middle-class women in the novels: opposition (Saviors), acceptance (Survivors), indulgence (Mothers of Men), and appropriation (Manly Women). Women often interact with women in other groups, with some women helping one another, and others contradicting and even trying to prevent the success of others. While we see four different types of responses, each woman in the novel only responds in one distinct way, and no woman appears to change the way she responds. Because, as I will show, these women's responses are dependent on their upbringing and their position in life, and the circumstances that determine a woman's response type are typically out of her own control, changing their response type seems unlikely. While toxic masculinity in the novels includes specific characteristics that all the men in the texts practice to different degrees, women's responses to it vary not in degree, but in type.

While nearly every relationship with a man requires the women to respond to toxic masculinity, the specific relationships a woman has with men (husband, father, brother, son) matters to both her experience of toxic masculinity and her ability to respond to it in different ways. While all women in these novels depend on men, some do so more than others, and the more a woman depends on a man, the less able she is able to respond to his practice of toxic masculinity, or toxic masculinity in general, with anything other than acceptance. The fact that every woman in the novel with a son

responds with either opposition or, more commonly, indulgence, suggests that a mother's role as moral teacher and her influence over the development of her son's masculinity prompts her to respond to toxic masculinity in only one of those two ways. I will discuss the possible reasons these women have for indulging or opposing their sons' practice of toxic masculinity in their designated sections. Women's relationships with other women are equally important, as different types of responses are taught and learned between women in the novels. Mothers (or maternal figures) often teach their daughters how to respond to toxic masculinity by giving them direct advice, but aunts, sisters, and friends often impact the responses of other women through their influence or the example of their own marriage. Women seem not only aware that they all must respond to toxic masculinity, but try to influence one another's responses.

Opposition (Saviors)

As only the two heroines, Helen and Agnes, are in this group, this is the least common type of response from women in the novels, but the one Brontë most thoroughly explores. These women not only find fault in the toxic masculinity they see being practiced by the men around them, but actively desire to challenge or change those characteristics for the purpose of saving either themselves, the men practicing it, or other women. It is only the characteristics of toxic masculinity, which emphasizes damaging or dangerous characteristics, that these women challenge, not masculinity in general, which is evident by the fact that the women don't actively try to change the men who don't present toxic masculinity, such as Gilbert and Mr. Weston. The marriages of the women who raised them may have influenced Helen and Agnes's idea of what marriage should

be, and how men should act, making them more likely to question and challenge masculinity. Mrs. Maxwell, who raised Helen, directly encourages her to find a man with good principles, “good sense, respectability, and moderate wealth,” and the Grey’s marriage was based on companionship and affection (*Tenant* 132). Helen and Agnes, though very different in their situations and abilities to take actions against toxic masculinity, have the same core goals of reforming men’s morality and revealing their essential good within.

The primary target of Helen’s efforts to reform toxic masculinity for the majority of *Tenant* is her husband, Huntington, who she wants to “save” almost immediately after meeting him. She tells Mrs. Maxwell, who challenges her engagement to him, “I think I might have influence sufficient enough to save him from some errors... and sometimes he says that if he had me always by his side he should never do or say a wicked thing” (*Tenant* 149). Helen embraces the expectation for her to be a positive, moral influence on her husband, and is motivated by her strong religious beliefs and faith. She says “Oh! If I could but believe that Heaven designed me for this!” (153). When Mrs. Maxwell warns her about Huntington’s friends, who are “loose, profligate young men... whose chief delight is to wallow in vice, and vie with each other who can run faster and farthest down the headlong road, to the place prepared for the devil and his angels,” Helen tells her “I will save him from them” (150). Before they are even engaged, she frequently and repeatedly alludes to his “essential goodness” and “sanguine temperament” to argue against Mrs. Maxwell’s and Millicent’s warnings against marrying him (153, 149). But, less than three months into their marriage, she admits that she was wrong to marry Huntington:

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...I was wilfully blind; and now, instead of regretting that I did not discern his full character before I was indissolubly bound to him, I am *glad*, for it has saved me a great deal of battling with my conscience, and a great deal of consequent trouble and pain; and, whatever I *ought* to have done, my duty now is plainly to love him and to cleave to him, and this just tallies with my inclination. (*Tenant* 202)

Helen regrets ignoring the warnings of her friends and family, and seems to blame herself for not knowing Huntington well enough before marrying him. She also claims, just days later, that “for the first time in my life, and I hope the last, I wished I had not married him” (210). Even though Helen regrets her marriage mere months after her wedding, she cannot leave it socially, legally, or, for her, morally, and considers it her duty as his wife to try and reform the toxic masculinity of her husband for his sake as well as her own.

Rather than being submissive, as wives were expected to be, and accepting Huntington’s authority, Helen frequently verbally challenges him, reminding him of lies, broken promises, and misdeeds, even in the face of his insistence that she is being unwomanly for doing so. She even challenges his own high opinion of himself when he complains that her faith is interfering with giving him the attention that he thinks he deserves:

I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker as I can... and not one atom more of it to you than he allows. What are *you*, sir, that 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, every blessing I ever did or ever can enjoy – and yourself among the rest – if you *are* a blessing, which I am half inclined to doubt. (204)

Helen is already, early in their marriage, intentionally trying to teach Huntington lessons against his self-conceit and arrogance, some of the main characteristics of toxic masculinity (212). She attempts to get him to stop drinking and indulging in excess in other ways, by “incessant perseverance, by kindness, and firmness, and vigilance, by coaxing, daring, and determination,” dedicating all of her time that is not spent with her newborn son, Arthur, on him (260). When he tells her that he cannot bear her treatment of him, she says “Can’t bear what? – to be reminded of the promises you have broken?” (255). She writes to him in London “sternly and coldly,” and even threatens him, claiming that if he continues to degrade himself in London, he will lose his health as well as her affection (245, 257). She has no sympathy for him, telling him “And why should I pity *you*? What is the matter with you?... There is *nothing* the matter with you... except what you have willfully brought upon yourself against my earnest exhortation and entreaty” (256). Her position as middle-class wife and the social duties and expectations of that role prevent her from taking certain actions in efforts to reform her husband, such as when she must allow the Lowboroughs to stay in their home after discovering the affair between Lady Lowborough and Huntington, or being forced to remain in their house because of Huntington’s fear of becoming the subject of gossip. Helen’s success in reforming Huntington, however, is limited by his exercise of his authority over her.

Helen is more desperate to save her son, Arthur, from the effects of toxic masculinity. She even claims that she would rather Arthur die in their escape than remain

under his father's influence, "it would be better that he should die with me, than that he should live with his father" (*Tenant* 394). After Arthur is born, Helen says, "god has sent me a soul to educate for heaven" and that she will "be his shield, instructor, friend..." and wonders how she is going to teach Arthur to respect his father without admiring the example that he is setting for him (239, 246). She sees reforming Arthur as her moral and religious duty in addition to her maternal duty. Helen's first efforts to undo Huntington's influence on Arthur are to teach him to hate alcohol, which she does by making him "him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine, when he was sick" (31). She also encourages him to enjoy and value spending time with her, rather than to disdain and devalue women and femininity as toxic masculinity would dictate, declaring "I trust my son will *never* be ashamed to love his mother!" (29). Helen's influence on Arthur is challenged by Mrs. Markham, who not only criticizes Helen at length and argues with her about how she is raising Arthur, but goes as far to ask their vicar to speak to her about it, putting social and religious pressure on her, but is not successful in stopping her. Helen is the only mother in Brontë's novels to oppose her son's toxic masculinity rather than indulge it, but she is only able to successfully do so after escaping Huntington and removing herself from his control and Arthur from his influence.

Agnes's stakes in challenging or changing toxic masculinity are less personal, as she is not the primary victim, but still motivated by the same moral compass and desire to be a savior for those who are harmed by it. Originally looking forward to being a governess and teaching children, she is soon horrified to discover that toxic masculinity is taught to her students by their mothers, fathers, and relatives. Her first position is at the Bloomfield house, and immediately after meeting her, Tom claims authority over the

entirety of the nursery as his (despite the fact that he shares it with his sisters), declares that he will use a whip and spurs on his horse, insists on the necessity of hitting his sister Mary, and recounts torturing animals for fun (*Agnes Grey* 77). Agnes, shocked at his presentation and practice of toxic masculinity, quickly determines to reform him and “show him the error of his ways,” and tells him when he wants to find more animals to torture that “I am determined you shall do nothing of the kind, as long as I have power to prevent it” (79). She is aware of the limitations of her power, but willing to use it to its full extent to challenge his behavior.

Agnes is clearly determined to challenge toxic masculinity for the purpose of reforming what she sees as immoral behavior, but her efforts are limited by her position as governess, and especially the restriction placed upon her by the mothers for whom she works, who give her no way to control their children, not even allowing her to punish them. Mrs. Bloomfield, an indulgent mother who is determined her son face no hardships, fires Agnes when she tries to intervene in Tom’s animal abuse by crushing a nest of baby birds before he is able to torture and kill them (*Agnes Grey* 107). She is also unable to reform the toxic masculinity appropriated by the teenage daughters of the Murray family (see the section on appropriation for more details), but is able to leave that position herself. Agnes remains unmarried for the majority of the novel, primarily encountering toxic masculinity in the families for whom she works, not her own. While her success in reforming her students’ behavior may be tied to her success as a governess, it is not reflective of her success as a woman, as Helen’s success in reforming her husband and son is.

Acceptance (Survivors)

The majority of the women in the novels passively accept toxic masculinity and the position of women in society. This is by far the largest category of women, including Millicent Hargrave, Mrs. Maxwell, Rose Markham, Eliza Millward, and Esther Hargrave from *Tenant*; and Mrs. Grey, Mary Grey, and Mary Anne Bloomfield from *Agnes Grey*. Many of these women recognize toxic masculinity and the way it affects women as something that should be challenged, but are unable to do so themselves. Whereas the women in the other groups often share specific goals and aims about what to do to or with toxic masculinity (stop it, increase it, use it to their advantage), the women in this category are aiming to survive it. Surviving toxic masculinity, in the context of these novels, means successfully fulfilling one's gender roles of becoming a wife and mother, which were considered essential to a woman's life. Acceptance is the closest to not responding to toxic masculinity that is shown to be possible for women in the novels, and presents essentially no challenges to the women who respond this way because it is how women were expected to respond to their subjection as women. These are the women who are either unable to respond to toxic masculinity in any other way because they rely on men who practice it for their livelihood, or are able to accept it and still live comfortably because they are not victimized by toxic masculinity to the same extent that so many other women in the novels are. I will focus on two women: Millicent Hattersley, from *Tenant*, who exemplifies the first type of woman, and Mrs. Grey, from *Agnes Grey*, who exemplifies the second.

Millicent's inordinate dependence on her brother and then husband, who both practice toxic masculinity, makes it impossible for her to respond in any way other than

with acceptance. Mrs. Hargrave instills in Millicent the idea that being a good wife means being obedient, submissive, and docile, and it is likely the influence of Mrs. Hargrave, who Millicent says she “cannot bear to disappoint,” on her that makes her so unable to respond to toxic masculinity with anything other than passive submission (*Tenant* 222). Millicent is easily pressured into accepting Hattersley’s proposal, originally meaning to decline by giving an “evasive, half negative answer” which was construed by her mother and Hattersley as an acceptance, but Millicent “had not the courage to contradict them” (222). Millicent writes to Helen that “[Hattersley] frightened me with his abrupt manners and strange hectoring ways, and I dread the thought of marrying him” (221). Her extreme passivity may not be the best survival tactic, however, as Hattersley blames it for his treatment of her, telling Helen, “how can I help teasing her when she’s so invitingly meek and mim – when she lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that’s enough?” (289). Huntington says, enviously, that Hattersley “might amuse himself just as he pleased, in regular bachelor style, and [Millicent] never complained of neglect... She never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, do what he will” (257). Millicent learns how to respond to toxic masculinity from her mother, who indulges it, and as a result becomes the woman most victimized by toxic masculinity in either novel.

Mrs. Grey, Agnes’s mother, is in a very different position than Millicent Hargrave, and is perhaps the least victimized by toxic masculinity, because her encounters with it are mostly limited to her husband, Mr. Grey, and his sense of authority and superiority over her. He insists on controlling the family’s finances as domestic authority, despite his foolishness and financial irresponsibility, whereas Mrs. Grey is “highly accomplished, well informed, and fond of employment” and even offers to

manage the finances (*Agnes Grey* 62). Mrs. Grey is forced to obey and listen to him during their marriage and deal with his selfish nature, but he only practices the authority of toxic masculinity. Like Agnes and Mr. Weston, the Greys appear to have a marriage based on companionship and equality, but in reality, the man still retains power and authority based solely on the virtue of his gender. Being a good wife and mother is also an important goal of Mrs. Grey, and she does all of the housework herself, as opposed to having a servant, after their family loses their fortune, without complaining or blaming Mr. Grey (65). While Mrs. Grey is domestically and financially impacted by her husband's toxic masculinity, she is free from physical or emotional abuse, and is able to accept toxic masculinity and still perform her roles of wife and mother.

Indulgence (Mothers of Men)

These women—or rather, these mothers, because every woman in this category is a mother—are united by their indulgence of toxic masculinity, typically in their sons. They do not see toxic masculinity as something to be challenged, but argue in favor of it. Included in this category are Mrs. Markham, Mrs. Hargrave, Mrs. Huntington, Mrs. Bloomfield, Mrs. Murray, Grandmama Bloomfield, and Lady Ashby (Rosalie's mother-in-law). Because these women are all already mothers to sons at the start of the novels, and we do not get insight into their early lives, it is impossible to say how they were impacted by the influence of their mothers or other women. Every woman with a son (except one, Helen) is in this group, and these women likely indulge their sons' toxic masculinity because of their duty to obey their husbands who teach their sons to practice it. Even mothers whose husbands are no longer alive, such as Mrs. Markham and Mrs.

Hargrave, continue to indulge the toxic masculinity taught to their sons by their fathers. Furthermore, challenging their sons' toxic masculinity could be seen as a threat to their sons' masculine identity, or as feminizing him, which Helen is accused of doing to Arthur. By indulging their sons' toxic masculinity, these mothers give their sons a greater sense of their own masculine identity in the context of these novels, which reflects positively on them as mothers and potentially grants them more power.

These mothers' indulgence is clearly gendered, and is only for the benefit of their sons, never their daughters. This is evident in how Mrs. Murray praises Charles as her "peculiar darling," but doesn't say a word about her daughters, and Mrs. Hargrave's demands that her daughters get married quickly and to wealthy men "because she is determined her cherished son shall be enabled to 'hold up his head with the highest gentlemen in the land'" (*Agnes Grey* 125; *Tenant* 230). Mrs. Markham, when criticized for spoiling her sons by the vicar, readily admits that it is based on their gender, and says "I wish to goodness he had a son himself! He wouldn't be so ready with his advice to other people then; – he'd see what it is to have a couple of boys to keep in order" (*Tenant* 19). Gruner even argues that Mrs. Markham's overbearing love for Gilbert is mirrored in Helen's education of Arthur, and that Helen herself is an indulgent mother (309). This idea is replicated by Mrs. Markham, who criticizes how often Helen keeps Arthur with her, calling it "foolish fondness" that will lead to Arthur's ruin, and insists that "Even at *his* age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron string; he should learn to be ashamed of it" (*Tenant* 29). However, Helen makes it clear that her attention and care for Arthur is not motivated by his gender. She claims that she would treat a daughter the same way, and importantly, never indulges or encourages in Arthur the characteristics of

toxic masculinity. These mothers' clear preference for their sons over their daughters only encourages their sons' sense of superiority over women, as well as encourages their daughters to accept it, leading to a cycle of women's victimhood to toxic masculinity.

These mothers indulge the characteristics of specifically toxic masculinity, and focus solely on fulfilling their sons' comfort or desires and ensuring that they face no opposition or struggle. Their indulgences vary from mostly harmless, such as Mrs. Markham's insistence that Rose make a fresh pot of tea for Gilbert when he is late to outright dangerous, such as Mrs. Bloomfield's permission of Tom's torturing animals (*Tenant* 57; *Agnes Grey* 79). Mrs. Bloomfield and Mrs. Murray both force Agnes to do their young son's schoolwork for them but still give them the credit and the praise, and specifically, in the case of Charles Murray, to protect him from knowing that is not as well educated as other boys his age (*Agnes Grey* 87, 125). Mrs. Markham's indulgences of Gilbert are explicitly the cause of his sense of superiority, as he says that "My mother had done her utmost to persuade me that I was capable of great achievement" (*Tenant* 11). Helen blames Huntington's behavior on his "foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent...doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress" (177). Gilbert and Huntington both act childish and infantile as a result of all of their mother's indulgences of their toxic masculinity. After overhearing Helen and Mr. Lawrence having a conversation he believes proves that they are having an affair, Gilbert throws a tantrum, saying "like a passionate child, I dashed myself on the ground and lay there in a paroxysm of anger and despair" (107). Huntington appears to be unable to behave like an adult, and Helen complains about his childish and immature behavior in church, as he holds his pray book upside down and draws a caricature of the

preacher, and that she cannot get him to “write or speak in real, solid earnest” (178, 201). He also relies on Helen for amusement, particularly when the weather constrains him indoors, as a child would his mother, and she says he is “as restless and hard to amuse as a spoiled child, – and almost as full of mischief too, especially when wet weather keeps him within doors” (225, 265). By indulging the toxic masculinity of their sons, these women only make more women victims of toxic masculinity, including the sons themselves.

Because these women are upper-middle class and typically have social status, they have the resources to indulge their sons and very little standing in their way. The main challenge these women face is often Saviors’ efforts to challenge the exact characteristics of toxic masculinity they aim to indulge in their sons. Mrs. Bloomfield faces opposition from Agnes, who tries to teach Tom lessons against physical cruelty towards his sisters and animals, but is able to simply fire her when she desires (*Agnes Grey* 107). Mrs. Markham attempts to dissuade Gilbert’s interest in Helen, telling him that he is above her and “If you knew your own value as I do, you wouldn’t dream of it” (*Tenant* 45). Mrs. Markham is particularly suspicious of Helen because of the rumors that go around about her, and judges how she raises Arthur and her “lamentable ignorance on... household manners, and all the niceties of cookery, and such things, that every lady should be familiar with” (15). Mrs. Markham is not only critical of Helen’s treatment of Gilbert, but of Helen’s treatment of her own son, as explored previously. The women’s quarrel about how Helen is raising Arthur shows the degree to which these women were concerned about the responses of other women. The direct opposition between the goals of Saviors, or other women who are deeply harmed by the practice of toxic masculinity,

and those of Mothers of Men, who are deeply invested in continuing it, shows how women's responses to toxic masculinity affect one another.

Appropriation (Manly Women)

Lady Lowborough from *Tenant* and Rosalie and Matilda Murray from *Agnes Grey* set themselves apart from the other women by appropriating toxic masculinity for themselves rather than trying to influence how it is practiced by men. Lady Lowborough and Rosalie Murray both appropriate the sexual excess and indulgence, sense of superiority, and self-conceit of toxic masculinity. It is important to clarify that Rosalie and Lady Lowborough are not simply utilizing their female sexuality for power, but appropriating the sexual indulgence of toxic masculinity alongside other characteristics as a part of their efforts to appropriate it. Matilda, on the other hand, appropriates the brutality and focus on camaraderie and all male spaces of toxic masculinity as she spends most of her time hunting with other men in the stable house or other masculine spaces. These women adopt the practice of the characteristics of toxic masculinity while rejecting more traditionally feminine gender roles in order to gain privileges often associated with masculine identity: independence, freedom, and status.

Though the characteristics of toxic masculinity may not be as toxic (that is, harmful) when appropriated by women, these women are reflecting those characteristics that are associated with toxic masculinity in these novels, not the characteristics of other types of masculinity. The characteristics of toxic masculinity function differently in a woman rather than in a man because women do not benefit from the power of hegemonic masculinity, and their appropriation of the characteristics of toxic masculinity is

disconnected from the legal, economic, and social sanction of men's practice of it. Halberstam's work on female masculinity makes the case for the importance of researching masculinity as it appears in women, and argues that it is when masculinity occurs in non-dominant male bodies that it can truly be observed, arguing that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam 2). Though Halberstam is not referring to toxic masculinity specifically, this idea shows how the appropriation of characteristics of toxic masculinity by female characters emphasizes the fact that they are thought to be only appropriate for men. While women can present and appropriate toxic masculinity's characteristics, the women who appropriate them are met with scorn and suspicion, and they cannot truly practice it because they will never receive the same support that men receive.

Women's appropriation of toxic masculinity is never as harmful as men's practice of toxic masculinity, and we can see this through the differences in what happens to Helen and what happens to Lord Lowborough after he discovers the affair between Lady Lowborough and Huntington. Whereas in the Huntington marriage, Helen is the victim of the affair and the one who suffers for it; in the Lowborough marriage, Lady Lowborough must leave and the victim, Lord Lowborough, though emotionally hurt, is fine legally, socially, and financially. The men that Rosalie hurts with her flirtations also end up ultimately fine, and only emotionally hurt. Toxic masculinity is defined by the fact that its practice is harmful, but men's authority over women helped to protect them from being harmed by women's behavior, even when they are appropriating the characteristics of toxic masculinity.

Lady Lowborough separates herself from the other women and aligns herself totally with the men in her appropriation of toxic masculinity. She “internalized the male standard that sees piety and kindness as weakness” and “tries to act like a man” (Senf 453). Her marriage to Lord Lowborough was purely to gain his title and the status it would bring her, and Huntington recaps a discussion he had with her before her engagement to Lord Lowborough by saying that “the artful minx loves nothing about him, but his title and pedigree, and ‘delightful old family seat’” (*Tenant* 197). While her title satisfies her ego and adds to her sense of superiority, she indulges sexual excess by having affair outside of her marriage with Arthur Huntington. Huntington says that, when it comes to men and women having extramarital affairs, that “The cases are different... It is woman’s nature to be constant – to love one and only one, blindly, tenderly, and for ever – bless them, dear creatures!” (236). Lady Lowborough appears to enjoy tormenting Lord Lowborough with their affair, but with “more of a malice and less of playfulness” than Huntington has when he torments Helen, potentially giving Lady Lowborough the appearance of a type of brutality (229). Her sense of superiority is made obvious by the similarities between how she treats her husband and how Huntington treats Helen, as both relish and enjoy the emotional abuse of their spouse. Like the men, Lady Lowborough pressures Lord Lowborough to drink alcohol and to join the other men in their camaraderie, and Lord Lowborough calls her, along with his male friends, “tempter[s]” (271). Her behavior associates her more closely with the men of the novel, rather than the women.

She also rejects the characteristics and accepted roles of womanhood, failing to perform her duty as wife, and never caring for her children. She “never loved children,”

further distancing herself from the expectations of womanhood (348). Caring for their children was seen as a basic feature of femininity (Davidoff and Hall 235). Lady Lowborough seems to consider other women her competition rather than her allies, and is Helen's main rival for Huntington's affection. After her affair with Huntington, she even delights in treating Helen cruelly, and has a "malicious smile of triumph" when she thinks Helen is jealous of her affair with her husband (*Tenant* 312). McMaster even goes as far as to claim that the other women in the novel consider Lady Lowborough an embarrassment to their sex (357). Ultimately, Lady Lowborough is punished for her appropriation of toxic masculinity, and "sunk, at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness" (*Tenant* 456).

Rosalie appropriates the same sexual excess and superiority of toxic masculinity as Lady Lowborough does, but without as much cruelty and malice. She enjoys flirting and aims to break the hearts of as many men as possible before her marriage, refers to the men she enraptures as "targets," and relishes in the envy of other women (*Agnes Grey* 176, 135). Her coquetry is not only a form of sexual indulgence, but a way to flatter her ego and confirm her high opinion of herself. Like the men who feel indignant when women appear to be uninterested in them, Rosalie is in offended disbelief when men seem uninterested in her. She throws herself into her seat after Mr. Weston fails to look at her, crying that he has lost out on a "A bow from [her], that would have raised him to the seventh heaven!" (190). She even attends church with the goal of being admired, clearly reflective of the conceited nature and arrogance of toxic masculinity (162). Agnes talks about Rosalie's self-conceit, which is very similar to the male characters', and says that

“Rosalie knew all her charms, and thought them even greater than they were, and valued them more highly than she ought to have done, had they been three times as great” (123). Rosalie’s sense of superiority is similar to that of many of the middle-class men in the novels, as she is unable to recognize the humanity of servants and disrespects them. She says about the servants “I never care about the footmen; they’re mere automatons — it’s nothing to them what their superiors think — if they presume to think as all — of course, nobody cares for that. It would be a pretty thing indeed, if we were to be tongue tied by our servants” (233). She acts very similarly to Lady Lowborough, suggesting that she may meet the same fate in her own unhappy marriage.

Rosalie further aligns herself with men by distancing herself from traditional female roles. She does not want to get married, disdains the idea of love because she thinks “It is quite beneath the dignity of a woman to do such a thing,” but ultimately marries for status and wealth, saying “I *must* have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me” (*Agnes Grey* 172). As a wife and mother, Rosalie fails to perform what would have been her womanly duty, and even abhors it. She complains to Agnes, “And so you think I would lay myself out for his amusement! No; that’s not *my* idea of a wife. It’s the husband’s part to please the wife, not hers to please him...,” expressing opinions contrary to the expectations for wives at the time and expressed by other characters in the novels (172). She shows no inclination towards family and domesticity, claiming to hate her husband and showing no interest in her baby daughter. She tells Agnes “I detest that man!” when Agnes sees Rosalie’s husband, Lord Ashby, for the first time, and compares her baby daughter to a dog and questions the point of becoming attached to “it” when there is no guarantee she will survive (236, 238). She complains that her husband “does

nothing but grumble and scold when he's in a bad humor, talk disgusting nonsense when he's in a good one, and go to sleep on the sofa when he's too stupid for either, which is most frequently the case now, when he has nothing to do but to sot over his wine," and compares herself to a prisoner or slave (235, 237). Rosalie's regretful marriage serves as a punishment for her appropriation of toxic masculinity, and any of the privileges of masculinity she enjoyed while appropriating it become unavailable to her in her marriage.

While Lady Lowborough and Rosalie appropriate toxic masculinity while still presenting femininity, Matilda both privately practices and publicly presents toxic masculinity as she hunts, swears, and prefers spending time with her father, uncle, grooms, and coachmen. Agnes says that Matilda, "though she would have made a fine young lad, was not quite what a young lady ought to be" (*Agnes Grey* 205). Matilda not only swears, which she "learnt from papa, you ass! And his jolly friends" but relishes in Agnes's reaction, exclaiming "Oh, Miss Grey, how shocked you are! I'm so glad!" (124). While the men typically try to refrain from cursing around women, Matilda does it intentionally. She does this all while "vigorously cracking a hunting-whip, which she habitually carried in her hand" (134). The whip has been associated with the expression of the "social violence of male gendering" (McClintock 80). This association between whips and male violence is seen in both of Brontë's novels, as Gilbert Markham uses his whip to strike Mr. Lawrence's head, "swift and sudden as a flash of lightning"; and Tom Bloomfield "manfully" uses his whip on his toy pony while showing off to Agnes (*Tenant* 116; *Agnes Grey* 77). Matilda's favorite places are decidedly masculine, "the yards, the stables, and the dog-kennels" (*Agnes Grey* 168). Her preference for spending time with the men hunting or at the stables clearly associate her with men, and

specifically, through its emphasis on hunting, with toxic masculinity. Matilda treats her dog, Snap, harshly and violently, like the men do, kicking and hitting it (168). She is elated when her dog catches and kills a hare that “cried out just like a child,” reflecting the brutality and violence of toxic masculinity (208). Furthermore, her delight at the sound of an animal crying out like a child further separates her from other women in the novel, who likely would have responded with more maternal instinct and compassion. When applied to a woman, “manly” was a rare compliment; though women were never able to reach full masculine status (Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities* 92). Matilda’s boyish behavior is only permitted temporarily— as she gets closer to marriageable age and nears coming out into society, her mother forbids her from her favorite places and becomes insistent that Agnes teach Matilda to be more lady-like (*Agnes Grey* 205, 206). Matilda does not face punishment by the text, but likely because she is still young and able to change before society considers her practice of toxic masculinity and rejection of femininity unacceptable, and requires her to align with the expectations for women.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I have shown that in these novels, British middle-class men practice toxic masculinity in ways that were harmful to all of society, and that women had to respond to it. While Brontë's male characters and their behavior may be cruel, depraved, and immoral, they are not, according to her claims in her preface to the second edition of *Tenant*, unrealistic. Crucially though, the men who practice toxic masculinity do so because they have been taught and encouraged to by their fathers, mothers, and their communities. She not only establishes that toxic masculinity and women's victimhood in it are supported by the legal and economic positions of men and women, but by the social and cultural attitudes towards men and women. Women's identities were tied to their position to men; thus women's actions and behaviors were viewed within the lens of this gender hierarchy—women were either performing their feminine duties of pleasing, obeying, and gratifying men; or they were failing to do so. By establishing the reality of women's experiences with toxic masculinity, she is able to explore the ways in which women variously responded with opposition, acceptance, indulgence, or appropriation. While the majority of women have no other option but to accept toxic masculinity, some are able to challenge its practice, while others embrace it and indulge it in men or appropriate its characteristics for themselves. A woman's response to toxic masculinity, however, impacts and influences the responses of other women as well. While the women may not be united in their responses to toxic masculinity, they are certainly connected, and these texts show that women must not only respond to toxic masculinity, but to the responses of other women.

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