

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 16.2 (Summer 2020)

Guns and Blood: Reading *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in the Age of #MeToo

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<1>For many of us working on gender-based and sexual violence, the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings in September 2018 replicated the well-known script of the Victorian rape trial in which a smart woman, accusing a powerful man of sexual misconduct, received the painful reminder that, no matter how reliable her testimony, her word will not suffice to curtail his ambition.<1> Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, owing to her expertise as a Stanford psychology professor, served in the dual role of accuser and expert witness and was compelled to explain how her own trauma had been coded into her hippocampus. As usual, her interlocutors, along with the media and the public, hungered for more facts, as if any amount of detail could have ever cost Kavanaugh, protected as he was by coterie of powerful men and buoyed by an angry performance of injured masculinity, his seat on this most conservative of American institutions. However, due to Blasey Ford's performance of polite accommodation and her impressive CV, even skeptical observers were led to concede that something must have happened to her. Someone, definitely not the accused, committed the violation she claimed she remembered.<2> This would be plausible since we live in a world where such violations occur so frequently as to be virtually unremarkable. The detail Blasey Ford offered was insufficient—or that's the story we were told. What listening to Blasey Ford's testimony drove home, once more, is that detailed narration of assault, arguably the main strategy of raising awareness of and battling gender-based violence, is still entirely insufficient to convince the public that male sexual entitlement should be checked. The communal outcry after the hearings, part of a tidal wave of online activism and consciousness-raising efforts known as the #MeToo movement, however, was new. The Kavanaugh hearings magnified and focused many women's anger, and helped spark the realization that we are, in fact, still living in a rape culture, a sociality that is entirely permeated by the knowledge that men may violate women's psychological and physical integrity, that they will be rewarded for such actions, and that it is impossible to do anything about it.<3> Somehow, men's memory remains more reliable, their individual boundaries more impermeable, their hold on power stronger than women's.

<2>I happened to re-read Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* right around that time. The Kavanaugh hearings had crystallized two problematics for me which informed my reading and which I wish to develop in this paper. First, *The Tenant* showcases brilliantly that sexual violence is a *dispersed* phenomenon, which is also the single most important takeaway of the #MeToo movement. Rather than imagining sexual violence as inhering in the minds of one man and one woman, where his word is opposed to hers, *The Tenant* argues that this violence is simply everywhere and invites readers to comprehend and address the consequences of violence communally rather than individually. Second, the latter half of this paper reflects on the critical

insight that violence, and often merely its threat, serves to stabilize a certain kind of subject—an autonomous, authoritative one, like Judge Kavanaugh—that relies on repeated “cruelties” of “repudiation” of other people’s identities to perpetuate itself into the future (Butler 114-115). I suggest that literary scholars working on sexual violence must work to abandon this authoritative, liberal subject as their tacit central category of analysis and instead embrace a care ethics that is attentive to humans’ essential interrelatedness and the individual and collective harms occasioned by rape culture. Violence is not an individual act that arises spontaneously; it is the product of a certain cultural figuration that affects and, arguably, is perpetuated by everyone.

The Gilbert Problem

<3>Much recent scholarly work has focused on how Victorian texts, both fictional and non-fictional, represent and occlude instances of rape and sexual violence—and scholars have been increasingly pressed to articulate what we’re supposed to *do* with those representations. The latest uptick in publications on marital violence and sexual assault in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* indicates that there is growing scholarly interest, some of it a renewal of second-wave feminist critical endeavors, in how Brontë, like her sisters, “exposes a social and existential hierarchy based on violence,” as Maggie Berg puts it (20). By paying attention to violent interactions with sexual resonances, I will first summarize how the novel imagines (and critiques) the patriarchal hellscape which Helen Huntingdon, the protagonist of *The Tenant*, precariously navigates. Brontë illustrates that sexual violence is a technology that works to “structurally disempower people (in general, though not always, women)” (Spampinato, *Awful Nearness* 40). Potential and actual sexual violence in *The Tenant* is scattered across its pages, reaching into each household and informing most of Helen’s interactions with men. Even the novel’s hero, Gilbert Markham, avails himself of such violence to safeguard his own power, and his ultimate reform can be considered partial at best.

<4>Helen’s marriage to Arthur Huntingdon is symbolically circumscribed by the hunt, a homosocial practice during which men compete with each other for status and prestige. Hunting, linked to heterosexual courtship in the novel, not only signals “men’s distance from women and other socially inferior beings” (Berg 24), but functions as a culturally sanctioned and hyper-visible practice of violence, continuously reminding readers that men alone have the right to decide which bodies are marked for breeding, exchange, or extermination. The fact that every man in the novel carries a gun signals the implicit—and often explicit—threat to the physical integrity of weaker animals, such as women, children, and particularly fowl. The gun fortifies otherwise unstable contours of male subjectivity by rejecting other beings’ claims to autonomy, life, and honor (Shuffelton 388). Helen, like a conventional romance heroine, is the prey here; she is pursued by Arthur, Walter Hargrave, and Gilbert Markham, all of whom are also depicted as tirelessly congregating with other men to hunt. The courtship between Arthur and Helen takes place almost entirely during hunting parties, and Arthur’s interactions with Helen are always observed by other men; for Arthur, courtship is a competitive sport, and his friends are the main audience. Arthur famously meets Helen at the end of a long day of shooting “all spattered and splashed ... and stained with the blood of his prey” (Brontë 156). Later, when their marriage devolves, Arthur hosts alcohol-infused shooting parties. During one of them, he offers Helen to “any one among you, that can fancy her,” inviting his carousing friends to rape her (Brontë 302).<4> Hunting in *The Tenant* not only registers a fatal cultural conflation of sex and

violence, but metonymically encapsulates the fact that male selfhood in Brontë's culture (and in ours as well) is produced through homosocial bonding, the sexual pursuit of women, and the authority to kill or maim without state interference.<5>

<5>We do not know if Arthur, in fact, rapes Helen; however, there are plenty of scenes depicting non-consensual physical contact between them. An abusive dynamic pervades their marriage and must condition their sexual relationship. During the months after their wedding, Helen complains in her diary that she “could do with less caressing and more rationality. I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend, if I might choose ... I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ardour” (Brontë 188). These words indicate that Helen has little to no control over their physical contact and, at minimum, suggest unwanted intimacy, if not sexual abuse. During that time, Arthur also showers Helen with unwanted anecdotes of his previous sexual escapades. Her “horror and indignation” at being made to listen to these stories are a “delight” to him (Brontë 193). Arthur further uses physical intimacy to resolve the disputes arising from these non-consensual confidences: “he tries to kiss and soothe me into smiles again—never were his caresses so little welcome as then!” (Brontë 193). Needless to say, these strategies would count as sexual assault today (Doub 15), and Helen's exclamation expresses her emotional turmoil at the fact that Arthur determines the kind and frequency of their physical contact. Arthur also throws a book at Helen's alternate, Arthur's spaniel Dash, and it is Helen who is bruised. Whether we wish to read for rape or not, it is clear that Brontë imagines marriage as an endless and self-replicating “series of imprisoning domestic structures” with profound effects on the bodies of women (Berry 39). After his friends suspect that the marriage between Helen and Arthur has cooled, Walter Hargrave, Helen's neighbor, supplants Arthur as the primary hunter when he begins a campaign of sexual harassment and assault against Helen. Arthur, in fact, mentions that Walter doesn't have enough shooting grounds on his own, so the reader is made to understand that Walter is poaching in another man's territory. In these scenes, Brontë conceptualizes sexual violence as omnipresent, structural, and unbearable. It is for that reason that her novel has been linked to the overtly agitational New Woman novels of the *fin de siècle* and seen as an explicitly feminist or proto-feminist text (J Cox 31).

<6>Recently, however, scholars have reassessed the status of *The Tenant* as a politically coherent text. Maggie Berg, expanding on Terry Eagleton's classic study of the novel, argues that Helen's diary serves as an occasion for Gilbert Markham, the supposedly reformable man, to forge homosocial bonds with his brother-in-law, Hartford. Gilbert's strongly sexualized devouring and copying of Helen's text—he is “panting with eagerness” when he “deliver[s] [him]self up to its perusal”—is tantamount to “a certain symbolic violence” which Berg directly links to the many scenes in which Gilbert's actual physical violence erupts, particularly in his cruelty towards Helen and her brother (21). When he first meets Helen, Gilbert finds Helen's knowing gaze—she sees him as of the same species as her husband and his friends—“inexpressibly provoking” (Brontë 47). Thus startled into unwanted self-recognition, Gilbert begins to pursue Helen, accompanied by his dog and his gun, clearly out for the hunt. When he comes upon his prey unexpectedly, Helen reacts like a typical trauma survivor: “She did not hear me coming: the falling of my shadow across her paper, gave her an electric start; and she looked hastily round” (Brontë 85). Incapable of reading the signs, Gilbert indulges in entitled fantasizing about Helen, enjoying the emotional pain he is increasingly able to inflict upon her, even mentioning his “selfish gratification” when he learns of Arthur's abuse of her (Brontë 334). He is

just as competitive with other men as Arthur, brutally whipping Lawrence, Helen's feminized brother (who is said to look very similar to her) and gloating about how much Lawrence bleeds after the assault. When re-reading the novel, I was startled at how willing I had been to forget that Gilbert's attack—and it happens when he is sober—constitutes the novel's most brutal assault, with consequences much graver than any other eruption of violence we witness. We might argue that rendering the romantic hero with a surplus of violent passion is an unremarkable feature of the Brontës' oeuvre, but *The Tenant*, after demonstrating for hundreds of pages that it is impossible for women to "cure" men of their violence, ultimately falls victim to that very fantasy.

<7>*The Tenant*, as invested in Helen's coming-into-knowledge as it is in Gilbert's maturation, traces the latter's reform from Regency rake to staid Victorian husband, a process first outlined in Lisa Surridge's magisterial study *Bleak Houses*. Surridge reminds us that, although Gilbert outgrows his violence, the novel does not argue that all men undergo this process. In fact, some of the supposedly reformed men in the novel experience inevitable relapses into brutality. Brontë lauds Gilbert's self-discipline and contrition as exemplary of Victorian domestic masculinity, and acknowledges the difficulty with which this restraint is achieved since she imagines men to be predisposed to violence (Surridge 82). Although Gilbert successfully learns to resist giving in to his violent temper and to suspend his desire for Helen (Berry 52), and, although Helen has been read as assuming power over him by elevating his social status, in the end, all her property—and even her story—fall under Gilbert's greedy coverture. It remains questionable, therefore, whether Helen's second husband is that much better than her first.<6> Gilbert's reform, incomplete as it is, certainly has no effect on the overall state of gender relations in Brontë's world; Helen rightfully identifies taking charge of her son's education as her only method of forestalling—or at least reducing—future instances of sexual violence. Yet, for Helen's project of reforming Arthur Jr. to have widespread social effect, all parents would have to decide to follow suit. Brontë's invitation for British mothers to take charge of their boys' education constitutes the novel's most notable didactic message. Reformations like Gilbert's, on the other hand, seem to belong rather in the territory of romance.

<8>I wish to linger here on the notion that *The Tenant* explores the "psycho-social mechanisms by which men maintain" the male supremacist order of their society, and, above all, continue articulating "the costs [of this order] to its victims" (Berg 21). If *The Tenant* is indeed a vivid portrait of what Berg, via Derrida, suggestively calls the "carno-phallogocentric order" (21)—we encounter many meat-eaters and meat-beaters in this novel—we must continue to explore "men's refusal to recognize the costs to others of their assertions of male virility" (Berg 27), including the traffic among men of dead animals, texts, and women's bodies.

Misogyny Is Everywhere

<9>One of the most important features of *The Tenant* that we notice anew in the era of #MeToo is Brontë's careful depiction of misogyny as a dispersed phenomenon; gender-based prejudice resides in the minds of both men and women alike. As such, the residents in the wider community educate the younger women to view themselves as objects to be hunted. Helen's aunt teaches her that she should not yield to a man's amorous entreaties until "the citadel of the heart is fairly besieged" (Brontë 132), imagining courtship as a violent campaign against women's psychic fortifications. Gilbert's mother, Mrs. Markham, acts as the propagandist for the political

and social double standard and tells her daughter that a young woman should primarily consider “what’s most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house—anything will do for the ladies” (Brontë 77). She argues that it’s man’s “business” to please himself and the wife’s to please him. Even the “puppy”-ish Gilbert dismisses that notion, reasoning that men “might sink into the grossest condition of self-indulgence and carelessness about the wants of others” (Brontë 77-78). Gilbert’s righteousness only goes so far, though. During their first conversation, Gilbert reminds Helen that boys achieve a state of moral virtuousness by defeating temptation, while girls can only safeguard their chastity. Helen angrily opposes Gilbert, points out his hypocrisy, and refuses to shake his hand. He then squeezes her hand in a fit of spite which Kimberly Cox reads as an assertion of physical dominance on Gilbert’s part (175-6). This moment is crucial as the reader witnesses the deployment of misogyny as corporeal violence. Gilbert enacts his gender-based prejudice, previously limited to a cognitive disposition, as painful muscular subjugation. While the psychological underpinnings of misogyny and its violent eruptions are well-understood, *The Tenant* permits a structural perspective on sexual violence as a material, embodied practice.

<10>Although *The Tenant* in many places mirrors the romance plots of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, its large number of unsuccessful heterosexual unions illuminates Brontë’s critique of the harms of structural misogyny. As Laura Berry notes, the novel parades pair after pair of unhappy, even violently antagonistic men and women (32), thus exposing the traditional marriage plot as a sham. Despite its harsh critique of romance, however, *The Tenant* remains invested in upholding marriage as an institution of paramount importance for both men and women, and seeks to imagine the ways in which the Victorian couple might successfully reproduce itself into the future—under what circumstances Arthur Jr. might best flourish into the second half of the nineteenth century. To that end, Brontë exhibits ill-suited couples ad nauseam and dismisses them one after the other for their coldness, avariciousness, cruelty, and violence until, eventually, Helen and Gilbert’s union, based on rational love, moderation, and social commensurability, arises as the future-proof model. Brontë’s dystopian world exaggerates the arguably more benign sadomasochisms<7> of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* to highlight the everyday consequences of internalized models of Regency masculinity and femininity, the social relations that elevate the brutality of this gender division, and the people who authorize it.

<11>Even Helen initially falls under the thrall of the gender binary. Deeply attracted by her future husband’s spirit and confidence, she dismisses her aunt’s and friend’s cautionary advice concerning Arthur, convincing herself that she, as his wife, will “undo what his mother did” (167). Helen’s eventual failure to reform Arthur suggests that peer pressure, cultural values, and long-formed habits exert far greater influence over him than Helen’s timid efforts at mothering her husband. His violence and immoderation are in fact shared by his immediate group of friends—and, as the novel hints, considered unremarkable across large swaths of British society—which means that Arthur’s domestic abuse is an embedded and contextually situated, rather than an individual, problem. Helen, the novel’s model of the autonomous liberal subject, cannot solve it alone. Nevertheless, although Arthur might be said to comply with the imperatives set forth by his culture, Brontë concludes that Arthur is to be held responsible for injuring his wife and son.

<12>Reading *The Tenant* today, with its stark, unvarnished language, should make it impossible for us to take Arthur’s, or even Gilbert’s, side in the various gendered conflicts it illuminates.

Brontë's novel famously received harsh reviews for its plain-spokenness, its chattiness about the small indignities and abhorrent catastrophes of married life.<8> The novel disables any possibility of what Erin Spampinato calls "adjudicative criticism" (*Awful Nearness* 28), that is, the critical habit of assessing whether the erotic catastrophe at the heart of a narrative amounted to rape or seduction, a tendency that characterizes older scholarship on *Clarissa* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for example. Such readings, Spampinato warns, often "replicate the way that the law has ... worked to ideologically construct male privilege as neutrality" (*Awful Nearness* 24; emphasis added). Brontë, in *The Tenant*, shows that this assumed neutrality endangers the lives of women and their children in palpable ways, both material and psychological, specifically in that it enables the near-universal distribution of sexual violence across the novel's households. Sexual assault, stalking, and violent altercations are not transmuted into crimes of the mind, as might be the case in *Tess* and *Clarissa*; instead, they are rendered as naturalistic spectacle. When Hargrave seizes Helen to force her to submit to his advances, the assault does not slip through the narrative, but jumps at the reader and leaves little room for speculation about whether Helen wanted it. *The Tenant* prioritizes Helen's perspective above anyone else's and, although Gilbert consumes her narrative in the end, Helen personifies the novel's moral and didactic center.

<13>Rather than merely theorizing sexual violence on an individual, psychological level, however, the novel carefully describes the social context that gives rise to it. Analogous to the narratives circulated in the wake of #MeToo, *The Tenant* drives home the insight that women's experience of sexual violence is a shared one. The movement's fundamental narrative is centered on an individual precariously navigating a world that is not organized around her needs for physical autonomy and safety. Novels like Brontë's lend themselves well to exploring this experience as the tragedy of much of nineteenth-century literature lies in the heroine's realization "that full personhood is only ever aspirational ... to women within a coercive heterosexual order that operationalizes their bodies" (Lubey 151). All women in *The Tenant*, and perhaps in the world, are figured as either past or possible future victims of violence, and the tragic element is not in the loss of female innocence, but in the protracted failure of a culture to reverse its own structural antagonism against female-identified people.<9> Brontë never leaves us doubting whether Helen consents; whereas, in our own, supposedly more advanced moment, we cannot tell (or know) whether someone consented. Brontë teaches us where to look.

<14>As Toril Moi has argued, feminism's most important contribution to the history of ideas has been "the reclamation of the body as a site of knowledge" since we have been operating within a "system that grants far more symbolic capital, far more intellectual power, to abstract theorizing than to ... concrete investigations of particular cases" (4). Brontë's novel insists that "male experience—like all experience—is embodied and thus subject to the limits of that body" (Spampinato, "Rereading Rape"). With Arthur's demise from alcoholism, Brontë helps us understand that men, too, operate from a limited perspectival standpoint, and that they are subject to the same pressures—be they cultural, psychic, or physiological—as anyone else. While #MeToo has been rightfully invested in detailing women's experiences of sexual harassment and rape—particularly their psychological and physiological fallout—one of the most important projects left to tackle for feminist scholars and teachers is a sustained debunking of the male perspective as unembodied, neutral, and ideal.<10> When teaching *The Tenant* in the wake of #MeToo, educators might emulate Brontë's attention to male embodiment and her

related challenge to the assumed neutrality and universality of men's perspectives. They should also brace themselves to encounter resistance since these issues stab at the heart of patriarchy.

Framing the Relational Self

<15>Works like *The Tenant*, with Brontë's sharp-eyed observations of the effects of trauma on its protagonist and the re-making of the self in the aftermath, serve to remind us of the "fundamentally relational and embodied nature of the self" (Brison, "Personal Identity" 224). Our bodies do not derive meaning from some pre-cultural realm, but "are saturated with meaning" that is specific to ourselves precisely because we stand in relation to particular other people, and because they enable and delimit our agency in the world (Brison, "Personal Identity" 225). In many of her essays, philosopher Susan Brison returns to the notion that "selves exist only in relation to other selves" (2017, 218); only via relationships with other people do we constitute our own self. Western philosophy has a problem in this regard, since, until one or two generations ago, most people doing the theorizing about selfhood were white men mostly concerned with the questions of how identities stabilize themselves over time, or how identities construct themselves vis-à-vis non-humans, including, for quite a long time, women, non-white people, children, and animals. Little attention has been paid to "how we become persons" or how we lose the status of personhood or citizenship (Brison, "Personal Identity" 218). Philosophy, with its traditional investment in "autonomous man," the "hero of ... moral and political discourse" has followed a project of reifying subjective boundaries, especially masculine ones, rather than interrogating their construction—and the cost of their construction to others (Code 73). Today, in the West, we still prioritize stereotypical masculine traits such as self-sufficiency, independence, self-reliance, and the maximization of personal success and wealth. We normalize the individual as competitive and entitled to defending the pursuit of his interests, to sometimes a paranoid or even violent degree, from outside interference (Brison, "Personal Identity" 219). Obviously, feminist scholars have long criticized this conception of the individual, since it conveniently forgets that men are actually conceived by women and usually spend a significant period of time in either total or partial dependence on them.<11> Personal autonomy is in itself relational, Brison reminds us, and it is only able to emerge under certain societal, institutional, and personal relations (Brison, "Personal Identity" 220). It is hardly necessary to remind anyone that the West's entire liberal political order depends on the fiction of individual autonomy.

<16>Feminist philosophy offers alternative models of how the mind and our mental states are organized. Naomi Scheman's relational account of the mind—of the way we narrativize ourselves—is useful for my purposes here, as she argues that, whatever feelings, meanings, and sensations we experience do only make sense "with respect to socially embodied norms" (228). This means, quite radically, that "we are responsible for the meaning of each other's inner lives" (Scheman 241). Everyone understands themselves from a specific, historically contingent, positioned perspective—all of us from multiple vantage points—and our experiences determine how we make sense of ourselves. Moreover, we do not control the linguistic strategies by which we narratively construct our identity, our "tropes, schemas, and narrative trajectories" that we normalize about ourselves (Brison, "Personal Identity" 225). We cannot influence how others avail themselves of words to limn or expand our self-narratives.

<17>Studying the psychological effects of sexual trauma and rape has been so crucial to feminist literary critics because these experiences—along with other potentially catastrophic self-

shatterings, such as wartime PTSD—quite literally change people. We only realize how tenuous identity is when it breaks down after a traumatic event, especially when such trauma is intentionally inflicted. If, as Anna Clark notes, “the physical act of rape enables individual men of all classes to dominate women and violently to degrade and humiliate their victims,” it also has the potential to render the victim’s subjectivity irrelevant by degrading their mind and body as ‘useless’ afterwards (6). Often, rape survivors report that they find it impossible to imagine themselves as coherent and entitled to recognition by others (Brison, “Personal Identity” 223-224).

<18>Reading *The Tenant* in the era of #MeToo provides scholars with the valuable lesson that the idea of the Western subject as having arisen *ex nihilo* might be an exhausted fantasy. Other persons, in the specific contexts in which we find ourselves, constitute us as who we are in the ways they use words, mobilize institutions in or against our interest, or activate meanings about us. If a culture imagines womanhood as something that, among other things, includes the possibility of sexual assault with impunity, then it is hard to think of womanhood as complete or normal without the component of sexual assault (Brison 2017, 226). Ideally, one of the legacies of #MeToo will be a permanent change in critical reading practices so that certain cultural assumptions and gendered blind spots, such as my automatic countenancing of Gilbert’s violence during my first reading of *The Tenant*, become a thing of the past. Such lowering of tolerance thresholds and definitional expansions of what “counts” as unbearable violence require effort and sometime painful soul-searching, even among feminists. It is far from easy to unlearn these lessons when much of one’s culture loudly proclaims that violence is essential to human experience or that men are naturally more proximate to violence than women.

<19>The only answer to the cultural supremacy of violence is a wholesale cultural turn towards care ethics, with a focus on relations, contextual thinking, and particularity (Chan 556). By overriding the current paradigm of the so-called “justice ethics” often embraced by men—with its fantasies of “independent, autonomous agency” and “rational application of impartial, general and universal principles,” care ethics emphasizes “appreciating . . . persons in a relationship as unique and irreplaceable and the embedding situation of an action as concrete and particular” (Chan 558, 559). The goal of care ethics is to formulate the “ethical ideal of caring” and to expand that ideal to “people outside our close circles” who we are unlikely to ever meet. There is no necessary connection between care ethics and gender (Chan 559, 564).

<20>Unfortunately, it is as of yet doubtful whether care ethics are viable in non-personal settings or whether they can be institutionally enforced. People embedded in Western culture today “require[] tremendous conscious efforts . . . to capture the particularity of a stranger” (Chan 563). We seem to take for granted that, in the absence of strong emotional bonds or sustained interactions, you simply cannot care about other people. I do not know whether women, due to their traditional roles as carers “at the expense of their own interests and opportunities” (Chan 564), are better positioned to call for necessary cultural revisions. I do agree with Nel Noddings’s classic position, however, that “[r]elations, not individuals, are ontologically basic” to humans (xiii). We cannot know anything about ourselves in isolation, and our identities are often more dispersed than we care to admit.

<21>While *The Tenant* does not provide a blueprint to solving sexual violence under the rubric of care ethics, its representation of that violence as shared across time and space provides critics and teachers various inroads to addressing the harms resulting from social inequities inherited from past generations. Brontë invites readers to understand the socially distributed nature of misogyny, the minutiae of its actualization into corporeal violence and institutional injustice, and to realize that the next generation bears the burden of our hopes for cultural reform. Finally, it allows a more useful and just delineation of the subject as embedded within a vast network of relations which, analogous to #MeToo, calls readers to communal rather than individual action.

Conclusion

<22>Reading *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in the age of #MeToo reminded me that the socially dispersed trauma of violence and abuse allows us, as readers, to recognize that the fantasy of the liberal, autonomous subject has likely run its course. This insight can be applied to the larger project of fighting rape culture. Sexual violence against others is not an individualized phenomenon that is repeated randomly across societies—just like rape is not a private crime of passion or the natural result of men’s somehow hydraulic sexual urges.<12> Like lynching, modern hate crimes, or mass internment, sexual violence is a politically significant, “group-based injustice that constitutes a violation of the victim’s civil or human rights” (Brisson, “Justice” 259). Sexual violence during war, political upheaval, or times of slavery is more easily recognized than the more diffuse ongoing global mass event in which we find ourselves today. However, as scholars and teachers, we must foster stronger awareness that sexual violence is not a singular occurrence attributable to isolated agents; it is a system of behavior for which all parts of the system are partly responsible and whose harmful *effects* we should center in our analysis. We should claim that the pervasive psychological, physiological, and material fallout of misogyny in all its forms, from the wage gap to long-term, incapacitating trauma following sexual assault, is a collective one. Rape does not emerge spontaneously and individually, and #MeToo is signaling that a wider cultural awareness of this fact is spreading.

<23>As presentists, we can use our scholarship to “anachronize the present in order to find ways to change it,” as Jill Ehnenn suggests, along with cultivating an awareness of the “affective dynamics ... that drive our work” (56). In this unbearable present of pussy-grabbing heads of state and fratty Supreme Court Justices, we might want to turn away from the autonomous subject as the privileged form of male and female self-possession. One of the solutions we can offer is fostering community, especially in forums like this journal issue, and reading methods that practice an ethics of care, that is, methods that are intentionally coalitional in the present and respectful of the past.

Acknowledgements

I would like to warmly thank the editors as well as Erin Spampinato for their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this essay that helped me mould it into shape. As I argue in this piece, everything is relational, especially academic writing.

Notes

(1)For historical scholarship on the standard script of the Victorian rape trial, see Bourke, Clark,

Conley, and Stevenson.

(2) This is the position taken by Maine Senator Susan Collins (“Read Susan Collins’s Speech”). Kate Manne’s *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, particularly the chapter “Exonerating Men,” addresses the sheer banality of “testimonial injustice,” the fact that, in certain contexts, statements uttered by a member of a certain group will be considered as less credible than those of others. The term “testimonial injustice” was coined in 2007 by Miranda Fricker (17). See Baker, Mitchell, Zhou, and Zorn, for a representative snapshot of contemporary media accounts of Blasey Ford’s testimony. They either faithfully rehearse (Baker, Mitchell) or refute the rape trial script (Zhou, Zorn).

(3) The recent works of feminist cultural critics like Soraya Chemaly, Jia Tolentino, Rebecca Traister, and Lindy West defend the legitimacy of women’s rage as a catalyst for political change. Tolentino (227) and West (204-207) cite the Kavanaugh hearings as sparking their anger.

(4) Maggie Berg brilliantly ties the image of the blood-spattered Arthur to Helen’s future nuptial bed (28). After the final, catastrophic hunting party ends, Arthur destroys Helen’s art supplies which Berg compares to rape (31).

(5) Incidentally, during the period, it was almost legally impossible for a man to be convicted for raping his wife (Hasday 1392).

(6) Also see Berg (23) and Kimberly Cox (175, 184) on Gilbert as insufficiently reformed.

(7) For recent explorations of S/M in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, see, for example, Davis, Jarvis, and Manning.

(8) Thormählen helpfully compares contemporary readers’ reactions to the scenes of domestic violence in the novel to that of contemporary scholars (6).

(9) See Spampinato, “Rereading Rape,” on this point.

(10) Peggy Orenstein’s *Boys & Sex* is an example of such necessary and timely scholarship. Orenstein’s exploration of why and how young men perpetuate toxic masculinity directly owes its emergence to #MeToo (1).

(11) See, for example, Benhabib (161), Brison (“Personal Identity” 220), and Fineman (xv) on these points.

(12) The notion that men’s erotic affect during coitus deserves special protection is alive and well today. North Carolina, the state in which I teach, remains the only state in which consent, once given, cannot be revoked during sexual intercourse. Senate Bill 563, filed by Democrats in April 2019 to overturn a forty-year-old precedent, never found a hearing (Martin; “Senate Bill 563”).

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