1 Huntingdon v Huntingdon

Of course it never happened: *Huntingdon v Huntingdon*. That is the issue. Helen Huntington was unhappily married, subject to various forms of spousal abuse. But the law offered no respite. Instead, it left her with a choice: put up with it, or run away. It was not an uncommon dilemma in mid-nineteenth-century England. It was, however, an uncommon subject for public discourse, and it was an even more uncommon subject for literary commentary. It was also the subject of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. And the fugitive tenant, hiding from her husband and from the law was Helen Huntingdon.

Modern critics have been keen to praise Anne Brontë’s novel, identifying a significant ‘voice’ in mid-nineteenth-century women’s literature (Gordon, 1984, pp. 719–25, 731–4, 739; Langland, 1989, pp. 119, 134–5, 143; Westcott, 2001, pp. 213–14; Morse, 2001, pp. 106–8; Jacobs, 1986, pp. 204–5; Carnell, 1998, pp. 9–12). Contemporaries, as we shall see, were far less inclined to praise (Wright, 2002, pp. 244–5).¹ In its stark portrayal of a dysfunctional, abusive marriage, the *Tenant* shattered the pretences of marital harmony so cherished by the age. It displayed, in harrowing detail, the reality of marriage for many Victorian women; and not just any women, but middle-class bourgeois women, the kind of women who could, indeed, be expected to read a Brontë novel. In this it resonated, not just with personal experience, but with all the ‘hideous revelations’ that Frances Power Cobbe identified in the published reports of the new Divorce Court (Hamilton, 1995, pp. 81–2).
The author’s intent, moreover, was made very clear, as the Preface to the second edition confirmed:

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.

(4)

And she continued, referring to some of the more notorious scenes to follow:

I know such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from the following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain.

(4)

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be read, as its author intended, as a strategic literary intervention in an emergent, and increasingly vociferous, debate regarding a range of jurisprudential issues which attached to the ‘question’ of women in the England of the late 1840s, most obviously those of spousal abuse, matrimonial property and child custody.² Whilst eschewing too brusque an engagement, this intent remained apparent:

Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim, and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense … and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader’s immediate pleasure as well as my own.

(4)

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was written with the same aspiration that fired George Eliot’s composition of *Adam Bede*: to reveal that ‘rare