

Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft: A Case of Sisterhood

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ABSTRACT

Two women writers, Anne Brontë and Mary Woolstonecraft, despite having lived in different centuries and lead different lives, have left the world two novels of striking similarity, both in plot and intention. These novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *The Wrongs of Woman* have clever and honest women as heroines, each of them married to dishonest and debauched men. Both protagonists, after a whole chain of trials in their married lives, are forced to escape from the conjugal home, defying social conventions and also the law which is entirely on the side of the husbands. Both novelists, nevertheless, place themselves on the side of reason, that is, on the side of both heroines, and make the reader take their part as well.

The two novels are, therefore, an indictment against the unjust situation of married women and the society which maintains them. The parallelism has been analysed within the contexts of period and biography, the conclusion being basically that Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, written by a self-effacing, quiet woman, shares the fierce spirit and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft, the Jacobine novelist and thinker, and the first English feminist, once labelled a «hyena in petticoats»¹.

INTRODUCTION

The question whether a feminine literature exists with intrinsic feminine characteristics of its own is still a controversial point and the purpose of these lines is not to add more wood to this fire of antagonistic opinions. Nevertheless,

women in general and women writers in particular, have shared no small number of circumstances and experiences. If we think of the Victorian women writers, for example, I daresay we would not find it difficult to agree that the vast majority of them felt the constraints of the prevailing attitudes of their time towards them as women and as authoresses, and that they had of necessity to experience the apparent contradictions of personal self-assertion on one hand and, on the other, what was then considered to be a woman's principal duty - to live for others.

Having this in common it is not surprising to find interesting coincidences in the works of these authoresses, namely the obvious preoccupation about a woman's position in the world, particularly the world of love, family relationships and a woman's complex and often tortured feelings. Novelists as different as George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë have, in their own different way, left traces of this in their books, and the same applies to other less well-known women novelists such as Mary E. Braddon or Margaret Oliphant. This is not to say that these Victorian authoresses were openly vindictive in their writings (although the last two decades of the 19th century witnessed the publication of a considerable number of novels with an overt feminist protest in them), some were indeed extremely conservative in this respect —let us remember Charlotte Yonge's quite merciless exposition of the aspiring heroine in *The Clever Woman of the Family*— but the voices of Maggy Tulliver, Jane Eyre or Aurora Leigh, sound the unmistakable note of the painful situation of women at that time.

The difficult and often risky recognition of the woman writer, however, has proved quite feeble as well: with the exception of a few «major» authoresses, little is known nowadays of the numerous women who published in their time, eventhough many of them once gained fame and were authentic best-sellers. It seems, therefore, that the personal and literary experiences of women are doomed to remain within the limits of their own epoch, as Elaine Showalter (1979: 11-12) affirms: «Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex». Despite the truth of these words, the lost links of literary history may not be so completely lost after all. The female literature of the 18th & 19th centuries is perhaps more interrelated than we suspect, and despite what Germaine Greer calls «the transience of female literary fame»², some examples of the Victorian voicing of feminine suffering can be traced back to the previous century. This is the case of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, whose points of contact with Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* are indeed worth dealing with. The parallelism existing in theme and purpose of these two novels and the revolt of both novelists against a similarly unjust situation bear witness to a profound case of empathy which I have chosen to call

«sisterhood», echoing Patricia Branca's *The Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home*³. These points of contact are even more fascinating when we stop to consider the striking differences between these two women writers, both with regard to the period of time in which they lived and to the nature of their personalities.

THEMATIC AND SITUATIONAL SIMILARITIES, HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall presents us with the unbearable situation of Helen, a virtuous woman married to a profligate husband, Arthur Huntingdon, who not only fails to appreciate her superior qualities, but neglects her at first, and later squanders her fortune and mocks and abuses her verbally both in private and in the presence of other people. All her efforts to reform him are in vain and after years of endurance she resolves to leave him and flees the conjugal home. The heroine of *The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria, has suffered a parallel situation with her unprincipled husband, George Venables, who, not only has proved impervious to any attempt at reformation from his wife, but has also squandered her fortune through gambling and «gross relaxation». The opening chapter of the novel shows us Maria confined by Venables to a lunatic asylum after abandoning him and trying to settle independently with her new-born daughter.

Helen and Maria are not merely the victims of their respective husbands, they also suffer the cruel and unjust restrictions that the law imposes on them as women. Helen and Maria witness how Arthur Huntingdon and George Venables respectively dispose legally of their wives' money as well as their own, and are free to squander the last penny of it if they please. But there is something the two heroines suffer far more acutely than this: the daily humiliation of living with partners who neither love nor respect them, to whom they owe obedience and honour and whom after years of disappointment and suffering they can neither respect nor love. Both women think there is only one decent way out: separation. Neither husband accepts and both feel outraged at the idea while both heroines find themselves literally locked in their own houses. As a result, both decide to escape from the men who are by law their lords, Maria to be chased out by Venables and finally imprisoned in a lunatic asylum at his request, Helen to become the tenant of Wildfell Hall, a recluse and the butt of gossip, and to live in continuous apprehension of being discovered by Huntingdon. The two heroines are mothers as well and suffer acutely for the future of their children, who have both such debauched fathers. As women, they have no legal rights over

their children if their husbands decide to claim them. Both Maria and Helen take the baby girl and little five year old Arthur respectively with them in their flight.

The similarity of theme and situation in the two novels is plain to be seen. Both novels expose valiantly the lacerating situation of a woman submitted to the bond of an unhappy marriage. And yet, Mary Wollstonecraft and Ann Brontë not only lived in different centuries; in a way, we could say they also lived in different worlds.

Mary Wollstonecraft lived in a period of time characterized by the rise of political philosophy. She had read Rousseau and was well acquainted with the philosophers of the Enlightenment. In England she had met some of the leading radical intellectuals and artists of her time, Dr. Price, Henry Fuseli, Thomas Holcroft, Joseph Priesley, Thomas Christie, Thomas Paine, William Blake, and he who later would become her husband, William Godwin. She had also contributed to the «Analytical Review», a monthly magazine set up by her publisher and friend Joseph Johnson, one of her contributions being a review of Rousseau's *Confessions*, in which she showed herself liberal-minded enough to justify the philosopher's adulteries on the grounds of his wife's «negative» character⁴. On the whole, Mary Wollstonecraft was an earnest radical thinker who, like the Dissenters, to whose criticism of religious empty formalities and prejudices she was indebted, based her outlook on life upon a profound if unorthodox moral outlook.

She was in France at the time of the French Revolution, which she had supported in principle out of faithfulness to her own ideals of democracy, universal education and equality. She shared with the French revolutionaries a dislike for privilege and idle aristocracy. In this respect, she was well able to hold her own on intellectual grounds against a political figure of the calibre of Edmund Burke, to whose *Reflections on the French Revolution* she opposed her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, advocating for civil and religious liberties, which she considered the inalienable rights of every human being⁵.

In the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was the seed of her following books, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which appeared in 1792 and was the first feminist manifesto in the English language, and in which its authoress thoroughly and with vigorous logic applied to women all the egalitarian principles so dear to the spirit of the Enlightenment and to all liberal reformers.

The philosophical stream which inspires these books is present in the rest of Mary Wollstonecraft's works, her two novels, *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, included. On the other hand, her nature was too passionate and honest for her to dissociate her own life from her thinking: she considered institutional marriage as legal slavery for women and, while living in France, defied convention by

living openly with the American Gilbert Imlay, by whom she had a daughter. She was destined to know bitter disappointment both in her thinking and in her love relationship. Although her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* established her name in England, some received it with outrage or mackery⁶ and prior to this she had been horrified at the bloodshed and ever busy guillotine in Paris⁷. Her lover, Imlay, was to leave her for another woman. She was to know, nevertheless, fame and recognition for a period of time. But fame and recognition were doomed to die some time after her death, the oblivion following generalized disgrace once her extramarital relationship with Imlay and her having had an illegitimate daughter by him became the subject of public knowledge in England. Moreover, she had defied conventional morality too openly, not only in her personal life but by sustaining those radical political ideas favourable to the French Revolution which characterised the thinking of the English Jacobins, a combination extremely difficult to forgive in her own country at the turn of the century, a period of time characterized by political conservatism and fear of those «French Ideals» now synonymous in England of free love and revolutionary disorder.

Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism thus became too dangerous a model to be followed by other women aspiring to something like a literary career, and the reputations of those novelists and essayists who, like Mary Hays and Mary Robinson, did write about the emancipation of women in the years immediately following her death, were by no means improved by being considered Wollstonecraft's followers. The fact that Mary Hays, a friend of Godwin's and a disciple of his wife's, omitted Wollstonecraft's name from a volume on learned women she prepared in 1803 is sadly meaningful in this respect⁸. If this was the case, then, what was the trend in this respect in the first half of the 19th century? According to Mirian Brody:

... feminism was quiescent in England in the early 19th Century, and when the movement did begin to gather force in the 1850s, with organizations to reform married women's property rights, it was in a spirit uncongenial to the ideological basis of the *Vindication (of the Rights of Women)* ⁹.

Elaine Showalter (1979: 18) sustains that Mary Wollstonecraft's writings «were not widely read by the Victorians due to the scandals surrounding her life».

On the other hand, Anne Brontë lived mainly a retiring and uneventful life in the first half of the 19th century, the intensity of which is to be found exclusively in the realm of her own inner self and her close relationship with the rest of the Brontë family. But this self-effacing woman was able to write such a challenging book as *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a valiant and individual work of art in itself, but clearly in the line of *The Wrongs of Woman*, even though criticism does not seem to be much aware of this. In the words of Winifred Gérin¹⁰ «The

Tenant of Wildfell Hall... might be said to be the first feminine manifesto for Women's Lib», and quoting May Sinclair's words of 1913 she adds: «The slamming of Helen Huntingdon's bedroom-door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England». Confronted with this opinion one might think that even nowadays Mary Wollstonecraft's works are still overlooked. It is true that Anne Brontë's determination to show a woman's right to free herself from an oppressive and degrading marriage is bravely sustained throughout the novel, but it is no less true that fifty years earlier Maria, the victimised heroine of *The Wrongs of Woman* had not only refused intimacy with her unworthy husband, but had also pronounced words like these: «... as solemnly as I took his name, I now abjure it. ... and (that) I mean immediately to quit this house, never to enter it more. I will provide for myself and child» (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 162).

CONCRETE CASES OF PARALLELISM

It is thus necessary, in my opinion, to consider in detail the extraordinary parallelism of concerns between these two women writers in order both to give Wollstonecraft due recognition and to understand to its fullest Anne Brontë's excellent *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, either so often overshadowed by her two sisters' writing or partially interpreted.

The Wrongs of Woman and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* have, as we have already seen, astonishing similarities of theme and plot, and through these both Wollstonecraft and Brontë likewise reveal a similar feminist attitude. I would now like to consider some of the most interesting concrete instances of coincidences between these two novels, apart from the above-mentioned similarities of both heroines, genuinely honest and brave women, and their respective immoral and shallow husbands.....

In the first place, both novels spring from a moral and didactic aim, evident in the two authoresses' prefaces:

In many instances I could have made the incidents more dramatic, would I have sacrificed my main object, the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 72).

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 (Brontë, 1979: 29).

Secondly, the marriages of Helen and Maria are both rash and romantic,

springing from their vulnerable hearts and the same lack of experience of the world. The two heroines are in the beginning naïvely idealistic:

She was beloved, and every emotion was rapturous (Wollstonecraft: 1987: 99).
... for still he (Huntingdon) is always in my thoughts and in my dreams. In all my employments, whatever I do, or see, or hear, has an ultimate reference to him (Brontë, 1979: 168).

None of these women suspects at this stage the disappointment and tortures which await them in their married lives, in which they are destined to know no happiness at all except that of becoming mothers: yet one more point of contact. Because, in the third place, Wollstonecraft and Brontë share a profound devotion for motherhood, its joys being for both authoresses (despite the fact that the latter never became a mother) among the deepest in woman's whole existence:

The greatest sacrifice of my principles in my whole life was the allowing my husband again to be familiar with my person, though to this cruel act of self-denial, when I wished the earth to open and swallow me, you owe your birth; and I the unutterable pleasure of being a mother (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 154).
He wakes: his tiny arms are stretched towards me; his eyes unclose; they meet my gaze, but will not answer it. Little angel! you do not know me; you cannot think of me or love me yet; and yet how fervently my heart is knit to yours; how grateful I am for all the joy you give me! (Brontë, 1979: 253).

Moreover, this motherly love is in both cases equally accompanied by these two women's concern about their child's upbringing.

In another order of things, the physical degeneration due to alcohol and other excesses of the flesh, brings us to what is the fourth and one of the most extraordinary similarities of the two books. The breakfast table is in the two novels witness of the meeting, after a night's estrangement, of the enduring wife and the husband, inconsiderate enough to offer her a vision of himself at his most unpleasant:

The squeamishness of stomach alone, produced by the last night's intemperance, which he took no pains to conceal destroyed my appetite. I think I now see him, lolling in an arm-chair, in a dirty powdering gown, soiled linen, ungartered stockings, and tangled hair, yawning and stretching himself. The newspaper was immediately called for, if not brought in on the tea-board, from which he would scarcely lift his eyes while I poured out the tea, expecting to ask for some brandy to put into it or to declare that he could not eat (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 147).
And he did come next week, but in a condition of body and mind even worse than before. I did not, however, intend to pass over his derelictions this time without remark—I found it would not do. ... Next morning, he was weary still: I would wait a little longer, But at dinner, when, after breakfasting at twelve o'clock on a bottle of soda-water and a cup of strong coffee, and lunching at two on another bottle of soda-water mingled with brandy, he was finding fault with everything on the table

and declaring we must change our cook—; I thought the time was come (Brontë, 1979: 265).

And what matters most is that in the two novels the contrast between wife and husband, the whole-hearted attempts of the former to reform the latter, who proves to be utterly irredeemable, are used most consciously by both novelists to make the woman's abandonment of husband and house a step—as unorthodox and challenging in 1798 as in 1848, or, some twenty years earlier, when the action of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is situated—totally justified: the fifth and most radical of these parallelisms. The fact that the two women resume their maiden names is symbolical in both cases: «I had resolved to assume my own name immediately», recalls Maria (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 170). Helen goes so far as adopting a name on the female side of the family: «My mother's name was Graham, and therefore, I fancy I have some claim to it» (Brontë, 1979: 393).

In short: Wollstonecraft and Brontë share the same consciousness of social and legal injustice towards their sex and neither of them hesitates to expose it, choosing for this an extreme—although perhaps not so infrequent—case. A bridge of common interest and circumstance is thus laid across two centuries by these two writers.

As has been said above, they shared neither the same century nor the same type of life. The socio-political moment of profound questioning of the Establishment characteristic of the last third of the 18th century has little to do with the at least apparently conservative early years of Victorian England. This, probably, together with the disposition of her own temperament and with the fact that she was basically a social thinker—her novels being vehicles for her ideas—is what makes Wollstonecraft, more outspoken than Brontë about some physical questions and also more open in denouncing the outrageous sexual and social injustices she depicts. The case Brontë presents remains within the realm of her heroine's own personal experience, the authoress never questioning the indissolubility of the marriage vow in general terms. Even so, Anne Brontë had to meet with some very harsh criticism which accused her of coarseness and of having chosen such scabrous subject matter. Her prologue to the novel's second edition is proof enough of this and presents us with an authoress to some extent hurt by it, but nevertheless determined to continue in her own line of truthful exposition of reality. Brontë, unlike Wollstonecraft, was a born novelist, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, self-contained within the limits of one particular case, contains its own universal truth. The indictment here is an implicit one, that of Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* being explicit and, therefore, more along the lines of the essay than authentically literary. This, and not the fact of being a fragment (Wollstonecraft died before finishing it), is what makes *The Wrongs of Woman* a much lesser

novel (its interest lies in its intellectual strength and honesty, in echoing in fiction the philosophy of *The Rights of Woman*) than *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in which characterization and narrative skill prove the genius of her creator.

Nevertheless, the bridge is there, linking two women authors, linking two novels, linking two periods of English history. Despite the difference in artistic achievement, the spirit of these two books is still the same.

THE QUESTION OF «INFLUENCE»: AN OPEN DOOR FOR RESEARCH

So far I have avoided the question whether Anne Brontë had read *The Wrongs of Woman* or whether she was acquainted with its authoress and with the rest of her writings. As we have seen, Wollstonecraft's was not a very recommendable influence for any authoress aspiring to literary recognition in the 19th century, and, therefore, we should not expect Victorian woman writers to acknowledge publicly that they knew, in case they did, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Thus, we certainly cannot deny that Wollstonecraft's works may have been, if not widely, at least privately read by some Victorian women, in particular by those so much concerned with woman's position as the Brontë sisters.

Interestingly enough, both Mary Wollstonecraft and Anne Brontë wrote only two novels, the first of which is in both cases autobiographical and have feminine names as titles, names closely linked to those of the writers - *Mary and Agnes Grey*. After this parallel start, Wollstonecraft and Brontë chose to write a second novel of common theme, with both being an indictment of the situation of woman. One cannot but wonder whether Anne Brontë was not only well-acquainted with Wollstonecraft's second novel, but with her entire life as well¹¹, and despite the many differences might have felt identified with the thinker and the woman. The following coincidences, together with those already mentioned, are very difficult to conceive of without this conscious identification.

In *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant* both Maria and Helen meet, after their escape, a man ready to love them. These male characters, the «heroes» opposed to the husband-villains, are ready to offer these heroines the happiness they have not yet found, and neither of them fails to value these women's qualities which for their lawful masters were like pearls before swine. Striking circumstances indeed, and even more so when these two characters, Darnford and Markham, owe their delineation to what I consider a kind of feminine wishful thinking on the part of their authoresses. They tend to be too good to be true, in the sense that they conform exactly to the needs of the female protagonists, despite Brontë's

skillful hand at characterization and the fact that Darnford might have developed into something different if *The Wrongs of Woman* had been finished. The two heroes even share a similar fatherly affection for the children of their beloved:

... and spoke (Darnford) of the child as if it had been his own (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 187-8).

... now I (Markham) affectionately stroked his curling locks, and even kissed his ivory forehead: he was my own Helen's son, and therefore mine; and as such I have ever since regarded him (Brontë, 1979: 487).

The parallelism which is practically impossible to conceive as a mere coincidence is the fact that these two loving and tender men learn about the *suffering of the women they love reading the respective accounts of their lives*: Maria gives Darnford, imprisoned like herself in the lunatic asylum, her own written memoirs which she had intended for instructing her daughter. On her part, Helen gives Markham her diary, which she had kept to protect herself against despair during her five years of married life. This narrative within the narrative device, which also occurs in *Wuthering Heights*, makes *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, considering their unity of theme and purpose, *still closer to each other*.

There are several other parallelisms in the two novels: the figure of the uncle of each of the heroines, the characters of Rachel and Jemina, the sly suitors of both Maria and Helen, London as the place of debauchery for both husbands and several others which, for reasons of space, cannot be dealt with in more detail here - they bear additional witness to the relation between these two novels.

There are also other parallelisms, in this case of attitude, between the two writers. They transcend these two concrete novels and can be found if we take *Mary* and *Agnes Grey* into account as well. One concerns Mary's and Anne's similar attitude towards cruelty to creatures and the spoiling of boys within the family. Tom, the pampered son of the Bloomfields in *Agnes Grey*, considered superior to his sisters for being a boy, has the tormenting of birds and animals as one of his favourite pastimes. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria's elder brother «became in due form the deputy tyrant of the house. Extreme indulgence had rendered him so selfish, that he only thought of himself, and from tormenting insects and animals, he became the despot of his brothers, and still more of his sisters» (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 125). The other parallelism is to be found in the religious stoicism of the protagonist of *Mary* and of Helen Huntingdon.

Then indeed the Lord Omnipotent will reign, and he will weep the tearful eye, and support the trembling heart (Wollstonecraft, 1987: 46).

«But though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men». 1

ought to think of this; and if there be nothing but sorrow for me in this world, what is the longest life of misery to a whole eternity of peace? (Brontë, 1979: 373-4).

The possible identification of Anne Brontë and Mary Wollstonecraft might have been at least partly fostered by certain biographical factors common to both women writers: despite the many differences already exposed, Mary and Anne had been governesses, and had had very painful experiences with their employers. Coincidences here are noteworthy:

Since I have been here I have turned over several pages in the vast volume of human nature, and what is the amount? Vanity and vexation of spirit¹².
...I was then at Throp Green and now I am only just escaped from it..., during my stay I have had somme very unpleasant and undreamt of experiences of human nature¹³.

The two writers suffered at some state of their lives the drunken excesses and bouts of temper of a very close male relative: a father in the case of Mary, her own bother, Branwell, in the case of Anne. At this point, now that Branwell Brontë has appeared on the scene, I find it necessary to say that Anne's unfortunate only brother, whose downfall and personal tragedy caused so much suffering to his family, was not the model cast for Anne Brontë's portrait of that epitome of thoughtless dissipation Arthur Huntingdon, as has been often maintained¹⁴. Obviously, Branwell's drunkenness and addiction to opium, his continuous professional failure, and probably that ill-fated love-affair that was to give him his final blow, was a sorrowful source of inspiration for his sister's second novel, but the use that a writer makes of biography must never be approached in an over-simple way. Traits of real people's characteristics, together with inner feelings and personal ideas and experiences may appear in the works of innumerable writers. But they need not correspond exactly to the original, for in the majority of cases an author reworks the biographical ingredients and gives them a new shape in literature. That is why, not to go too far for an example, the two male characters of *The Wrongs of Woman*, the libertine Venables and the gentlemanly Darnford, could be said in a way to be based on different aspects of Wollstonecraft's lover, Gilbert Imlay. And the same applies to Branwell Brontë, some of whose most saddening facets can be found in Huntingdon, but also in the taciturn and suffering figure of Lord Lowborough, aware of his own progressive destruction (which would be much more in Branwell's line) and keen to reform himself.

In no way, then, is *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* «about» Branwell Brontë nor Arthur Huntingdon a portrait of him, the former having victimised his wife to the point of making her escape taking with her all the sympathy of the reader at the same time. In his own love-affair, on the contrary, Branwell was more on the victim side. Her brother's own story gave Anne a tragic example of masculine self

destruction, which she used in her novel, struggling against her own sisterly suffering, as a warning against over-indulgence in boys upbringing, generalized as much as over-protection and restrictions for girls. Huntingdon's agony testifies to her own religious worries about the salvation of her brother's soul¹⁵. But the theme of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is still a married woman's love betrayed by an undeserving husband, her exploitation at his hands, and her justified escape. Like Maria, Helen Huntingdon defends her own dignity and the right to live by herself. The protagonist of *The Wrongs of Woman* is more unfortunate than Helen, who, after the death of her husband, is rewarded with a happy married life with Markham. Maria, on the contrary, loses her infant, has to undergo confinement and trial, and her future remains unknown, confined for ever to an unfinished novel of which she is the heroine. But her story, together with Helen Huntingdon's slamming of her door against her husband, had, most likely, a more powerful reverberation throughout Victorian England than is generally acknowledged. Wilkie Collins was to make the sweet Laura Fairlie, heroine of *The Woman in White* (1860), the victim of a cruel husband who has her also incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, not because she is insane, but precisely because he wants to destroy her sanity. The echo of *The Wrongs of Woman* did not certainly die out with the fame of its authoress, and the gothic element in it proved to have its foundations more in reality than in imagination: Charlotte Brontë herself had supposedly heard of the real case of a mad woman's imprisonment in an attic and was to use the idea in *Jane Eyre* (1847)¹⁶.

Every century somehow survives in the following, and if this applies to literature in general, it certainly has to apply to the literature written by women in particular. Some, perhaps too many, links have disappeared in the history of women's writings, but to look for them is no doubt worthwhile. It was indeed worthwhile exploring again Mary Woolstonecraft's and Anne Brontë's lives and writings and witness in amazement a case of sisterhood across two centuries.

NOTES

¹ Horace Walpole coined this description, quoted in Tomaline, Claire (1977: 142).

² Cf. Showalter, Elaine (1978: 11).

³ Branca, Patricia (1975).

⁴ Cf. Tomaline, Claire (1977).

⁵ Wollstonecraft, Mary (1790).

⁶ Cf. Miriam Brody's Introduction in Wollstonecraft (1986).

⁷ Cf. Tomalin, Claire (1977), and Wollstonecraft, Mary (1794).

⁸ Cf. Miriam Brody's Introduction in Wollstonecraft (1986).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. Winifred Gérin's Introduction in Brontë (1979).

¹¹ William Godwin had published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798, a well intentioned biography of his dead wife which was unfortunately to damage her posthumous reputation.

¹² From a letter of Mary Wollstonecraft to her sister Everina, quoted in Tomalin, Claire (1977: 82).

¹³ From Ann Brontë's Diary, quoted in the Introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

¹⁴ Cf. Pinion, F. B. (1975) and the Introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

¹⁵ Cf. Introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

¹⁶ While she was governess with the Sidgwick family, Charlotte visited Norton Conyers, Swarcliffe, with her employers, and saw the attic where a mad woman had been confined in the 18th century. See Pinion, F. B. (1975).

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