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Mary Grace King
College of the Holy Cross

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Father Figures in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Bronte's Perspective on Victorian Era Masculinity

MaryGrace King

College of the Holy Cross Class of 2020

ANNE BRONTE PRESENTS two different illustrations of fatherhood in the characters of Mr. Markham and Mr. Huntingdon. These two men represent contrasting versions of masculinity in their roles as father figures to Arthur: no matter how full of virtue or vice these relationships with Arthur are, they both exhibit at least some “masculine” qualities. Mr. Huntingdon is a father in name and biological connection more so than in good influence, and the influence that he does have on Arthur is certainly an unsavory one. Mr. Markham, on the other hand, is not directly related to Arthur. However, he offers a certain guidance that Bronte portrays as paternal in nature and much more healthy than Mr. Huntingdon's, even if his affectionate relationship with Arthur does contain some typically “feminine” traits. So where exactly does masculinity, or “manliness” fit into the family ideals and conception of fatherhood in the Victorian Era? In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Bronte explores paternal roles and masculinity in Mr. Huntingdon and Mr. Markham and opposes some of the prevalent domestic ideals of the Victorian Era with her depiction of harmony found in an unconventional family structure.

Mr. Huntingdon represents a father figure who is emotionally distant and uncomfortable with showing affection toward his newborn son. Bronte emphasizes how Mr. Huntingdon commodifies and objectifies Arthur during his early infancy in the words of Helen, Arthur's mother, who writes in her diary the following: “At present, he is pleased with the

acquisition, and hopes it will one day become a fine boy and a worthy heir... now, it is an object almost of indifference, except when his impatience is roused by its 'utter helplessness' and 'imperturbable stupidity'" (Bronte 189). The objectifying "it" in reference to Arthur and use of the word "acquisition" sound cold and economical, not affectionate and humanizing. Mr. Huntingdon's utilitarian regard for his son contains an element of Industrial Era masculinity that enabled fathers to view their children as assets with potential future value instead of as family to cuddle.

Intimate nurturing was seen as a feminine role in the Victorian Era, so Mr. Huntingdon's aversion to hold or interact with his infant son resonates with one Victorian idea of manliness that asserts how "the differences between men and women had to be sharply emphasized and feminine traits had to be kept firmly in their proper place: in men they were a sign of weakness" (Genders 90). Bronte does not paint this detached regard for Arthur in a positive manner, which may be interpreted as a protofeminist push-back on this idea. She writes how Helen fervently addresses her tiny son, saying, "Would that your father could share [my joy in you] with me - that he could feel my love, my hope, and take an equal part in my resolves and projects for the future" (Bronte 189). Helen's wish that Mr. Huntingdon could share in her deep emotional connection to their son shows that he does not measure up to her concept of what a father figure should provide. By setting Huntingdon's obvious discomfort around his son's "utter helplessness" against Helen's longing that he could participate in a nurturing, intimately caring role, Bronte shares how this "disengaged masculine regard" lacks an essential quality of responsible fathering. By means of Mr. Huntingdon's negative example, Bronte argues that healthy fatherhood requires something more, even if that "something" is not totally masculine in nature.

When Arthur is a little older, Mr. Huntingdon becomes more interested in his son, but not in a way that supports his moral upbringing. Instead, Mr. Huntingdon encourages his idea of manliness in his son, which makes Helen incredibly anxious and distraught. Helen's diary expresses her distress as she writes: "[Arthur's] father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct him in all the evil habits he could acquire — in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements" (272). And what are these "evil habits" that constitute manliness in the eyes of Mr. Huntingdon and his corrupt

friends? “The little fellow... learnt 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” (272). Bronte clearly denounces these “vices” as a corrupt and immoral, and yet she also emphasizes that these traits are part of an ideal of manliness that fathers may teach their sons. Griffin, author of *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights*, comments on how Bronte deals with the gender norms of the era in her writing:

She exposes how the conventional rearing of boys condones aggressive and even violent behaviour, often directed against females in these middle-class households. Rather than seeing such behaviour as unmanly, fathers perceive it as a necessary step to manhood, marking their separation from their mothers and other women in the household. (Griffin 113)

Mr. Huntingdon definitely lives this idea out to the full, embracing the ideal of manliness as one that sets his son against his wife in order to “have his own way like a man.”

This ideal of masculinity runs contrary to certain recommendations put forth by the advice literature of the Victorian Era, however. In these books and pamphlets, commentary on domestic values and morals were popularly read by Victorian society, and these values included ideas about the proper roles of men and women, especially mothers and fathers. One piece of advice literature encouraged a masculine ideal of productive fatherhood by exhorting young men “to cultivate ‘sobriety, industry, and activity’... ‘Let him resolve, from the very start, never to spend an hour from home unless business, or, at least, some necessary and rational purpose demand it’” (Cobbett, qtd. in Griffin 113). In the eyes of Victorian society, Mr. Huntingdon’s behavior of teaching his son these vices would appear immoral but still have a masculine quality about it. Cobbett would recommend Mr. Huntingdon to change his ways, but would that really fix the possibility that this family structure (in which the patriarch held complete authority) could enable abuse? Here, Cobbett makes “two assumptions... the first was that men would always use their domestic authority wisely; the second was that a wife would happily submit to her husband's wishes” (Griffin 38). A father who does not “use domestic authority wisely” may promote any values he pleases without being checked, and in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Bronte illustrates how Mr. Huntingdon’s viceful

conception of manliness, combined with patriarchal authority and his role as a father, endangers his son to follow in his footsteps.

By illustrating Mr. Huntingdon's undignified behavior, especially in how he interacts with his son Arthur to "make a man of him" by teaching him to swear and drink, Bronte pushes back against the domestic ideology of the Victorian Era that promoted the subjugation of the wife to the husband in order to minimize disputes at home as much as possible, since "...a more democratic model of decision-making in the household would have endangered the male authority that was a fundamental component of masculine self-respect" (45). Griffin writes about the Victorian view of the home as the private sphere, separate from the public one:

The home needed to be peaceful to allow a man to contemplate God and to provide him with the peace and love he required to develop his character, so that he could protect himself against the sinfulness of the public sphere... any sort of discord in the home, therefore, threatened both a man's religion and his character. (41)

But what if the male head of the family was the one causing the "discord" by bringing the "sinfulness of the public sphere" back into the home? Bronte explores how this "domestic sphere" ideal could be a far cry from reality. This vision of the home as a respite of peace and domestic cheerfulness would only be possible if the man himself embodies virtue and responsibility. If he abuses his patriarchal power, there is little check to stop him from ruining the private sphere for his family. Mr. Huntingdon's abuse of power in his roles as father and husband exemplifies just how toxic this corrupt masculinity could be, to both wives and children.

Mr. Markham's close personal engagement with Arthur, on the other hand, illustrates Bronte's conception of "good fatherhood" as mixing alleged "masculine" activities with the slightly more feminine role of emotional nurturing and companionship. As Mr. Markham becomes closer with Helen, after she and Arthur escape Mr. Huntingdon, Mr. Markham also spends a lot of time with Arthur. He does so oftentimes in close physical proximity, which contrasts Mr. Huntingdon's aversion to his son. Indoors, Mr. Markham and Arthur read together with the boy sitting cozily on his lap, described this time from Mr. Markham's perspective: "the little fellow was seated on my knee, surveying with eager interest the various specimens of horses, cattle, pigs, and model farms portrayed in the volume before me" (Bronte 23). Out of doors, Mr. Markham takes him for a horseback ride

and “promised to bring him safe back” (42) to Helen, indicating his willingness to take on paternal responsibility. Mr. Markham’s version of fatherhood includes a much more hands-on, intimate relationship with Arthur that includes elements of education and companionship which typically fell under the woman’s responsibility in the Victorian Era. Bronte therefore questions the role of the father as one that is exclusively masculine or emotionally distant. Instead, she embraces the idea that in order to raise a child properly, a father must not leave nurturing up to the mother alone or provide only material resources; he must provide his fair share of emotional resources, as well.

Arthur also plays the important role of mediator between Helen and Mr. Markham, which draws Mr. Markham closer to Helen in a family context instead of a purely romantic or sexual one. In their meetings, there is a pattern in which Arthur usually precedes Helen and interacts with Mr. Markham briefly before Mr. Markham speaks with Helen. Mr. Markham acknowledges Arthur’s position in this dynamic fondly, exclaiming, “Dear Arthur! What did I not owe to you for this and every other happy meeting? Through him, I was at once delivered from all formality, and terror, and constraint. In love affairs, there is no mediator like a merry, simple-hearted child” (71). Even near the novel’s end, at the final dramatic meeting when Mr. Markham is about to give up pursuing Helen, Arthur is the one to call out to him, not Helen:

While standing thus, absorbed in my gloomy reverie... a tiny voice from within [the carriage] roused me by exclaiming - ‘Mamma, mamma, here’s Mr. Markham!’... I did not raise my eyes, but I suppose mamma looked, for a clear, melodious voice, whose tones thrilled my nerves, exclaimed - ‘Oh aunt! Here’s Mr. Markham - Arthur’s friend! Stop, Richard!’ (373).

The reunion scene is not that of delirious lovers reuniting passionately. Instead, Bronte focuses on the familial context by including Arthur as a catalyst to draw Mr. Markham and Helen together. Bronte emphasizes this again with the language she uses to describe Mr. Markham’s point of view. Markham does not reference Helen by name but by “mamma,” as if from the eyes of Arthur. This is a reflection not only on his own paternal potential but also on the shifting ideal of masculinity during the Victorian Era: “the aristocratic manhood that stressed social graces and sexual prowess was challenged by a norm of “character” understood as inward fortitude,

self-regulation, and a sense of duty” (“Victorian Sexualities” 128). This second ideal of “character” is one that Bronte promotes as healthy masculinity. Bronte emphasizes Mr. Markham’s “sense of duty” over “sexual prowess” when he recognizes Helen as a mother figure before he views her as a romantic interest, which indicates how Bronte values paternal duty over selfish romantic desire as “good” masculinity. And yet her idea of fatherhood contains elements that are not purely masculine, either, which complicates these concepts of fatherhood and masculinity and makes Bronte’s statements about these gender norms rather hard to categorize as being Victorian, protofeminist, or something else altogether.

Bronte is therefore making a statement about family values and her idea of what the father’s role in the family should be. She pushes against the ideal of “separate spheres” for men and women in families by illustrating, through Mr. Huntingdon’s behavior, how the separate spheres ideal enables abuse by subjugating women completely to male authority. Does she advocate for a “nuclear family” ideal in which the father actually provides emotional nurturing and companionship to the child, or does she say that there is a place in society for completely unconventional families, such as the unlikely joining of Mr. Markham with a widow, her son, and all the baggage from her first marriage? It is unclear just where Mr. Markham falls in his conception of a domestic ideal, as illustrated by his interaction with Arthur after his engagement with Helen: “now I 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” (Bronte 381). The use of “my own Helen” is glaringly possessive and reminds readers that, at this time, a husband would legally own his wife and all her possessions upon marriage. However, Bronte includes his “affectionate” caresses to the boy, which balances out the fear that showing affection would undercut whatever masculinity there is in fatherhood.

As a final note, Bronte turns the “domestic ideal” on its head even further with the fact that Helen actually owns quite a bit of money by her second marriage, which makes the role of providing financial resources not really an obligation to Mr. Markham. Compared to Mr. Huntingdon’s abuse of the “public and private spheres” family structure, however, this new family of Helen, Arthur, and Mr. Markham seems much more balanced in the roles between father, mother, and child. Mr. Huntingdon’s masculinity is toxic; Mr. Markham’s is dignified and yet flexible enough to let him kiss

Arthur. Bronte illustrates how easy it is for the family structure to be abused when male authority has free reign. But she also illustrates how it is possible to have a slightly less conventional family structure that, while looking quite different than most lauded family arrangements of the Victorian Era, actually works as well as (if not better than) the typical domestic ideal.

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