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Brianna Phillips
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Noisy Transgressions: Gendered Noise, Female Voices, and Noisy Narration in Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Submitted by Brianna Phillips in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.A. in English.

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Name, Title	Signature	Date
1. Dr. Jennifer Flaherty Thesis Committee Chair	DocuSigned by: Dr. Jennifer Flaherty 0B797A4F8DB945F...	5/8/2021 | 4:18 PM EDT
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Noisy Transgressions:

Gendered Noise, Female Voices, and Noisy Narration in

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Brianna Phillips

M.A. Candidate

Spring 2021

Abstract

This thesis re-evaluates Anne Brontë's critically undervalued novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) through its noisy women. By joining the fields of narratology and noise studies, I argue for the subversive noisiness of a novel that has been overwhelmingly dismissed by critics as a text of female silence, subjugation, and subordination. However, by offering a soundscape of gendered noise and proliferating female voices, Brontë privileges the sounds of women's voices in such a way that female noise "re-voices" the masculine origins of the novel (Gilbert Markham's frame narrative). Contrary to traditional readings of Brontë's heroine, Helen Huntingdon proves subversively noisy on two levels: her verbal interventions in noisy drawing rooms and her noisy narration through her diary and letters. I read both instances as sources of noise in the novel and argue for Anne Brontë's significant role in constructing a powerfully noisy (female)Victorian novel. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* women make noise against paternal figures and paternal narratives that seek to silence them. With its drawing rooms filled with the sonic violence of drunken men and its two gendered narratives (Helen and Gilbert's competing accounts) filled with narrative violence, the novel proves overwhelmingly noisy on multiple levels. However, because of the deafening nature of female noise, Helen Huntingdon conversely imprisons the male voice in her narrative and overwhelms male voices with her noise, undoing the male frame that threatens her imprisonment.

Keywords: noise studies, narrative voice, female voice, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, gender, narrator, Victorian novel, Anne Brontë, gendered narrators, violence

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Introduction:

Violent Sounds: Seeping Voices and Locked Narratives

"No Sound is Dissonant, which tells of Life"
~Coleridge

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) registers the noisy transgressions of women, positioning women as powerful noisemakers and noisy narrators while the men in the novel suffer from verbal blunders, nonsensical speech, and fragile narration. With an attention to the noisiness of voices, she offers a unique reading of the female voice through a violent and gendered soundscape, crafting an equally unique Victorian novel made noisy from its discordant voices. As women gossip and whisper with each other about the new tenant of Wildfell Hall, Helen Huntingdon, Gilbert Markham reveals the deafening "din" of Linden-Car (Brontë 96). The women are "continually talking…and so never pause" (97). Helen rebelliously laughs and heatedly parleys with censuring men in fraught conversations playing out across Brontë's drawing rooms. However, her drawing rooms are not pleasantly congenial but violently noisy because of contending women and men's voices, disruptive women, and drunken, muttering men. Linden-Car, the parish surrounding Wildfell Hall, resonates with the "noisome vapours" of women, and Grassdale manor, the Huntingdon estate in Helen's diary, becomes "alive with the party of ladies and gentlemen" (335, 290). The men at Grassdale, with their "madness, folly, and brutality," "[make] the house night after night one scene of riot, uproar, and confusion" (298). The result is a novel of noise in the extreme as the clamor of multiple voices emanates from within the estate, spanning the entire narrative.

In both parlors, then, there exists a tension between men and women's voices that stems from the anxiety of being muffled by the other voices in the room, and ultimately, in the

narrative itself. In particular, the danger lies in women's voices being effaced from the drawing room and the text by men. For example, after hearing several "reports" from Eliza Millward, Rose Markham, and Jane Wilson among others, Gilbert strides through Linden-Car "wondering…how [their voices] could the most effectually be silenced" (92). Helen, though, contends with Gilbert in numerous verbal conflicts about women's discursivity, women's education, and her claiming the "last" word between them. Similarly, as Grassdale falls prey to a "brutality" of male noise, Helen ensures that her voice will not be drowned out by suppressing *their* voices with her own noise. In this way, as men strive to silence women, and the women defiantly make noise in return, Brontë's soundscape operates around a dissonant power struggle between female and male noise that spreads through drawing rooms and across gendered narratives.

Moreover, Brontë relies on the split narrative structure of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in which Gilbert's frame narrative encloses Helen's diary and that allows for their dual narration, to re-assess female narration as noisily transgressive. In other words, one of Helen's noisy transgressions occurs through her disruptive acts of narration so that Brontë, in an unprecedented move for the burgeoning field of noise studies, situates narration as noise and as a strategy for noisemaking. In doing so, she enacts a soundscape of narration and of gendered narrative voices, wherein Helen and Gilbert's competing narrations embody sonic attempts to cover or drown out the other's narrative voice. Helen narrates through her extensive diary and through letters written to her brother, Frederick Lawrence, after her return to Grassdale in the latter half of the novel. These acts of narration structurally interrupt, disturb, and fragment Gilbert's narrative, bringing about a dissolution of the authority of the male story. Drawing on the sonic-like ability of Helen's narration to disrupt and to cross into Gilbert's designated narrative sections, Brontë

establishes narration as the "voicing" of the female narrative voice, endowing it with the sonic ability to reverberate across textual boundaries. As so, the female voice audibly and narratively sounds over and past lines of domestic and narrative containment, enabling Helen to defy her entrapment within her abusive marriage and within Gilbert's narrative as it encloses her story within it. Helen, then, defies the "noise" of the male narrative and of male voices with female noise and noisy narration. In this way, as proliferating noises radiate across the novel, they radiate dually from the drawing room and from discordant narration.

For this reason, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I propose, is a novel of female noise, for Brontë's soundscape operates around both the noises made by and from within a woman's narration. The novel, however, is not traditionally viewed as a noisy novel, but rather one of silence, silencing, and subordination by the patriarchy for its female characters. In particular, Brontë's implementation of a nested narrative structure that "nests" Helen's story inside of Gilbert's has been overwhelmingly read as both a signal of women's containment and of Brontë's suppression of the female voice. Elizabeth Langland notes, for instance, that the "traditional narrative analysis" surrounding *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* interprets its form as "the woman's story…enclosed in and authorized by a respectable man's narrative" (111). The diary, when read through its noise, proves to subversively contain male noise, narratively expunge the male voice, and formally rend the male narrative into two disparate parts. As a result, both the male voices *within* the estate and the overarching male narrative are undermined by women's verbal and narrative noises. Thus, Brontë, rather than suppressing women's voices, amplifies women's sounds of subversion to unsettle, and undo, the paternal tale.

In its interest in both noise and the sonic nature of narration, Brontë's novel joins two currently mutually exclusive fields of criticism: narratology and noise. The field of noise studies

has its roots in disciplines like music, physics, and technology, but more recently, the study of noise has been applied to literary works with an interest in understanding how, and to what purpose, authors employ sound in their texts. Nonetheless, noise-oriented literary criticism still has much work to do in comprehensively grappling with not only the possible textual roles of noise, but also on defining what noise is, means, and does in literature. Angela Leighton's *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* argues for the significance of paying heed to sound in literature and discusses the ways in which texts "invite the ear to listen" by "manag[ing] [an] extraordinary expressivity of sound in their silent writings" (17, 18). Her reading of literary sound, however, relies not on tracing actual noises in the text, but in a "voicing" of a poetry or prose done by the reader. For Leighton, because "the printed page is a silent base…which continually asks to be voiced," we "hear things" in a text when we become a "reader-voicer," in which the reader "work[s] to hear inaudible print…[and] imagine the intonations of what [they] read" (25, 7, 8). Anne Brontë, however, suggests that there are other ways we can hear sounds in the novel within the narrative world and with the resonance of narrative voices. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the text voices itself with or without the reconstruction of the reader. Leighton seems to dismiss the agency associated with noisemaking by and within a literary work. Moreover, although she explores sound across nineteenth through twenty-first centuries work, her primary focus in on the "sound effects" of poetry, but novels, it can be argued, employ sound much differently than verse (30). Her central premise, nevertheless, that "the literary text is a bottomless well of potential noises" remains true (25).

Because of its relevant newness as a discipline of literary study, several gaps exist in noise studies criticism, which *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* helps to fill. In his *Victorian Soundscapes*, John Picker observes that noise studies tends to focus on twentieth century

Modernist texts while the Nineteenth Century British Novel has been severely neglected. Picker takes the first steps in amending this theoretical gap, firmly establishing the Victorian novel as noisy through his concept of a Victorian soundscape. He traces an authorial preoccupation with sound that he argues began as early as the Romantic period with "natural sound," and thusly, the Victorian novel become the form through which "Victorians interpreted sound in newly amplified forms, as voice, noise, vibration, music, and electric echo, and how it worked within but, often at the same time, against their acts of writing" (Picker 7, 13). Picker, though, focuses primarily on the effect of sound technologies (the telegraph, for instance) on Victorian writers and how they chronicled these new advances as a "metaphor for the communication of meaning" (7). Corroborating Picker's claims, Melba Cuddy-Keane performs a sonic reading of Virginia Woolf's novels, drawing attention to two types of noise at work: the noises of overheard voices in "Kew Gardens" and literal noises (the striking of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*). Like Picker, she confines her study of noise to urban settings, positing that "the city plays a formative role in stimulating this increased auditory awareness" (382). However, Anne Brontë's novel shifts the field's seeming preoccupation with twentieth century urban noise in a new direction so that Cuddy-Keane's "noisy assault of the London street" becomes the "noisy assault" of the estate and of a multi-voiced narrative in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (384). Neither Picker nor Cuddy-Keane, moreover, situate noise as a specifically narrative signal, function, or device. That is, they do not consider the narratological significance of noise.

In his groundbreaking work on Bertha Mason's sounds in *Jane Eyre* (1847), Kevin Stevens advocates for a narratological shift in noise studies, coining the term "narratology of sound" in his "Eccentric Murmurs': Noise, Voice, and Unreliable Narration in *Jane Eyre.*" As Stevens reveals, "we know that nineteenth-century authors, in particular, wrote extensively

about, and were disrupted by, noise…[but] we do not know the extent to which they used such sounds for narratological purposes" (215). The power behind sound, for Stevens' reading, lies in its ability to "call attention" to the noisemaker, particularly when that character faces silencing or erasure (214). His framework of noise hinges on narrative unreliability, asserting that when we hear noise in a text, it marks "*narrative* discord—an antagonistic relationship between a noise-listener and noisemaker, each of whom effectively uses sound to condemn her foe" (205). He concludes that noise exposes Jane's plot to "obfuscate Bertha's voice—to transform Bertha's legible discourse into inarticulate noise" and to "lock Bertha's story away in a carefully crafted narrative" (204, 213). His problematic caveat, though, rests in the assumption that noise is not a powerful voice in itself, but instead, that Bertha's sounds represent her "noisy speechlessness" because her legible voice is "distorted" *into* noise (205). Thus, Stevens aligns more with the critical view of noise as unpleasant or unintelligible sound while Brontë offers another possibility: the noisiness of articulate voices and gendered narration. For her, (female) sound has an additional narratological use in that women's voices undo the male "origins" of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* re-sounding the novel with their noise. Therefore, sound can be used to trace a larger ideology of subversion by female novelists writing against the patriarchal literary tradition that excluded them. As Lisa Sternlieb notes, "the history of the English novel begins with men manipulating the writings of women," and perhaps, sound enabled these women, Anne Brontë among them, to challenge the mass of male voices in the literary marketplace, re-sounding the conversation in the same way that Helen re-sounds the masculine frame tale narrating her story for her (11). Thus, while Picker and Stevens have successfully accomplished sonic analyses of fundamental Victorian texts, *Dombey and Son* (1848)*, Daniel Deronda* (1876), and *Jane Eyre*, Anne Brontë has not yet figured in this critical conversation. By re-reading *The Tenant of*

Wildfell Hall through a feminist "narratology of sound," this thesis will argue for Anne Brontë's pivotal role in developing a powerfully noisy Victorian novel.

As a term, noise is unstable and not easily nor unanimously defined by noise critics because of its interdisciplinary nature, but on the other hand, its variability allows for literary texts to employ noise in unaccountable and diverse ways. In *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, Greg Hainge examines the multiple interpretations of noise across the disciplines with the goal of identifying a common thread amongst the literary, scientific, technological, and phonetic perspectives on sound. Noise "has been used to apply to everything and to nothing at the same time, subject to a whole host of mutually contradictory definitions and usages," which "makes the field of noise studies itself a noisy discourse, nothing but a tale of sound and fury" (Hainge 8, 7). In attempting to reach a consensus of what sound is, he offers several significant readings. Noise is "random, unpredictable and unordered" and possesses a "confrontational and contestatory nature" (9, 68). It, therefore, "does not fit within the bounds of an ordered and safe existence and the only possible response to that which cannot be contained within existing hermeneutic categories" (87). Ultimately aligning noise with disruption, he concludes that "it is undoubtably not insignificant that noise is imbued with a particular propensity for transgressing and destabilizing fixed boundaries" (11). Murray Schafer, in *The Tuning of the World*, reiterates the necessary subversiveness of noise, as it travels over fixed "bounds," with his concept of "sound imperialism," which refers to the ability of a sound to dominate the soundscape, invoking the power dynamics of noise (77). Literary analyses of sound often confine their definition to either unpleasant, unintelligible sounds or the nonverbal sounds within a narrative world. For instance, the chiming of the hall clock in *Jane Eyre*, the slamming of doors in *Persuasion* (1818), the bustle of the Price children in *Mansfield Park* (1814), and the

noisiness of the newly Industrialized landscape of the Victorian age are quintessential examples of conventional noise studies criticism in the Novel. In contrast, the “sonic environments” in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are not those of the roaring railways or the “bustle” of the urban street, but they are, on the contrary, permeated with the sounds of laughter, drunken abuse, male mutterings, women’s whispers, Helen’s sobering directives, and the noises of a verbalized “domestic hell” (Picker 11, Jacobs 210). Bronte offers a soundscape of voices rather than normative sounds in order to reveal the ways in which women makes themselves heard on every level of the text as they bring down their paternally constructed prisons.

The proposal that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a novel of noisy women conflicts with and challenges not only its supposed silencing of female characters but also the critical misevaluation of the novel as either an antifeminist text or as a work undeserving of our notice. In her introduction to the 1922 edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, British writer May Sinclair epitomizes the unfavorable reception of the novel both by Brontë’s contemporary reviewers and by modern-day critics. Sinclair denounces the novel for its seeming lack of “thrill,” “disturbance,” and “violence” as well as for a dull heroine whom readers cannot “bear.” She denies Brontë’s feminist influence and dismisses the novel as too lifeless to warrant further attention even as she, albeit unaware of doing so, alludes to the noisy crux of the novel’s “thrilling” disturbances:

> For there is no violence in Anne Brontë. When she slammed the door of Mrs. Huntingdon's bedroom she slammed it in the face of society...And you can see her sitting quietly outside it, with her little air of integrity, with her hands folded in her lap, and vowing to Mrs. Grundy that she knows nothing about any slamming, that there has been no noise or disturbance of any kind. And there really isn't any. But for the slamming of

> that door…but for that startling and reverberating sound, there isn't one enlivening thrill, not one, in all the long pages of Anne's novel. (Sinclair *vi-vii*)

Unaware of the power behind sound, Sinclair nevertheless alerts us to the noisy possibility of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with the "startling and reverberating" sound of Helen's bedroom door slamming shut in her husband's face. But, for Sinclair, "that door" is the sole sound in the novel, indicating that Helen's sounds are locked safely away behind her door, or, possibly, that she makes no other noises at all. Although she draws attention to this singular instance of noise, Sinclair further claims that Anne Brontë does not own that startling noise, but quaintly insists that "there has been no noise or disturbance of any kind." She, then, refuses to give Brontë her due credit in devising a novel of radical noise. On the contrary, Brontë plays with noise in unprecedented ways in her canonically forgotten novel, constructing a text that jars with, narrates with, and ultimately collapses from its (female) noise. She institutes a violence of sound wherein Helen "voices" her way out of it through noisy transgressions of voice and narrative, causing a sonic "thrill" that upends the male foundations of the text.

Sinclair's main critique revolves around the apparent dullness of the plot, but her assessment of Helen Huntingdon is conversely overladen with images of power, betraying the critical ambiguities surrounding Helen as both innocent yet powerful, pious yet destructive, and silenced yet noisy. Sinclair, noting Helen's "horrific capacity for monologue," maintains that "she doesn't go down. There is no bearing with Helen Huntingdon…[who is] a bore monstrous and indefatigable, with unbounded power to lay waste and to destroy" (*vi-vii*). Her assessment seemingly defeats itself in that Helen, if a "bore," is still "monstrous and indefatigable" because of her "unbounded power to lay waste and to destroy." She can't be "brought down," for her "horrific capacity for monologue," in fact, prevents her erasure from the text as unnoticeably

dull. Sinclair doesn't take into consideration the power of voice behind Helen's "capacity for monologue," which can be re-assessed as her capacity for making herself *heard*. Moreover, Helen is not "monstrous and indefatigable" nor does she "lay waste" to the plot because of her supposed banality as Sinclair implies, but rather, she is monstrous and "lay[s] waste" to the masculinized frame tale through her uncontainable noises. As a result, Brontë constructs a text that engages not with Picker's acoustic technology, Stevens' "noisy speechlessness," or Cuddy-Keane's urbanized sonic assaults, but rather, with a feminized noise of its own.

In this way, re-reading *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* through its (female) sounds reveals its inherently feminist foundations, but Anne Brontë's role in feminist criticism, as well as feminist narratology studies, has been slim to nonexistent. Carol Senf, for instance, reiterates the extent to which Anne's novels have been left out of the critical feminist discourse while her sisters, Charlotte and Emily, have been relentlessly expounded upon. She writes, "in the past decade and a half, feminist critics—including Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter—have focused on Charlotte and Emily Brontë and their literary treatment of… women's education, women's employment, and women's identity." However, "their younger sister, Anne, has not fared as well with either readers or critics, and the consensus seems to be that she is not worth reading" (Senf 446). Paving the way for feminist narratology in the Nineteenth Century British Novel, Susan Snaider Lanser and Lisa Sternlieb also omit Anne Brontë from their analyses of female narrators and narrative voice, yet they both use Charlotte and Emily Brontë's novels as touchstones for this model of reading. Thus, when Anne's work *is* mentioned, the tendency becomes either to touch on her involvement only briefly with the subject at hand or to compare her texts with her sisters' earlier novels, denying her a merit distinctly her own. If, as Sinclair posits, Anne had any "genius," it came as an emulation of her

sisters (vii). Jan Gordon, too, contends that "*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is always on the verge of collapsing back into its originary, *Wuthering Heights*" (736). Joel Simundich, along similar lines, argues for the "untimeliness" of Anne Brontë, suggesting that her novels represent "an experience of being out of sync with one's historical moment" (2). Not only, then, does Anne not have individual genius, but she is "out of sync" with her own time period, a reading that diminishes her singularly subversive engagement with the form of the Victorian Novel through noise. Simundich, too, falls prey to May Sinclair's diagnosis that Anne "bores to tears" in his notion of the "tediousness" of reading Anne Brontë (Sinclar *vii*, Simundich 2). For him, her "experimental narratives fail to hold interest" because she "[prioritizes] tedium and duration over excitement and the epiphenomenal" (1, 2). It appears, then, that neither Sinclair or Simundich were listening to the disruptive and disrupting female voices taking over the novel under the cover of Gilbert Markham's outer letter.

Given Anne Bronte's radical engagement with a female (narrative) voice that cannot be silenced or "brought down" as it resonates, bolsters, and reclaims the narrative as a female domain, the exclusion of her novels from feminist narratology, and feminist criticism more generally, proves problematic. More recently, significant feminist readings of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* have been done by Elizabeth Langland, N.M. Jacobs, and Rachel Carnell, but Anne's place as a feminist novelist who privileges radically noisy women, affording her heroines sonic and narrative power, is an avenue that has not yet been explored. Adding to Lanser and Sternlieb's work, I argue that, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Brontë engages with the interstices between female narrators and narrative voice, but in a new way: through women's noisiness and ability to *sound* over paternal narration. The sonic-turn of the novel, then, allows for a powerful resonance of female noise over boundaries of imprisonment so that women's voices seep across

narrative boundaries into forbidden sections, allowing for the "unlocking" of a patriarchal textual prison that initially locks Helen within. Because female sounds dominant the novel, they re-write the paternal narrative as, in fact, feminine, female-controlled, and feminized. As women's voices and Helen's narration resonates over male utterances and the voice of the male narrator, female noise conclusively "re-sounds" the novel. On every level of the text, then, the female voice resonates and demands to be heard. As Lidan Lin aptly notes, "Anne Brontë proves that women can be heard: she writes a novel, a form designed to be read and talked about" (455-56). Garret Stewart, too, attests to the sonicality of the Brontës when he writes of their style in aural terms, noting their "linguistic pitch," the "echo of [the] Brontë[s]," and the "verbal brunt of psychic violence" (234, 238, 239). However, while Charlotte confines her noisy women in the attic and Emily confines Nelly Dean's noises to one act of telling, Anne releases the "echo" of one woman's subversive voice to re-narrate the masculinized structure and to ultimately imprison the male voice within the female narrative.

Therefore, this thesis aims to listen to women's noisy transgressions and how they re-voice the novel by narratologically examining Anne Brontë's unprecedented role in the field of noise studies as well as to argue for her individual and distinctive contributions to the English Novel and the English canon through *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* The many voices spilling across the novel and violently seeping across unsanctioned spaces and narratives produce a Victorian novel of the resonantly disruptive female voice and of a heroine who proclaims to Gilbert Markham, the "taker" of her story, "'I'm sorry I gave it you; but since I did make such a mistake, the only remedy I could think of, was to take it away'" (Brontë 402).

Chapter 1

Sounds of Subversion:

Gendered Voices, the Female Voice, and Sonic Violence in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) resonates with gendered voices that cross drawing rooms, country estates, and narrative boundaries as characters vie for aural dominance over the others, producing a crescendo of sound in the estate. Brontë offers a unique Victorian novel made noisy from competing voices, sobering female directives, parlor gossip, and drunken male murmurs and outbursts. The drawing rooms of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* resound with tense conversations between Helen Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham and between Helen, Arthur Huntingdon, and his reprobate companions; the whispers of women gossiping; the loud clash of women's and men's voices during Helen and Walter Hargrave's chess game; and the unsettling profusions of Helen's laughter that spill over narrative lines. For Brontë, the source of so much narrative noise emanates from the interplay between the female and male voice, enacting a model of noise that hinges on the *sound* of the voice. She splits the novel's soundscape between inarticulate, abusive male noise, which repeatedly attempts to drown out and conceal female noise, and the articulate, potent female voice that struggles to be heard over the babble. From within this contentious dialogic space, Helen makes verbal noise in order to be heard over men and to challenge the patriarchy's ability to speak at all so that she voices her way out of domestic imprisonment. While men murmur, laugh, or halloo, Helen speaks "'plainly,'" positioning her voice as superior over nonsensical male noise (Brontë 103). The female voice, as it overwhelmingly deluges the soundscape, suppresses male noise, recoding *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, despite its male frame, as conversely feminine and female dominated. In this way, female noise stifles and undermines male voices of authority, rendering the patriarchal landscape full of female voices and the sounds of subversion.

With its collection of expressive voices and noisy country estates, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* engages with the ongoing discourse of noise studies criticism of the Novel, although Anne Brontë has not figured in this critical conversation until now. In John Picker's "Victorian soundscape," Victorians listened to "the screech and roar of the railway and the clang of industry, with the babble, bustle, and music of city streets, and with the crackle and squawk of acoustic vibrations on wires" (Picker 4). The Victorian age was a "period of unprecedented amplification, unheard-of loudness…'alive with sound.'" Sound became an "ubiquitous and inescapable" presence in daily life, both in "the streets and public spaces of Victorian London" and "in the drawing rooms and parlors of middle-class homes" (6,11). His study of sound, though, centers around Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and he never moves beyond the cityscape, omitting the noises that occur *within* those Victorian parlors. Although he acknowledges the presence of sound in drawing rooms, he attributes that noise to "the increasing volume of street noises" that poured through the windows, disrupting and distracting the "writing labors" of Victorian authors (11). Anne Brontë's novel, though, extends Picker's framework of Victorian noise by exploring the noises that already dwell within the country estate, not the noises that invade parlor windows from the outside.

With an emphasis on listening for noise in the novel, John Picker and Kevin Stevens, two fundamental noise studies critics, offer two similar, albeit different, models of noise at work in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel. Brontë modifies both frameworks in the soundscape of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, constructing her own model of noise and re-defining the meaning of noise and voice for the Victorian novel. She does so by offering, through Helen Huntingdon, a noisemaker who narrates. Noise criticism typically defines noise as either unpleasant and unintelligible sounds or nonverbal sounds, definitions which Brontë challenges by re-defining

the voice as noise. Picker and Stevens' respective work similarly walks the fine line between verbal and nonverbal noise, Picker proposing that the voice can be coded as noise while Stevens, contends that noise consists of inarticulate *attempts* to speak. In his analysis of Dickens and Eliot, Picker confines the role of the voice in the soundscape to the authorial voice or the voice as mutual confession respectively, but in both cases, the significance of "sound and voice, the ability to speak and listen, to hear and be heard" in the two novels operates around a sense of loss and disempowerment, especially for Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth (Picker 83). Of *Daniel Deronda*, Picker proposes a "fraught" soundscape that "depends…on the powers of voice and silence," "piano-playing," "intimidating silences," and "Gwendolen's and Daniel's fraught dialogues" (83, 91). However, Gwendolen "spends a large part of the novel…[in] silence," and "the way out of the marital cage of silence depends upon her muffled voice finding a close listener" (93, 95). Thusly, Eliot produces a "conversation story," in which Daniel becomes a "resonant repository for… Gwendolen's confessions" (95). Gwendolen "hears his voice as holding the key to her longings of escape from the repression of her marriage," but she becomes the "one…trapped" and "[will] not develop into the outspoken, powerful woman she hoped to be" (97, 106).

While he rightly classifies verbal exchanges as noisy and "fraught" conversations in the Victorian novel, Picker nonetheless offers a diminished view of the female voice in the Victorian soundscape, a diminishment that Stevens, in part, corroborates. Picker asserts that men are "repositories" of female speech, which conversely positions men as containers of female noise rather than as keepers or safeguards of the female voice as Picker implies. Similarly, the male voice embodies an "escape" from repression for the woman "longing" to be heard and listened to. All of which leads to a framework of noise in which women's voices are subordinated to the "need" for a male listener and dependent on a patriarchal sounding board. Women speak to be

heard by men rather than to be heard *over* men, as Brontë puts forward. However, while Gwendolen "depends upon…finding a close [male] listener" to speak, Helen Huntingdon speaks to silence the men who censure her voice, forcing men to listen to *her*. Although George Eliot appears "invest[ed] in the power of voice," her heroine, it seems, does not profit by the power of her own voice (Picker 96). Kevin Stevens, who brings noise studies closer to Anne Brontë's own time by exploring Bertha Mason's sounds in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), likewise offers a Victorian soundscape contingent upon the female voice being *distorted* into nonverbal noise. He argues that Bertha is capable of speech, but Jane deliberately manipulates and "distort[s]" Bertha's "language" into incomprehensible murmurs (i.e. noise) (Stevens 205, 209). He re-reads instances of female noise as attempted, but repressed, speech, thusly denying the power of female noise to "speak" in what he terms Bertha's "noisy speechlessness" (209). In both instances, Picker and Stevens do not fully address the capacity of the female voice to make noise or its subversive implications in gendered discourse, preferring instead to relegate Gwendolen's voice to a male repository and Bertha's voice as unintelligible sound.

Deviating from the models of female noise in the Victorian novel posed by Picker and Stevens, Brontë radically transforms the Victorian soundscape into one of struggle, resistance, and the female desire for verbal hegemony, amplifying the female voice across the reach of the novel while containing the male voice. She simultaneously plays into Stevens' notion of the "dissonant" soundscape wherein the narrator represses other voices even as she takes his ideas to their limits by employing a model of noise that revolves around deeply divided and antagonistic moments of gendered noise that require Helen to speak out against the erasure taking place. She exchanges Picker's cityscape for noisy country estates, and the Victorians in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* listen to each other's voices, murmurs, mutterings, gossip, and whispers instead of

hearing the railway or the "babble" of the streets as in Picker's soundscape. It is not, as Picker suggests, about "how [the Victorians] heard themselves," but rather how they hear *each other* that proves key in Brontë's unprecedented take on the noisy Victorian novel (Picker 11). Moreover, Helen's marriage is not one "under silence" as suggested in Picker's sonic assessment of *Daniel Deronda*, but one fluctuating between the "uproar" of drunken male noise and Helen's sobering voice lashing out against the pandemonium, creating a noisy dissonance between the genders (Picker 93, Brontë 243). While Brontë's soundscape similarly depends on "fraught dialogues," she denies the male voice the power of a "repository," and thus containment, of female noise. Gendered conversations are not sources of reprieve or confession, but representative of verbal opposition and struggles for hegemony. Helen, too, achieves dialogic control of this divisive soundscape, transforming into a discursively powerful woman while Picker's Gwendolen remains "trapped." In this way, Brontë's model of sound uncovers Helen's vocal power and desire for expressive control in a sonic environment characterized, because of the male-narrated frame letter, as masculine.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the country estate becomes just as noisy, if not more so, than the city streets, and by exploring the presence of noise in the country manors of Wildfell Hall and Grassdale, Brontë reveals the crucial and disruptive role of the female voice in the Victorian soundscape. Because of the replacement of urban life with solitary, isolated estates in the country, she re-situates the source of noise in the Novel as occurring within the drawing room, where the exchange of voices between men and women are distinctly and continuously heard. As Helen's Aunt Maxwell makes clear, the novel revolves around an (paternal) anxiety of what women will say to men and the extent to which the female voice can be heard across the length of the drawing room. Peggy Maxwell, after superintending Helen's introduction to two

potential suitors, tells her niece, "'It is no matter what I said. What will *you* say?—that is the question'" (Brontë 137). The "question" of what Helen will say prevails across the narrative and underscores the novel's preoccupation with the manifestation of the female voice within subsequent arenas of noise. Aunt Maxwell is concerned not only about what Helen says to *men*, but how she says it, instructing her to "'speak gently then'" after observing her "sharp answers" to Mr. Boarham, the suitor whom Aunt Maxwell favors for her niece (145). If Helen speaks "sharply" rather than "gently," then her voice, it seems, has been heard across the drawing room by the "inquiring" ladies with whom Helen "'[has] made [herself] conspicuous enough'" from the other end of the room (145). Aunt Maxwell, then, reveals an uneasiness about the *sound* that Helen's voice makes, which re-situates the female voice as carrying the sound of disruption across the narrative in the same way that it crosses rooms. In emphasizing how Helen converses with men, she also discloses the significance of gendered discourse that comes to bear as the novel progresses, betraying the threat of the "sharp" female voice.

Within Brontë's soundscape, the drawing rooms of multiple Linden-Car estates, located in Gilbert's narrative, and of Grassdale manor, found in Helen's diary, function as sites of sonic sparing between the sexes, spaces that witness the resulting clamor of verbal conflicts and the tension that underpins each gender's vying for aural supremacy. The men, in "making noise enough for all the servants to hear," attempt to muffle women's voices with their bustle, and the women respond by bombarding the soundscape with the sounds of their multitoned voices, whether by whispering around the tea table, sobering a drunk man with "determinately yet calmly delivered" rebukes of his "imbecile" behavior, or laughing directly in the faces of censuring men, all instances of female noise that challenge the male voice (247, 290). In conversation with Mr. Hattersley, one of Arthur's reprobate friends who visit Grassdale yearly,

Helen recognizes the antagonism of voices that marks the soundscape: "'And finally, should you wish your wife to be ready to sink into the earth when she *hears* you mentioned; and to loathe the very *sound* of your voice […]?'" (320, emphasis added). Brontë not only positions the voice as noise here in that the women cannot bear to "hear" the patriarchal voices around them, but she also establishes the conflict between gendered noise because Helen "loathe[s] the very sound" of the male voice more so than any other female character, accounting for the forthcoming sonic challenges between her and various men. While Hattersley ultimately reforms for his wife, Arthur does not for Helen, and his continual volley of "abusive language" towards her effects her hostile relationship with male noise (197). The number of quarrels between Helen and Arthur throughout their marriage reinforces the discord between the male and female voice that defines the soundscape to the point where Helen tells Arthur, "'I'll call you nothing—for I'll have nothing at all to do with you, if you talk in that way any more'" (165). In a parallel scene with Gilbert at the Markham home, Gilbert and Helen argue about which gender can have the last "word" in their first of many altercations. Gilbert derisively remarks that "'ladies must always have the last word'" while Helen responds, "'You may have as many words as you please—only I can't stay to hear them'" (61).

Across the parlors of the Markham home and of Grassdale manor, the opposition between male and female voices persists as Helen refuses both to hear certain kinds of male speech and to speak to men as a result. She will not listen to Arthur's blasphemous curses nor Gilbert's bitter remarks about women's speech, and she wants "'nothing at all to do'" with Arthur because of his "talk" while Gilbert, too, can talk as much as he pleases but not in *her* presence. She would rather not hear his "words," and by removing herself from the dialogic space, she prevents him from further articulation, thusly stifling *his* voice. Gilbert, then, unconsciously reveals the

progressive nature of the female voice in his suggestion that women withdraw from rooms only when they can be assured of discursive hegemony, or, of being the last voice heard. The dissension between Helen and her male interlocutors centers around a concern for whether she or they will ultimately "have" the last word, a concern that reinforces the gendered desire for verbal control within and beyond the conversation itself. It is, after all, the one who obtains the last word, or whose voice "linger[s]" the longest as Picker would say, who achieves control of the soundscape (Picker 12). Helen, struggling to be heard over the men's "uproar" at Grassdale, foregrounds both this gendered contention present in the estate and the (noisy) capacity of the female voice to challenge male noise when she writes:

> Could I ever imagined that I should be doomed to bear such insults under my own roof—to hear such things spoken in my presence—nay spoken *to* me and *of* me—and by those who arrogated…the name of gentlemen? And could I imagined that I should have been able to endure it as calmly, and to repel their insults as firmly and boldly as I had done? (Brontë 307)

Men "insult" her and utter unspeakable "things…in [her] presence," but she "calmly" "repel[s] their insults" with a "firm" and "bold" voice, signaling the confrontational sonic environment as well as the forcefulness of the female voice against male noise. Moreover, hearing men speak *to* and *of* her underpins the noisiness of conversational sparring in the drawing room.

Recalling her "sharp answers" towards Mr. Boarham, Helen's "bold" and "firm" voice, heavily contrasting with the drunken murmurs of the men at Grassdale, introduces the distinction between female and male noise that forms the crux of Brontë's soundscape: the functionality and cogency of voice. While Helen "'set[s]…the example of plain speaking,'" Arthur "mutter[s] bad language" and his friends are incoherent while intoxicated (288, 268). Because of its inarticulate nature, Helen repeatedly characterizes male noise as "nonsense," a designation that Mr. Hargrave

confirms when he asks her, as she observes Arthur, Grimsby, and Hattersley drunkenly laughing and muttering together, "'Did you ever hear such nonsense as they talk, Mrs. Huntingdon?'" (244). When Arthur harasses Milicent, the men all in a stupor by this point, Helen insists that though he "talk[s] to [Milicent] in so low a tone that no one could hear what he said but herself," "it must have been intolerable nonsense at best" (243). The male voice quickly becomes "intolerable" for Helen, more so because masculine speech turns meaningless, incomprehensible, and derogatory. Arthur's voice, in his continually "muttering" behind Helen's back or outside of her hearing, becomes so unintelligible that she constantly returns into the room and asks him to repeat himself. In their first marital quarrel, she recounts that "I went, but hearing him mutter something as I was closing the door, I turned again. It sounded very like 'confounded slut'" (197). The sound of his voice calls her back into the room, but she is forced to interpret his speech for herself, guessing at a possible translation but "willing it should be something else." Ultimately, she "[leaves] him—muttering…to himself" without returning for a recitation, revealing her increasing aversion to male noise (268). As opposed to his muddled murmurs, Helen definitively replies "'yes,' 'no,' or 'humph'" at the breakfast table to Annabella's inappropriate inquiries about Arthur, a contrast that differentiates these gendered voices (276).

Male murmurs complicate the soundscape in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* but simultaneously provide a source of subversion for the female voice as Brontë uses gendered voices to invert normative power structures. Brontë's categorization of male noise as inarticulate, incoherent mutterings and female noise as articulate, intelligible speech embodies the power dynamics of the soundscape in that the incomprehensibility of male murmurs reveals the inadequacy of the male voice to clearly communicate, and thusly, to achieve aural hegemony. Male noise, then, proves futile and impotent while female noise possesses a directionality that

elevates its influence in the estate and in the novel, enabling the women to counter male utterances that are too nonsensical to enforce obedience or control. For example, when Mr. Hattersley torments Milicent because she refuses to explain why she's crying, Helen subdues his drunken noise with "'*I'll* tell you, Mr. Hattersley.'" His noise consequently ceases, and he can only "stare [with] stupid amazement" and afterwards "mutter" curses at Helen (247). Gilbert, moreover, is not exempt from irrational male noise, but rather, Helen criticizes his impulsive speech: "'I am not speaking now from the impulse of the moment as you do'" (339). In what Juliet McMaster similarly characterizes as "Anne Brontë's vision of the disastrous divergence between the male and female" and the "enormous gulf" between genders in the novel, men and women "scarcely [talk] the same language" (McMaster 357, 356). She corroborates the significance of dialogue in Brontë, but she, in aligning men with laughter and the women with moral "seriousness," problematically argues for Helen's "deterioration" across the novel rather than her empowerment (McMaster 361). Nonetheless, McMaster verifies the extent of the "divergence" between genders in the novel, a "gulf" made even more clear when viewed through the lens of their divisive and dissonant noise.

In this power play of noise, the core of contention occurs as the women in the novel face the drowning out of their voices by patriarchal voices no matter how incoherent they may be, converting the Victorian soundscape into one of sonic violence against which the female voice must retaliate to prevent the total concealment of women's verbal presence therein. Although, as Brontë clarifies, male noise proves impotent because of its nonsensical nature in the battleground of voices that takes place, the sounds of intoxicated men laughing, hallooing, yelling, cursing, brawling, and muttering are nonetheless tremendously loud and clamorous so much so that Helen characterizes multiple (paternally) noisy scenes as an "uproar" (Brontë 243). Male noise

threatens to subsume, both verbally and narratively, the female voice, such that Helen contends with a forced removal of her voice from the soundscape. Helen alludes to that threat when she describes herself as "drowning" amid the abusive noise at Grassdale: "What could possess me to make such a request of such a man? I cannot tell, but drowning men catch at straws; they had driven me desperate between them; I hardly knew what I said" (307). The unrestraint of her voice, her "hardly [knowing] what [she] said," occurs *because* she feels like a "drowning man [catching] at straws," suggesting that male voices are drowning her out to the extent that she becomes willing to say "anything" in order to be heard *over* them. Helen, moreover, associates male utterance with "sentence[s] of impatient censure or complaint" against her, Hargrave calling her "'heartless'" and Arthur classing her as a "'confounded slut'" for arguing with him (258, 197). Arthur fills the library with abuse of Helen, attempting to silence her critique of his behavior: "[Arthur]…turned to me, and, addressing me in a low voice, scarcely above his breath, poured forth a volley of the vilest and grossest abuse…I did not attempt to interrupt him" (306).

In this way, noisy aggression, and aggressive noise, defines Helen's experience of male noise in the country estate, allowing for a violence of sound, specifically for *women*, that noise studies have not yet engaged with in the Victorian novel or otherwise. Patriarchal violence distinguishes Brontë's soundscape, functioning alongside the novel's layers of gendered narration, for the purpose of revealing the double imprisonment that Helen ultimately subverts through her own noise. The drawing room of Grassdale, for instance, functions as the seat of masculine brutality from the "volley" of cruel male language (insults, curses, mockery, and ridicule directed solely at the women), the bodily detriment of the wives (Hattersley throws Milicent to the ground; Arthur hurls a book at Helen), and the physical quarrels between the heavily inebriated men (306). Gilbert, too, throughout the course of his opening narrative grows

increasingly brutal, striking Mr. Lawrence over the head with his riding whip, pinching Eliza Millward's arm until she painfully cries out, and snubbing Helen despite his claims of loyalty to her instead of to the community gossip. Although Gilbert contributes more narrative violence than physical violence, he is nevertheless another aggressive male figure. As Tess O'Toole rightly asserts, Gilbert "while not the rake that Arthur Huntingdon was, is capable, like Arthur, of violence," aligning Gilbert as Arthur's double rather than as Helen's supposed "happy ending" (716, 715). Furthermore, Arthur, Hattersley, and Grimsby, in turn, noisily deride and slight Helen in the same room. As she passes the male trio, Hattersley loudly voices his "animadversions" against her; Grimsby "glower[s]…with a leer of malignant ferocity" while Arthur "mutter[s] a coarse and brutal malediction" at her (Brontë 295). Their aggressive behavior manifests itself through their sounds, positioning male noise as a verbal assault for Helen. Such noisy domestic violence recasts the estate as a structure of imprisonment for Helen, a bodily and verbal entrapment that Naomi Jacobs attests to as the "horrific private reality" and "violent domestic reality" found in Helen's diary, and thusly, in the drawing room where so much of Helen's narrative occurs (Jacobs 204, 205). However, Brontë's model of sound operates within structures of containment in order to conversely defeat them through female noise.

In transforming the country estate into a noisy locus of sparring voices that are further codified through gender and intelligibility, Brontë uncovers, from this realm of noise, the subversive capacity of Helen's resistant voice by revealing the ways in which she escapes spatial captivity, subverting the patriarchal strategy to stifle her voice from the soundscape and from the narrative. That is, the sounding of Helen's voice acts as, to extend Stevens' terminology, "aural retaliations" against overwhelming paternal noise (Stevens 203). Helen tellingly says to Hattersley, "'I would never contradict you without a cause, but…if you oppressed me, in body,

mind, or estate, you should at least have no reason to suppose 'I don't mind it'" (Brontë 256). Listening for the female voice, therefore, discloses the power of women's voices in a novel that for far too many critics exemplifies women's powerlessness because the interpolation of the female story into the male narrative frame initially indicates that a male narrator confines Helen's elocution. Because of this male frame, it is tempting to listen solely to the male babble of the drawing rooms, given its loudness, and to view Helen as "buried" beneath it, but reading the Victorian novel through a "narratology of noise" "call[s] attention to the subversive elements" that have been "conceal[ed]" (Stevens 203). For Brontë, Helen's voice, resonating across the entire novel, is the concealed "subversive element" that undermines Arthur's aural control and Gilbert's narrative manipulation to contain her noise. As so, Helen patiently listens to Arthur's "volley of the vilest and grossest abuse," but her voice strikes back: "But my spirit kindled within me, and when he had done, I replied" (Brontë 306). In resisting the articulation of authoritative male voices, Helen subverts the constraints on her voice and body as Arthur proves unable to control her unruly voice in the presence of other men.

Foregrounding the reverberating power of the female voice in this soundscape, Brontë deliberately opens Gilbert Markham's narrative with a community of female voices, rendering the male story (and voice) inadequate because of the proliferation of noises from the women. By amplifying the female voice across the first half of the male narrative, she establishes the authority of female noise before relocating Helen to Grassdale. Contrary to Grassdale, a telling absence of the male voice defines Gilbert's opening section as female noise, both Helen's and other women's, prevails. Women are upheld as subversive noisemakers before the substantial gendered contention transpires at Grassdale manor. Helen's entrance into Linden-Car as the new tenant of Wildfell Hall occasions an upsurge of female voices through the rumors, small talk,

whispers, and sotto voce conversations between women in the Markham, Wilson, and Millward families as they speculate about the mysterious Mrs. Graham. At the table, Gilbert "silently" listens to "[his] mother and sister…talking" and "discuss[ing] the… mysterious lady" (45). In the Markham and Millward parlors, "the ladies continued to talk about her," and Fergus Markham admits, "'We often hold discussions about you'" (72, 81). Eliza Millward, Jane Wilson, and other women exchange gossip in parlors, at dinner tables, and during walks in the countryside. Eliza, in a "voice subdued…to a whisper," "[brings] that lady on to the carpet" to discuss the "'shocking reports'" about Helen (91). Mrs. Wilson "[edges] her chair close up to [Mrs. Markham], and bending forward… [delivers] some spicy piece of scandal" to her confidante. The drawing rooms prove so full of the reverberations of female voices that Helen becomes "'wearied to death with small-talk'" from the women's "'continually talking'" (97). Brontë, then, offers an opening (male) narrative that resounds with women's noisy and disruptive "'whispering and muttering'" about Helen, positioning Helen as a powerful originator of female noise (95). Helen thus promotes the emergence of female noise in a narrative controlled (or not) by a male narrator.

In the first social gathering at the Markham home, Gilbert introduces his characters through their noise levels, depicting the men as quiet listeners while the women are so continuously talking that men *cannot* speak. This first explicitly sonic scene of the novel frames the power dynamics of gendered noise, positions of power that will be severely strained in the middle section of the narrative (Helen's diary) and return, quite vengefully, through the female narrative voice in the resumption of Gilbert's narration. Assessing his guests' vocality, Gilbert observes that Richard Wilson and Robert are "the most attentive listeners," and the other male guests, including Frederick Lawrence, are "willing enough to listen" while Mrs. Markham, Mrs.

Wilson, and Jane talk unceasingly. With her "old scandal," "trivial questions and remarks," and "oft repeated observations," Mrs. Wilson "uttered apparently for the sole purpose of denying moment's rest to her inexhaustible organs of speech," and Jane's discourse is "witty and seductive" to "effect [Mr. Lawrence's] subjugation" (62). Gilbert, though, incorrectly assesses Mrs. Wilson's incessant noise, assuming that she enjoys hearing herself talk, when, in fact, her "denying moment's rest" represses any comments or sound from the men in the room. Jane also uses verbal noise to achieve male subjugation. Anticipating his role as controlling narrator, Gilbert betrays his preference for *controllable* levels of female noise in that he misaligns Mary Millward as "another mute" with "a certain short, decided way of answering and refusing" while becoming piqued by Mrs. Wilson's "inexhaustible" speech (63). Mary, it seems, is too abrupt while Mrs. Wilson refuses Gilbert his due as speaker. Within the Markham's drawing room, female noise nonetheless dominates while the men remain speechless, which affirms the capacity of women's voices to silence the male voice and thusly attain control of the soundscape.

Helen further contributes to the female noise that bombards Gilbert's narrative, in addition to generating other women's utterances, in her discursive conflicts with Gilbert and by filling the soundscape of the male story with her laughter. Despite the absence of the male voice, when Gilbert does speak with Helen, she repeatedly represses, cuts short, and refuses to hear Gilbert's speech as she refuses to hear Arthur's, determined to resist patriarchal noise so that the female voice becomes the only voice that *can* be heard. The antagonism between her and Gilbert's differing voices manifests itself "when she anger[s] [him] by her unkind words or looks," which then "provokes" him to "revenge" (83, 88). He resents her conversational prowess when she talks with Mrs. Markham, Gilbert, and the Vicar, in which she suddenly "seemed to think enough had been said on the subject, and abruptly turned the conversation" (56). She

controls her own voice rather than allowing others to dictate its emergence in public conversation and in private discourse with Gilbert, regularly stifling male voices in the process. When, for example, Gilbert, in a rapid profusion of words, begins explaining the way to the sea from Wildfell, Helen "check[s] [him] with,—'Oh, stop!—Don't tell me now: I shall forget every word'" (70). She interrupts and counters his voice, "turn[ing] the conversation" at her will and demanding that he not "'tell [her] now.'" He, too, recognizes her ability to regulate his speech when "she [stands] still and turned towards [him] while she spoke, as if expecting [he] should go no further, that the conversation would end here, and [he] should now take leave and depart" (75). As she talks, she prevents him from "going…further" and "ends" their dialogue, denying him an opportunity to respond. The sound of her voice interrupting, checking, or dictating Gilbert's elocution, then, subordinates their verbal exchanges to her discursive power to "end" or "turn" the parley of gendered voices. Brontë offers male dialogue continually fragmented by the female voice, legitimizing the effectual potency of women's noise in the novel.

Moreover, Helen makes noise through her uncanny laughter that resonates consistently throughout the opening half of Gilbert's letter, a distinctive sound made subversive because she laughs while challenging male authority figures. Stevens emphasizes the disruptive nature of laugher in his analysis of *Jane Eyre*, a novel haunted by one woman's laughter. He proposes that outbursts of noise, such as laughs or screams, "imply that Jane and Bertha…experience unfair confinement and express justifiably indignant sounds" (Stevens 213). Helen Huntingdon laughs too and much to the same effect. Helen's laughter similarly signals not only her resistance to double imprisonment but also to oppressive male noise, marking "narrative disturbances" to Gilbert's authority as narrator. As Langland upholds, Gilbert represents the "traditional [patriarchal] narrative" of woman as a "desirable object for a suitable man," for Gilbert "strives

to interpret Helen Graham…as just another woman whose life could be fulfilled by connection with his" (114, 115). Helen, however, conveys her opposition to men's voices through laughter. When she refuses to answer Fergus Markham's invasive inquiries into her past, denying another male figure, she forthrightly tells him, "'I am not disposed to answer any more questions at present.'" Upon his demanding another, "'No, not one more!' laughed she, and instantly [quitted] her seat" (81). She again laughs her defiance with "'No, not one more!'" She also tellingly laughs in Gilbert's presence when he desires something from her, such as an account of her past, an explanation, or a painting, that she refuses to give him. When, for instance, he visits her art studio and examines Arthur's portrait sans her permission, she "without a grain of ceremony…took it from [him]…and then turned to [him] and laughed. But [he] was in no humour for jesting" (Brontë 72). When she forgoes hearing Gilbert's "words" in the parlor and thusly defies his peremptory voice, she "laughingly turned around, and held out her hand" (62).

Helen, therefore, laughs at Gilbert's (and Fergus's) attempts to censure or command her speech, to demand an account of her past, and to confine her in his "simple love story of a young farmer and beautiful stranger" (Langland 114). As a result, female noise imparts Helen's defiance, and, as Gilbert professes, the "injustice" she commits to the patriarchy such that she not only interrupts his narrative with her rebellious sounds, but she also overrules, as female noise encroaches, his hold on a narrative conceived as a solely male-sanctioned text. When she "laughingly" "[holds] out her hand" to Gilbert, he "[gives] it a spiteful squeeze; for [he] was annoyed at the continual injustice she had done [him] from the very dawn of [their] acquaintance" (Brontë 62). He, "in no humour for jesting," connects Helen's transgressive laughter with "the continual injustice *she* ha[s] done [him]," re-defining her noise as the sonic embodiment of her unruly wrongs done to the "spiteful" patriarchy. Perhaps most significantly,

her laughter turns “bitter” as the novel advances towards her diary, which positions laughter as her “indignant sounds” at being confined within Gilbert’s narration. She “bitter[ly] laugh[s]” when Gilbert remarks on her shabby rooms at Wildfell, the same rooms that he imagines as a prison for her preceding their first physical meeting in the garden at Wildfell (109). Her resentful bursts of laughter “make noise” in the narrative and disclose her fury and discord with Gilbert. Indeed, Gilbert reveals, after a novel’s worth of Helen’s laughter, that “‘You were laughing, and I don’t like to be laughed at,’” betraying the power dynamics inherent in a woman laughing, or making noise, in the presence of a man (and a narrative) who insists on her silence (386). Therefore, McMaster’s argument that only men in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* laugh while the women are mutely “unsmiling” proves contradicted by the heretofore unexplored resonance of female sounds, which neither McMaster nor other Brontë critics have yet addressed (358).

In this way, the loudness of women’s proliferating voices, whether through community gossip and chatter or through Helen’s laughter-prone confrontational interchanges with men, bombards Gilbert’s opening section and displaces the male voice so much so that all Gilbert can admittedly *hear* is the female voice. The female voice, then, regardless of its form, gains a measure of authority that men’s voices clearly lack in Linden-Car, bolstered too by the narrative power that Brontë dually invests in female noise. Gilbert, seemingly threatened by the explosion of sound from the drawing rooms, derides the “noisome vapours” penetrating the sanctity of his masculine narrative (Brontë 335). Female noise proves so threatening that he desires the silencing of such disruptive sounds, telling Eliza, “‘If you had wished not to anger me, you should have held your tongue from the beginning’” (93). The uncontrollable gossip provokes him *because* of its uncontrollability. He cannot control the noise surrounding Helen, whom he believes “I knew her better than they” (96). Thusly, his obsessive need to “silence” and

"disprove" the false reports about Helen exposes both the radical nature of female noise, as something that cannot be patriarchally contained, and his position as a repressive narrator who believes he alone can tell Helen's story and "set [it] right" (92, 94). However, he cannot be heard over the women, despite his intervention or demands for information from the Millward women, for when he does speak, Helen fragments his voice, and Eliza, too, commands him "'Don't speak so loud'" (93). Female voices so powerfully encompass and build upon each other that Gilbert admits to hearing nothing except the resulting noise. Perceiving the women's loudness, he depicts the parish as "wearied" with sound: "'I never heard it till Eliza told me, the other day—but…all the parish dinned it in my ears'" (92). "Dinned" denotes "of persons: to make a loud noise; to roar" and "to weary with noise…to utter continuously so as to deafen" ("Din, v."). Gilbert, then, feels deafened and wearied by the sounds of so many women communicating with each other and around the men. He consequently admits to Eliza, "'I've heard *nothing*, except from you'" (93). He suggests that the soundscape is so complete with the talking, whispering, and laughing of women that he can listen to no other voices.

Gilbert's narrative, contrary to the conviction of his own narratorial prerogative, depends entirely on this endangering female noise for coherent completion. Brontë, then, subtly overturns his narrative constraints by enforcing a dependency on female texts and discourse, thusly investing the female voice with specific *narrative* power that further manifests itself through Helen's narrative voice in the final volume. As Langland asserts, Gilbert's "narrative is bankrupt, unable to provide answers to the questions generated by the text," and "Helen's voice intervenes, with greater narrative authority…to redeem [it]" (116). His narrative fails to "provide answers" because Brontë denies him direct access to those "answers," the answers of Helen's identity, her past, or her current marriage, all of which *she* offers in her own narrative, establishing a narrative

imbalance of power between her privileged information and his access of it. For this reason, female voices and female-authored texts (letters, Helen's diary) predominantly inform his narrative rather than male sources. Rather than confiding in other men, Gilbert turns to Helen for information, proving the supremacy of her voice. Patricia Murphy reveals that controlling narrators "[build] upon others' narratives" in order to construct an arbitrary narrative from "the words [they have] been collecting" and "the plot details and conversations [they] describe" (40).

Gilbert likewise constructs his narrative from Helen's letters, women's gossip, and his conversations with Helen so that his text relies on *women* to "set [it] right" (Brontë 94). It is not Helen's narrative that requires correction (as he originally insists), but rather his own, and by way of female noise. Throughout the novel, though, he exercises his narratorial sleight-of-hand to diminish the power of these escalating voices from his soundscape, so he receives credit for the whole. Consequently, he deems the gossip as "noisome vapours" and "poison" that "spreads through all," attempting to derail the credibility of female noise (97). Nevertheless, the authoritative female voice, underpinning and holding the narrative together, exposes Gilbert's inadequacy and impotence as narrator by providing what he cannot. Gilbert's narrative, then, fails as a male-authored text because of the penetration and disturbances caused by the female noise that dominates his hearing and his narration, suggesting the weakening of paternal control in the parish and over the gendered soundscape. Gordon significantly notes that "the novel begins…with the death of paternity—a theme that continues throughout" (721). Gordon also indicates the *narrative power* in the "speech-act[s]" of gossip in that "to fear gossip is to fear that one is becoming a character, an 'other,' in someone else's fiction," and she refers to the creation of hearsay and rumors in the novel as "the narrative powers of the community" (723). Like Gilbert, she argues for the "devalue" of gossip and its "[lack] of authenticity" because of its

apparently untraceable "origins" (725, 722). However, Brontë emphasizes that *women* in Linden-Car produce the rumors, and as so, to extend Gordon, women are undoubtably imbued with the power to influentially shape the narrative itself as they "create plots" through their noise (Gordon 724). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, it seems, is *not* so much a male narrative as it is a (fe)male narrative drowned out and written over by female noise, which then rescinds Gilbert's authority to narrate a story that is not rightfully his to tell. This "male" narrative, in other words, is "bankrupt" in male noise, leaving the female voice and narrative to "intervene" (Langland 116).

Before Helen's diary overtakes the narration, Gilbert's narrative closes with an explicit identification of the female voice that disrupts his tale, resituating Helen's voice as the source of narrative interruption and sonic transgression. In the climactic scene between Gilbert and Helen preceding the switch to her diary, Helen promises to "'tell [him] all'" the next day on the moor, but he returns unobserved to Wildfell to watch Helen and Mr. Lawrence walk in the garden, assuming that they're lovers: "I looked. Her chair was vacant: so was the room. But at that moment some one opened the outer door, and a voice—*her* voice—said,—'Come out—I want to see the moon […]'" (Brontë 113). Gilbert's use of dashes textually represents disruptions to his narration, produced by the sounding of Helen's voice into the night. He neglects their meeting on the moor, refusing to hear anymore female noise until Helen says, "'Gilbert, I *must* speak with you'" so that "*her* voice" again disrupts his determined narrative silence, and hence erasure, regarding her (125). Her (narrative) voice literally takes over the narrative with the subsequent first-person narration of her diary. Significantly, Helen's formal introduction to Gilbert, as a speaking body in the text (preceding which we only *hear* of her from others' hearsay), occurs with a similarly overt sounding of her voice that also startles Gilbert. Roaming unauthorized about the grounds of Wildfell Hall, Gilbert suddenly "hear[s]" Helen approach from behind, and

she speaks to him “in a voice scarce louder than a whisper, but with a tone of startling vehemence” (52). The male narrative, then, begins and ends with the female voice so that his narration is trapped between two soundings of Helen’s voice, mirroring the way that his two narrative halves trap Helen’s diary in the “claustrophobic” middle (O’Toole 715). In a radical reversal of the novel’s structure, the female voice structurally binds Gilbert’s opening half, suggesting that Helen projects Gilbert’s imprisonment tactics back onto his own narrative.

Helen’s diary proves just as noisy, if not more so, as Gilbert’s opening frame, but while women’s voices predominantly resonate within Gilbert’s beginning section, her narrative jars with repressive and degrading male noise, a reversal that amplifies Helen’s desire for dialogic control of the soundscape and over so many censuring voices. As so, the gendered power play invested in the novel’s noise becomes firmly entrenched at Grassdale, but by placing the root of the (most violent) struggle against the male voice in the *female* narrative, Brontë allows the female voice (via Helen’s narration) to figuratively write over “patriarchal discourse” as well as “write herself out of [it],” as Arthur seeks to imprison her within a “domestic hell” (Lin 136, Jacobs 210). Carol Senf similarly argues for Arthur’s “desire to silence [Helen],” his “contempt for women,” and his “[attempt] to prevent her from making her story known,” aligning, like O’Toole, Arthur and Gilbert through their silencing and imprisonment of Helen (451, 454). However, while Senf asserts that “Helen…is neither permitted to speak nor to escape,” Lidan Lin, recalling Langland, differs in her claim that in “refusing to be silenced,” “Helen never stops intervening in Arthur’s life spent away from her, and to Arthur, Helen’s intervention is an unacceptable transgression” (Senf 450, Lin 134). Helen’s voice therefore continues to “intervene” and discursively cut through the patriarchal “uproar” at Grassdale, sealing the role of female utterance in the Victorian soundscape.

Grassdale Manor, Arthur and Helen's residence and the setting of Helen's journal, proffers excessively cacophonous drawing rooms, fraught with the "gender tension between husband and wife" and the resulting noises of Helen and Arthur's quarrels and of the yearly (inebriated) visits of Arthur's friends to the estate (Lin 135). As opposed to Linden-Car, Grassdale pits Helen against an overwhelming number of male voices, those of Arthur, Grimsby, Mr. Hattersley, Mr. Hargrave, and Lord Lowborough. The maximum number of women present at Grassdale at any given moment amounts to three: Helen, Milicent Hargrave, and Annabella Lowborough. Neither Milicent nor Annabella employ their voices in challenging the men as Milicent proves meek and yielding while Annabella, who "tries to act like a man," encourages the masculine raucous (Senf 453). Helen's single voice, then, must outweigh the noise of five men in order to counter their smothering of her discursive presence in the text. She must silence the men *before* they silence her, and the supremacy of her noise stems from the clarity and sobering effect of her language while the men produce nothing but meaningless, unintelligible gibberish. The men may not be quiet listeners as they are in Linden-Car, but the impotence of the male voice persists at Grassdale because of its nonsensical, and therefore ineffective, nature. During Helen and Arthur's first argument, Arthur "mutter[s] expletives" at her, and Helen, after previously telling him "'I don't want to…hear your voice again till the morning,'" sits in the drawing room, "wondering when Arthur would speak next, and what he would say, and what [she] should answer" (Brontë 195, 197). Helen silences him with the slamming and locking of her bedroom door (noises in themselves), and she apprehends the extent to which the drawing room witnesses their verbal sparring as she deliberates over what he will say and what she will say in return. While he indistinctly murmurs his replies, she responds "coldly" and with "calm contempt," which in turn "dumfoundered" Arthur to the point where he becomes "uncertain how

to answer such a speech" (193, 195). Her voice dumbfounds and "stop[s] short" Arthur's friends, too (295). With such utterances, Helen is "determined to show him that [her] heart was not his slave, and [she] could live without him if [she] chose," using her voice to deny his enslavement of her (195). Brontë premises her model of noise, then, on her heroine's ability to literally and figuratively "voice" her way out of domestic captivity, dumbfounding male noise as she does so.

In the first overtly sonic scene of Helen's narration, a gender-inverted parallel to that of Gilbert's, the women become the listeners of dominating male voices that laugh, sing, halloo, mutter, and shout so loudly that they can be heard through the triple doors separating the dining room from the drawing room, where Helen sits "sick at heart" from the noise (243). The scene dramatizes not only the hostile conflict between gendered voices, as Arthur, Hattersley, and Grimsby deliberately harass a wife that is *not* theirs, but also Helen's transformation from being shocked silent by their noise to vengefully stifling *their* voices with her own voice of authority, recovering control of the soundscape. The sounds that peal through Grassdale's drawing room irrevocably alter what Helen describes as the "quiet life" of their early marriage in the country (193). Helen hears "loud bursts of laughter and incoherent songs, pealing through the triple doors of hall and ante-room," noises that "startled [her] ear and pierced [her] aching temples." The men's entrance into the room is a "riotous uproar," upon which Arthur chooses Milicent; Mr. Grimsby sits beside Helen; Hattersley lounges by Annabella so that their "sounding bodies" antagonize the women with their crude jokes and ridiculing gibberish (Picker 6). They are "noisy" with "intolerable nonsense," and she observes Arthur "laugh[ing] immoderately" across the room (Brontë 243). She cannot decipher their language when "a clamorous contest [ensues] between them about [she] [knew] not what," and Arthur "[can] do nothing but laugh" (244, 245). McMaster tellingly argues that Arthur's laughter betrays his impotence because it "marks…a

congenital inability to be serious about anything" (359). This first instance of unrestrained paternal noise establishes the rivalry between Helen and these threatening, derogatory voices in that though she initially sits "silent and grave," she subsequently activates her powerful voice to restrain the heretofore unrestrained clamor. Brontë, therefore, uses the scene to elucidate Arthur's intention of silencing and obscuring the female voice beneath the men's "[giving] loose to all their innate madness, folly, and brutality, and [making] the house night after night one scene of riot, uproar, and confusion" (Brontë 298).

Helen retaliates against that male "uproar" with her direct voice, besieging the "deplorable spectacle" of paternal noise with her own resistant noise that counters and stifles the men around her. The female voice, then, once more fills the narrative, and, because this scene represents a male version of the female "din" of Wildfell Hall, Helen's verbal interventions, or the striking out of her voice against the noise (and men), feminize the drawing room noise in order to reclaim her power over the soundscape and other men's voices. After her initial silence at the men's entrance, Helen revives her voice when the men attempt to enter into conversation with her. Her explicitly frank speech, though, stuns the men silent in the same way that their noise shocked her, affording her a substantial sobering effect in the arena of gendered noise. She, for example, forthrightly tells Mr. Hargrave, after his persistent chatting annoys her, "'You better not say so to me then'" (242). Mr. Grimsby, too, has "been talking away, at [her elbow]" until she intervenes with "'You are pouring the cream into your saucer, Mr. Grimsby'" and corrects him about the candles being snuffed (244). Her voice sobers him when he responds, "'Have I so?…Um! I perceive'" (245). In a similar scene, Hattersley, after Helen's criticizes his behavior towards his wife, can only "stare [with] stupid amazement" at her, paralleling Arthur's previously being "uncertain how to answer such a speech" from his wife (247, 195). Similarly,

Rachel Carnell argues that Helen "emblemizes the rationality of the public sphere" because "[her] voice is rational, confident, and self-sufficient." Although Carnell maintains the power of Helen's voice, she proposes that its "rationality" codes "[Helen's] discourse" as "masculine," thusly detracting from the potency of the female voice as *female* that Brontë insists on (Carnell 10). Helen's continual vocal interference in this male pandemonium represents a dialogic struggle between her silencing them and the room swiftly tilting back to their laughter and clamorous arguments. Nonetheless, *her* voice cuts into the babble, vying for control and making noise so that she will not be entirely subsumed. She doesn't appropriate a masculine voice, for she maintains and employs her own distinct voice. As her narrative records numerous exchanges between her and these men, she transitions from this back-and-forth between her voice and their voices to demanding men's silence. She commands Hargrave, whom she knows relays her words to the group of friends drinking in the drawing room, "'I only ask your *silence*'" (289).

Before Helen silences the patriarchy, the tumultuous (and noisy) chess game between Helen and Hargrave literalizes the novel's thematic concern with competing gendered voices, aural conflicts, and the desire to supplant the opposing sex as Hargrave aims to "conquer" Helen but she rejects his defeat of her. For this reason, Brontë deliberately designs the chess game as a competition between a male and a female player, rather than between two men or two women. Through Helen and Hargrave's respective voices as they "battle" for victory, the chess game formalizes the noisy gender war of Brontë's Victorian soundscape as well as Helen's desperate determination to triumph over her male opponent as she cries out *against* the male voice, refusing to be silenced or overcome. Moreover, the chess game unfolds within the drawing room, the center for antagonistic voices. Entering the room, Hargrave "challenge[s] [Helen] to a game of chess," and Milicent is "'delighted to watch…two *such* players'" and "'wonder[s] which will

conquer'" (261, 262). In her narration, Helen alludes to the double meaning of this seemingly simple boardgame, converting their surface-level "play" into an extensive power struggle:

> "Now, Mrs. Huntingdon," said Hargrave, as he arranged the men on the board, speaking distinctly, and with a peculiar emphasis as if he had a double meaning to all his words, "you are a good player,—but I am a better: we shall have a long game, and you will give me some trouble; but…in the end, I shall certainly win" […].
>
> We set to work;…I intensely eager to disappoint his expectations, for I considered this… a more serious contest—as I imagined he did—and I felt an almost superstitious dread of being beaten…I could ill endure that present success should add one tittle to his conscious power…or encourage, for one moment, his dream of…conquest. (Brontë 262)

Melinda Maunsell, in her study of the power transactions embedded in characters' hands in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, offers one way to re-assess this scene, which Maunsell excludes from her analysis. She proposes that Brontë "devise[s]" a "synecdochic relationship between woman and hand…to imply an even stronger link between the violence and the woman's body" because "power rests in the hands, can be expressed, given, grasped, retained or passed on by the hands" (Maunsell 48, 59). A similar argument can be made about the chess game, where Helen and Hargrave take turns moving the chess pieces with their hands and thusly making power plays through their hands. In their "combat," Helen "struggle[s] hard against him," and "victory… [inclines] to [her] side" as she "take[s] several of his best pieces, and…baffle[s] his projects" (Brontë 262). "Power transactions" are acted out, according to Maunsell, by such "hand codes," suggesting that each tactile move on the chess board embodies a figural move towards power, or a "grasping" for power for both Helen and Hargrave (45). When she "takes" his "pieces," she is, then, taking his power for herself.

As the power balance tilts first towards Helen and finally towards Hargrave, the clashing of their voices signifies a "grasping" at sonic or dialogic power, or, the urgency to be the last voice heard, such that the exchange of power rests in the voice as well as the hands. Helen steals the power of the authoritative male voice, feminizing that power with her own voice, in the same way that she takes his chess pieces. When Hargrave asserts the certainty that "in the end, [he] shall certainly win," Helen responds "with a vehemence" of voice that "startle[s]" the room (Brontë 262). The pitch of the conflict occurs, significantly, when Helen begins losing the game and Hargrave and Hattersley, a spectator of the match, loudly taunt her, re-casting the scene as both a "power transaction" and a noisy debacle between voices of shifting authority. Noticing that Helen is losing her lead, Hattersley laughs and mocks her, but she commands him to "'hold your tongue, will you?'" because "his talk distract[s] [her]." As Hargrave moves to checkmate her, she "[seeks] in agony some means of escape" from her "antagonist," revealing her abhorrence of defeat by the patriarchy. She must "escape" rather than risk being "entangled" in his "snare," which given Brontë's sonic emphasis, implies the "snare" of Hargrave's voice/noise. As paternal noise escalates and "distracts" her, she fears the tangible danger of their murmurs of victory overpowering her voice in the drawing room, where she has previously sobered their critical voices. Hargrave "murmur[s] 'Beaten—beaten!'" and "suspended the utterance of that last fatal syllable…to enjoy [her] dismay" while Hattersley persistently laughs. However, she rallies by "exclaim[ing]" "'No, *never*, Mr. Hargrave!'" (263). She denies male victory with her noise, and her "startling" voice symbolically cuts through the dialogic space that is rapidly becoming male-dominated rather than female-dominated. She cuts through their sounds because in her exclamation, she "[cries] out" and "proclaim[s] *loudly*" ("exclaim, v."). In the drawing room, then, Helen "loudly" cries out against the controlling male voice and restores the power of

her noise. She rejects Hargrave and Hattersley's "talk" when it threatens her control of the chess game (Hattersley's distractions) and when it confirms her defeat (Hargrave). Therefore, women and men in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* exchange words in the same way that they exchange chess pieces, reinforcing the "power transactions" that occur between their voices (Maunsell 45). When Helen cries out against the patriarchy, she not only silences Hargrave and Hattersley, but she also claims aural supremacy for the female voice that refuses to be hampered by men.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is not only a noisy novel of clamorous voices, fraught drawing rooms, and slamming bedroom doors, but it is a novel of the *female* voice, of resistant female noise. The novel operates around women's struggle to be defiantly heard over the patriarchal uproar of voices and raucous noise, but *women's* voices are the sounds that proliferate, dominant, and control the narrative, radically opposing the "traditional analysis" that Brontë's novel "affirms the patriarchal status quo of masculine priority and privilege" and women's "subordination" because of the overlaid male narrative frame (Langland 111). As Brontë's soundscape reveals, the novel is not merely interested in voice, but, to modify Maunsell, in how "power rests in the" *voice,* "can be expressed, given, grasped, retained or passed on by the" voice (59). However, that power "rests" in the "sharp" female voice and is robbed from the ineffectual male voice as female noise bombards the estate and across the male narrative itself. Women's voices become so continuous and overpowering that Brontë covertly re-codes the novel as female-driven and female-derived. That is, women "narrate" over Gilbert and the male characters through their noise, sounding over the story he presents through their gossip, conversation, and rebellious laughter. Through sound, women overturn the male story, underpinning a narrative that would otherwise collapse because of the fragility of male (aural) authority. In this way, female noise converts a purportedly male narrative into an authoritative

female narrative, upheld by, resonating with, and governed by their privileged voices. For this reason, Helen performs the role of the male suitor in the concluding pages as her and Gilbert's "fortuitous encounter leaves him silent," and she "must propose to him and so transgress the boundaries of the masculine and feminine" (Langland 121). The novel ends, then, not with Helen consigned to "narrative silence," but rather, with our narrator silenced and Helen *speaking* (Senf 448). In the same way, Brontë constructs a masculine narrative overtaken by female voices, wherein, like Gilbert, all we can hear are the sounds of female subversion.

Chapter 2:

Hearing Narration:

The Female Narrative Voice, Noisy Narrators, and Imprisoned Male Voices

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Helen Huntingdon constantly navigates, and eludes, a hostile and fraught relationship between aggressive men and female narratives. There exists, in other words, an antagonism between paternal figures and female narratives, wherein male narrative "hands" manipulate, seize, and control Helen's narrative in an attempt to dismantle female narrative power. Arthur Huntingdon violently seizes Helen's diary from her while she's writing, and Gilbert, in copying her letters down for Jack Halford to read, severely mutilates her texts by fragmenting, redacting, and disorganizing them. That is, men commit violence to women's narration in an attempt to estrange, muffle, and erase the coinciding female "voice" embodied in such texts. However, when Arthur takes her diary, signifying the female narrative's being trapped between male hands, Helen "[does] not leave him to pursue the occupation *in quiet*" (Brontë 309, emphasis added). When her narrative power is threatened, then, she pointedly makes *noise* in the presence of the paternal intruder, denying him the pleasure of enjoying his novel violence "in quiet." The connection between Helen's diary, through which she becomes *the* narrator of Gilbert's text, and the production of unruly noise in the presence of men allows for a re-reading of narration as sonic soundings of the female (narrative) voice. Helen's acts of narration within the novel, her diary and letters to Frederick Lawrence that Gilbert coercively reads, function as another "language" through which Helen speaks *over* both the male voice and the male "noise" of narration. In this way, the act of narrating functions as a powerfully sonic *resonance* of the female voice for Helen Huntingdon.

In a continued engagement with noise, Brontë re-codes narration as an audible "voicing" in the novel, and thus, as a form of noisemaking. In the same way that men threaten her literal

voice with erasure, so too does Gilbert endeavor to subsume Helen's narrative voice with his own, enacting a soundscape of narration in which Helen and Gilbert's discordant narrative voices struggle for aural control of the novel itself. Through her interpolated diary, which "shoulder[s] aside" the "outer" narrative as N.M. Jacobs notes, and letters that bombard Gilbert's text, Helen's narration infiltrates Gilbert's narrative, enabling the female narrative voice to reverberate across textual boundaries and transgress into the masculine sections where the male voice *should* predominate (208). As Helen invades his authorial space, the "noise" of Gilbert's narration threatens to efface her narrative voice in order to prevent her from "speaking" her own story, but Helen noisily hijacks the narrative from him and narrates *over* Gilbert, refusing to lie silently buried in the middle of the novel. Moreover, by interrupting and subduing Gilbert's story, the female narrative voice cripples and undoes the male narrative frame that contains the female story. Helen's noisy narration therefore reverses the structure of the entire novel, imprisoning the male story within *her* story and revealing the fragility of the male voice as a narrating device. She collapses the paternal discourse binding her voice, her narrative, and her noise, pulling down the very narrative structures that confine her. As a novel already bristling with contentious voices in Victorian parlors, it aptly concludes with the figural "sounds" of Gilbert's and Helen's narrative voices clashing across Gilbert's resumed narrative. The result is a novel made noisy from the "din" of narration as two co-narrators strive to drown out the competing narrative and become the last narrative voice *heard,* redefining the possibilities of the sonic Victorian novel (92).

The introduction of Helen's expansive diary, through which she becomes the "I" of the narrative and displaces Gilbert from his narratorial role, signals Brontë's crucial conflation of narration and voice as well as the novel's transition from vocality to vocal narration. That is,

Brontë positions narration as an alternative voice through which Helen and Gilbert "speak" to each other in the latter half of the novel, investing narration with an aurality that amplifies the novel's noise two-fold. Helen's diary initiates this vocal narration when she offers it to Gilbert, after he demands an explanation of her past to disprove the misaligning parish gossip about Helen, in lieu of verbally telling him her story. She instead "speaks" it through narrative, through narration, conversing with him from within the "I" of her diary. When he fails to meet her on the moor, where she intended to orally recount her life history, out of his jealousy, she forces him to read her diary instead, substituting one act of voicing for another. In so doing, Gilbert must recognize her status as both an authoritative speaker and narrator. Texts, for this reason, take the place of spoken words, assuming the function of the voice and thusly simulating the "noise" of dialogic conversation. Elizabeth Langland likewise argues for "Helen's authority to speak her story" through the journal, aligning the diary as one way in which Helen "silence[s] the other proliferating voices" of the community (116). She further proposes that had Helen verbalized the story of her abusive marriage to Arthur, it would've been *disempowering* to do so because "that story would be the traditional one of a male subject's reaffirmation of his desire for a woman as object. That is not the story Brontë wanted to write" (Langland 114). In a more harrowing encounter with Arthur over her diary, the connection between narration and voice is made explicit, for when he forcibly snatches away her journal mid-narration, she becomes powerless and voiceless. She sits "speechless…and almost motionless," connecting the absence of her journal with an absence of her voice. Therefore, narrating, whether through diary entries or letters, affords her the power of voice as well as a level of audibility in a masculine frame tale. Furthermore, her diary signifies her ability to "speak" into the void of Gilbert's narration that

surrounds her as well as to write over the clamor of drunken men "defiling" her paper, ultimately un-writing their sounds by excising their voices from her narrative (Brontë 311).

Brontë's designation of narration as a dialogic, communicative "speaking" mode allows for this distinctive aural feature of narration, a *narrative* noise bolstered by the verbally rowdy drawing rooms. In the same way that Helen's diary "speaks" to Gilbert, her series of letters that bombard Gilbert's resumed section, after her diary concludes, occasion a similar vocal narration. In the final volume, Helen returns to Grassdale, the setting of her narrative, to nurse her dying husband while Gilbert remains in Linden-Car so that they are forced apart into separate narrative worlds. Their separation thusly precipitates the need to "speak" through narration, enacting a discursive exchange through the narrative voice. Mikhail Bakhtin's influential analysis of "novelistic discourse" and the "multiplicity of social voices," or social heteroglossia, at work in the Novel offers one way to assess the dialogic aspect of narration in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (332, 263). For Bakhtin, the novel is in its very nature discursive and conversational because of its "distinctive social dialogue among languages." The "distinguishing feature" of the Novel is its "interrelationships between utterances and languages," its "movement…through different languages and speech types," and its various types of written narration, which he codes as "the *speeches* of narrators" (263, emphasis added). Heteroglossia facilitates the "dialogization" of the Novel, and significantly, Bakhtin does not separate verbal languages from narration in codifying the many voices at work in the text (263). He suggests that a "dialogue" forms between "direct authorial literary-artistic narration," "oral everyday narration," "(written) everyday narration (the letter, diary)," and "individualized speech of characters" (262). Thusly, Bakhtin establishes narration as a distinct voice in the novel so that narration *speaks* alongside characters' utterances. Pairing his dialogic reading of narration with Brontë's sonic novel indicates that if normative

voices make noise in her gendered soundscape, then the "voice" of narration likewise contributes its share of noise to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Bakhtin's emphasis on the "voicing" of the novel plays into a larger conversation around locating and defining narrative voice in the Novel, an area of much critical debate in the field of narratology and one that has not yet considered the influence of noise studies. Significantly, key theorists, such as Gerard Genette, Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, Ann Banfield, and Dorrit Cohn, discuss narrative voice using aural and sonically charged terms, but even so, laying a foundation for the implicated role of noise in discourses of voice and narration. In answer to Genette's defining inquiry of "who speaks?" in a novel, Genette, Bal, Chatman, and Cohn suggest that in locating a narrative voice, we locate the speaker (or, narrator) of the novel. Genette describes the way in which a speaker "utters" narration, proposing that a "narrative without a narrator" belies an "utterance without an uttering," and critics who contend that "no one in the narrative is speaking" possess, according to Genette, "an astonishing deafness to texts" (101). Mieke Bal similarly defines narration as the "voice that is verbalizing the action" so that both Bal and Genette situate the act of narrating as the narrator's verbally speaking within the text, joining narration with aurality and spoken dialogue (Bal 146). Critic John Brenkman, too, contends that the "novel engages the sociality of communication," even going so far as to connect the "contemporary novel" with an increasing "interaction with oral culture" (290, 297). He draws attention to the seeming contradiction, in narratology, of viewing written narration through metaphors of voice because traditional voices signify speech while written texts are "silent." Nonetheless, he insists that "what makes the novel…is its voice," and "our aesthetic response to novelistic 'voice' relate[s] to the everyday experience of recognizing someone's voice" (Brenkman 299, 303-4).

Along similar lines, Richard Aczel analyzes narrative discourse, and the metaphors of voice with which narration is described, through the lens of the sound effects and audibility of human voices, drawing parallels between the two, again implementing sonic terms in conjunction with narrative voice. For Aczel, narrative voices can be distinctively identified through the tone, style, and rhetorical language employed by narrators in the same way that differences in the tone or pitch of everyday voices can be discerned by the ear. That is, "stylistic expressivity" characterizes individual narrators" and "endows this speaking subject with recognizable *voice*," for "where style does have an expressive function it will produce a voice effect" (472). Drawing on Seymour Chatman's notion of a narrator's "degree of audibility," which depends more so on a narrator's "covertness" or "overtness" in the text rather than an awareness of audible *sound*, Aczel offers the concept of "audible" narration. He thusly reframes the contested metaphor of voice in narrative studies by asserting that we can "hear voices" in the Novel due to a narrator's stylistic particularities that, in turn, allow the narrator to be heard via "an identifiable narratorial idiom" (Chatman 196, Aczel 468, 482).Yet, much like Chatman, this "narratorial audibility" and the "audible narratorial agency" proscribed to narrators pivots not around the audibility of narratorial *sounds* heard within the text, but more so the "elements *of* the narrator's discourse itself which…may draw attention to the intrusive presence of the narrator" (470). Aczel, too, concludes that "written texts" are in themselves "silent," and the "construct[ion]…[of] speaking entities" falls to the reader's textual discernment of the narrator's "idiom" (495). He, then, disregards the aurality of narration even while arguing for it. In this way, although these narratologists call attention to the metaphoric "speech-act" or verbosity of narration and the narrative voice, narratorial audibility only signals the detection of a narrator's presence, not the audible *noises* of narrators as they speak in their "idiom" across a text.

In contrast, Anne Brontë's novel, with its concentration on noise, voices, and dialogic narration, effectively joins noise studies with narrative theory, literalizing "audible narration" as an authentically *sonic* phenomenon that redefines the Victorian novel. In that linkage of narration and noise, she reorients what it means to not only write a noisy novel but also for a narrative to quite literally *make* noise with its narration, solidifying her unforeseen yet pivotal place in the field of noise studies. If narration has the potential to be audible, then it follows that the narrative voice is the "utterance" of or *sound* of narration, translating narration into a form of noise (Genette 101). By "dialogizing" Gilbert and Helen's narrative voices, Brontë transforms their struggle for the role of narrator into a sonic one that revolves around making noise, silencing another's dominating voice, and aurally disturbing the walls of a textual prison. Designed to replicate conversational exchanges, the male and female narratives, as they succeed and ultimately confound each other, represent and formalize a noisy parley of narration or narrative voices. The result is an ostensibly sonic narration, through which Helen's narrative voice resounds over gendered narrative territories, transgressively defying Gilbert's partitions between their dueling narratives. Bakhtin, without heeding to the sonic connotations of his language, nonetheless suggests the capacity of narration to make noise in attention to "the *resonance* of novelistic discourse" (332, emphasis added). Notably, "resonance" refers to a "resulting" "sound, or quality of sound" as well as an "amplification," and as so, to extend Bakhtin's analogy, the "resonance" of narration thusly implies that Gilbert and Helen's narrative voices resonate with the sounds of their stories. As they struggle to claim the "unitary language" of the novel," they amplify their narratives over the opposing tale, *loudly* narrating as they do so ("Resonance, n.").

Within this framework of sonic narration, Brontë constructs her own multi-voiced or heteroglot novel that capitalizes on the ability of a noisy narrative voice to transcend the layers

between texts, producing a heteroglossia of noise. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* involves a complex layering of narratives, speech acts, and texts, all of which contribute to the loudness of the novel. In what Jan Gordon sees as the novel's "world of proliferating 'texts' which cannot be contained," Brontë foregrounds what Bakhtin's polyvocal novel might sound like as she "sublate[s] a variety of second- or third-hand discourse: community gossip; [Gilbert's]…'faded old journal'; the incomplete manuscript of Helen Huntingdon's diary…a cluster of failed correspondence between Gilbert and Helen," and drawing room conversations into their varying noises (Gordon 719). She codes both verbal and written expressions as noise, allowing for an overwhelming resonance of sound within her text that has heretofore remain unaccounted for by critics. Her profuse layering of narratives, authored by different characters, over a collection of characters' voices and "speech types" replicates Bakhtin's heteroglossia, but she also modifies his schema by offering a novel with *two* narratives with two separate narrators, doubling the heteroglossia of the novel. Gilbert and Helen's narratives contain two distinct sets of voices, languages, and texts, comprising two sonic environments as well. As the two narrators contend for narrative control, Brontë draws on the ability of noise to elude, transgress, and defy barriers and narrative layers, especially when tension arises, not so much between languages (as Bakhtin proposes) but between narrative noises. The tension is not a "unitary language" but a unitary narrative. As such, she draws the discursive struggle between the author and other languages that marks Bakhtin's heteroglossia *inside* the novel, drawing on Gilbert Markham's status as author of the book-length letter and Helen's role as challenging narrator. For Anne Brontë, then, the Victorian novel does not simply speak, but it also jars with, reverberates with, and produces noise through equally noisy narrators.

In this way, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* relocates the noise of the Victorian novel from sounds within the novel to sounds *by* its narrators, offering a soundscape that takes into account a female narrator's making noise against a male narrator who actively works to negate her voice. The role of the narrator in relation to a novel's sounds has not yet been grappled with in noise criticism, however. The two pivotal noise studies scholars of the Victorian novel, John Picker and Kevin Stevens, while insightfully engaging with voice, noise, and gender, view narration as a tangential aspect of noise in the Novel, neglecting the ways in which the *acts* of narrating are acts of noisemaking. John Picker, for instance, focuses not on narrative voice but on the "authorial voice" in *Dombey and Son* (1848) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) (33). He traces the "anxieties" of sound, of being heard, and of expression in the Victorian novel, noting *Dombey*'s "uneasy sensation that the roar of authorial expression might not be heard above the shriek of the express train but could be consumed within it" (Picker 29). The "noisy thrust" of Dickens' novel threatens the voices within, and he similarly charts Eliot's "authorial voice" without heeding to the narrator's role in either soundscape (33). On the contrary, Kevin Stevens explores the "power dynamics between narrators and noise-makers" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), but his premise revolves around a separation of noisemakers and narrators. His noisemakers are marginalized *characters* while narrators are noise-repressors, revealing the discordant relationship between "the noisemaker(s) and…the narrator" (215). For him, "narrative noise …marks a narrator's attempts to dominate and nearly silence his/her foe but, in doing so, carries the response of the oppressed, an aural retaliation that unsettles a narrator's seemingly coherent account" (Stevens 203). What happens, though, when the one making noise is a narrator who is being silenced by another (male) narrator?

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall provides one answer in its engagement with both sides of Kevin Stevens' model of noise: the roles of a character and narrator. Brontë privileges at once the sound of women's voices and the sound of the female narrative voice, investing both with disruptive and disrupting qualities. Helen, for example, is both a character in Gilbert's narrative *and* a narrator of her own diary so that she possesses a double noise that Stevens splits between Jane and Bertha. Brontë further shifts Stevens' emphasis on sonic discord between character and narrator onto (aural) narrative discord between a female narrator and a male narrator, redefining the novel's noise as not only deeply gendered but invested in the *sound* of narrative voices as they clash. In this way, the "noisy thrust" of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* centers around the conglomeration of Helen and Gilbert's narrative voices parleying over the female and male voices vying in the drawing room.

In Brontë's multilayered heteroglossia of noise, however, female noise escapes from every level of the text, becoming the "unitary language" of the novel at large in order to accomplish a feminization of the "male" narrative. As a result, the female narrative voice transgressively reverberates and echoes past the narrative boundary lines that are meant to keep Helen's voice contained or "covered." Because the female narrative (Helen's diary) is "nested" or contained inside the male narrative (Gilbert's letter), Helen's diary is structurally trapped between the two "walls" or halves of Gilbert's narrative, signifying her narrative imprisonment as well as Gilbert's malevolent attempt to trap her narrative voice there. The "nested" form, which has been interpreted as the "framed story" (Helen's diary) within the "framing story" (Gilbert's letter/narrative) with Gilbert as the "covering narrator" and Helen as the "covered narrator," thusly allows for the construction of narrative boundaries or figural "walls" between the male and female narratives (Jacobs 207). For that reason, Jacobs argues that "we cannot see

or experience the *buried* reality of the 'framed' narrative without first experiencing the 'framing' narrative" so that the narrative structure allows for a "violent" domestic reality doubly enclosed by a paternal narrative (207, emphasis added). She suggests that Helen, and her narrative "reality," are "buried" beneath layers of male narration, noting that Helen's "secret misery is confined within Gilbert's less painful [narrative]" (212). O'Toole likewise posits that Helen's diary "mimics the entrapment [she] experiences in her marriage," creating a sense of "narrative claustrophobia" as we "[proceed] through the multilayered narrative" (715). Helen, then, becomes shut in by her "nightmarish marriage," which O'Toole significantly aligns with "confined spaces" ("claustrophobia, n."). It is significant, then, that while she writes from within the middle of Gilbert's narrative, she confesses, "I am a slave, a prisoner," and "'He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out.'" (Brontë 312). However, Brontë's model of sound operates within structures of narrative containment in order to conversely defeat them through female noise. As Helen's letters interrupt and revise Gilbert's narrative, the female narrative voice, which has already broken his account into two disparate fragments through a prolific diary, escapes her "claustrophobic" narrative middle and resounds through and over the male narrative. In this way, not only does Anne and the reader "pass through" and "go behind" the male narrative, as Jacobs posits, but so too does Helen as she sneaks behind Gilbert's (narrative) back through her noise, penetrating *his* narrative and overtaking the role of narrator for herself (204).

In *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts*, Nina Auerbach calls attention to the subversive uses of the trope of imprisonment by women novelists in the Long Nineteenth Century. She contends that female novelists, including Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, acting from an awareness that "men's gateways to salvation are often women's prisons," exploit Romantic notions of imprisonment through "thematic and formal structures which

themselves imprison both reader and protagonist, barring all escape from the confines of the novel's world" in their texts (*xxiii*, 7). She suggests that they deliberately employ the masculine Romantic "obsession" with imprisonment in order to "cannibalistically" extract power for their heroines (7). That is, women writers "monstrously" "snatch at and twist the iconography the great male Romantics made their own" from within the very structures that are intended to contain them, deliberately undermining the prisons they construct within their texts (*xvii*). Auerbach connects this feminine "twisting" of male "iconography" to a revisionary process in which Austen and Emily Brontë work to "revise" patriarchal Romantic literary traditions. It can be argued, then, that Auerbach is also arguing for a feminization of paternal narrative structures, wherein "strong men" can be read through a "female prism" because of "women's imprisoning power over [men's] imaginations" (*xi*). She credits this "female" revision of male plot devices to the implementation of narrative structure, noting the ways in which novel form often doubles as a symbolic prison for Victorian heroines. In particular, the "typical device of Romantic fiction" mimics imprisonment through "the labyrinthine process of…the tale within the tale, collapsing into a series of increasingly claustrophobic vistas, a narrative series of dark passageways into which the reader recedes increasingly from the novel's point of origin" (Auerbach 10).

Along similar lines, a feminizing, revisionary process through the "tale within the tale" device occurs in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, so that Auerbach's discussion of structural imprisonment applies to Anne Brontë as well. In the same way that Austen and Emily undermine the prison trope by conversely implementing it, Helen Huntingdon, too, imprisons the male voice from within the prison that Gilbert unsuccessfully confines her in, employing his imprisonment tactics against themselves. As a result, she becomes the imprisoner of *her* original jailor. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* similarly "collapse[s] into" "claustrophobia" as Helen narrates her

confined domestic life with Arthur, as Jan Gordon iterates. Helen's diary is the "tale within the tale," suggesting Brontë's reliance on structure to establish Helen's narrative entrapment. Recalling N.M. Jacobs' reading of Helen's narrative as a "under-world" approached by "passing behind" the "outer" story, Helen's narrative forces Gilbert, and the reader, to "recede…from the novel's point of origin," which is the originating male narrative frame (Jacobs 217, Auerbach 10). Thus, Anne Brontë, too, reconstructs a "Romantic imprisonment" through novelistic form, but hers is made noisy from the constant and furious resonances of the female voice, or "monstrous" resonances as Auerbach might say, *out* of those paternal structures. Gordon likewise confirms Brontë's participation in "revising" male narrative traditions, connecting *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to "the world of…Gothic monsters" (734). He draws on Brontë's use of the Gothic frame letter, noting that "by the framing device of the letter…writing is always belated, always attempting to 'recover' and bring into the present what remains forever lodged in the past" (Gordon 720). If "the text is always recovering prior texts," then Gilbert has been "recovering" Helen's narrative, a text that occurs *before* his, and thusly recovering the hegemony of the female voice throughout the duration of the novel (720). For this reason, Anne Brontë's deployment of narrative imprisonment for her heroine intends not to disempower Helen, but to enable her to bring down the very paternalistic structures that confine her through an explicitly feminine noise which by its very nature defies limits, partitions, and confines.

The sonic abilities of Helen's narrative voice to transcend and slip by Gilbert's narrative control results in a power struggle of noise shifted onto the level of textuality and narrative as Helen strives to make her narration "audible" over Gilbert's constant attempts to narrate her story for her. As they take turns narrating or "voicing" their respective accounts, their gendered narrative voices embody the power dynamics of noise in that Gilbert and Helen contend for the

authority to narrate over the other. Their struggle is one of narrative power, of who can make the most narrative noise, and of whose narrative voice becomes the final voice heard in this tumultuous soundscape of narration. As Helen's voice intrudes into masculine sections of the novel, it transgresses the boundary between her diary and Gilbert's letter, between the female narrative and the male narrative, such that the reverberation of her narration enables her to subvert her narrative imprisonment and re-claim her role as narrator. He subsequently retaliates against her unruly transgressions into his narrative space by editorially mutilating her letters and copying her narration as his own in order to silence Helen. As Langland argues, "each claims authority to tell the story, and the two versions cannot be simply supplementary" (117). Therefore, just as male noise seeks to subsume the female voice in the estate, so too does the male narrative voice strive to drown out the female narrative voice as it interrupts and resonates across the male domain of the novel, even after the *designated* female narrative (Helen's diary) has ended. The opposition between *who* has the power to narrate and who silences the narrating voice is a distinctly sonic one in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Brontë, then, devises a new layer of noise through a soundscape of antagonistic narrative voices, competing accounts, and snatches of the female narrative voice intervening into the male narrative, marking the presence of the *written* text as a site for (noisy) power transactions between the genders

For this reason, Brontë formalizes the struggle for power and authority between the female and male narrative voices through the repeated motif of the book and of various types of texts (diaries, journals, letters, books) throughout the novel. That is, texts mark the relationship of violence, power, and authority between a text and its author or holder. For both the author of a text and for the possessor of a book/narrative, texts are imbued with power as various narratives proliferate and exchange hands, textually acting out the shifting power roles between the

genders. Across both Helen's and Gilbert's narratives, physical books register violence or the threat thereof, particularly for Helen because of her status as discursively prominent woman who authors multiple texts that destabilize the paternal narratives surrounding her: her journal, letters, and hastily written notes on the flyleaves of a nearby book. Gordon, for instance, remarks on the presence of Gilbert's prayer book, Helen's sketchbook, her Bible, and classical novels (725). Arthur Huntingdon, too, throws a novel across the drawing room at Helen, bruising her hand, and he takes her diary from her while she writes of her plans to escape from Grassdale to Wildfell Hall, subversively recording the "female plot" of the runaway wife (Sternlieb 5). In their early acquaintance, Gilbert and Helen swap books so that "Gilbert's knowledge of Helen, apart from that revealed by gossip, is derived entirely from their exchange of books" (Gordon 726). He can only access Helen in her self-seclusion through narrative and only at her textual bidding. Helen, then, uses texts to keep Gilbert and his fascination at bay, forcing him to traverse a linguistic barrier of her choosing. In the same way that Gilbert uses the structure of his letter to enclose her diary between his two halves, Helen's usage of books similarly controls Gilbert's access to both her body and her story. As Gordon further notes, "instead of using the contents of the book to reveal more about herself, Helen Huntingdon deflects the status of the book from *clue* to *occasion* of exchange." She, in other words, "demands [an] 'exchange' of discourse" from Gilbert, demanding *his* discourse without handing over her own (Gordon 726). In this light, her diary also initiates an exchange of discursive power, shifting the narrative from the male author to the female author.

Helen, then, is not only the recipient of others' texts, but she is the author of her own so that Brontë aligns texts of power with the female hand and fragile, disrupted texts with the male hand. Much of Helen's power against the male voice, in addition to her physical speech, stems

from her power in, over, and with texts written in her own hand, aligning the emergence of the female narrative voice with resistance. It is significant, for example, that her name, signed at the end of her letters to Frederick as "Helen Huntingdon," repeatedly breaks up Gilbert's narration when he copies her letters down, carving through his text as a violent reminder of her presence and authorial capacity. She "signs" her name to his narrative as if *she* had written it, claiming his narrative space as her own. On the other hand, her journal remains uninterrupted, and we "remain for a surprisingly protracted time" in Helen's voice (O'Toole 715). Even at Grassdale, she claims the library as a definitive female space, into which men cannot enter or borrow a book without her consent, aligning texts with not only female power but with the capacity to bar the male voice from oneself. When the men "[give] loose to all their innate madness, folly, and brutality, and made the house night after night one scene of riot, uproar, and confusion," Helen silences them by "locking [herself] into the library," so she no longer hears their noise (Brontë 298). She "regard[s] the library as entirely [her] own, a secure retreat at all hours of the day" (301). She fortifies herself in with texts, surrounded by shelves of narratives that the male visitors at Grassdale cannot touch, take, or violate. She thus becomes a female modulator of texts, declaring *the* text as specifically female-controlled, which foreshadows the re-writing of the "male" narrative as femininized. In the hands of men, though, books become "a potential instrument of repression," and Helen's diary, "in its drawer in the library," "remains a potential source of violence, either from her husband or the community" (Gordon 725, 731). As Rachel Carnell reveals, "books in the hands of men risk being employed in less than humanistic ways. To prevent the misuse of literature…women must first teach men how to read" (16).

Women in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, then, are aligned with the authority of textuality while men destroy or "misuse" texts, particularly female texts. While men must be taught how to

read and *by* well-read women, women generate texts that cannot be contained until Gilbert can no longer silence Helen's narrative as she re-writes his. Gilbert's narrative, on the other hand, becomes formally disrupted and fragmented by Helen's narration and depends entirely on female texts, suggesting its fragility as the female narrative voice cuts through paternal discourse. Brontë, in this way, accords women a textual power in the novel that men are denied, accounting for Helen's narrative intercessions that forcefully rescripts Gilbert's narrative into hers. For this reason, Helen becomes a dangerous woman in the library, "snatch[ing] up [her] palette-knife and [holding] it against" Hargrave when he intrudes and takes a book (Brontë 305). The men deem her "'monstrous" because of the power that her narrative sanctuary affords her (303). If Helen Huntingdon is a dangerous woman let loose in both the library and within Gilbert's text, then the question becomes *not* whether Helen's narrative remains trapped between Gilbert's two halves, but rather, whether her diary, from its position in the middle of the novel, actually ruptures his text, ripping it in half in the same way she rips the pages about him out of her diary before giving it to Gilbert. Her diary, instead of being a "clumsy device," exemplifies the way in which Helen's noise, her noisy narration, violently splits Gilbert's narrative apart, consigning his tale to fragments that *her* text holds together (Langland 113). As George Moore aptly writes, Helen's diary "broke the story in halves" (254). As a noisy narrator, then, Helen discursively takes over the male narrative through female texts that represent soundings of the female across the novel.

Helen's diary is jarringly noisy from the babble of drunken men, hostile chess games with Mr. Hargrave, and quarrels with her husband, but as the narrator, she presides over that noise through calculated narratorial tactics, transforming her journal into a narratological tool for controlling sound. She, for example, deliberately omits male dialogue towards the end of the manuscript, refusing to narrate their noise. Through narration, she "retaliates" against men's

attempts at silencing her by expunging patriarchal utterances, incoherent or otherwise, from her diary, rejecting male noise from her story and "retaining" power through her narrative voice (Stevens 203, Maunsell 59). After the first sonic scene at Grassdale of Arthur and his friends' drunken pandemonium, Helen, now in her bedroom, listens to the men clumsily ascending the staircase, but mid-description, she decides to *stop* narrating their noise: "At last [Arthur] came…making noise enough for all the servants to hear. He himself was no longer laughing…but sick and stupid—I will write no more about *that*" (Brontë 247). Paralleling the way that her speech fragments or cuts in on male dialogue, she only partially narrates gendered conversations at Grassdale, excluding male responses to her own replies. She admits mid-conversation with Hargrave, "But I need not repeat all his arguments. I refuted them to the best of my power" (288). Referring to three weeks of Arthur's conversation, she staunchly decides "I shall not trouble myself to describe it" (323). She, then, controls others' noise through narration *and* controls the noise levels of her narrative itself in a way that Gilbert cannot in either of his two sections as the female voice reigns unchecked in the opening volume. While his narrative becomes dissolute from unmanageable female voices, Helen's narrative remains under her discursive control as she regulates who speaks and to what degree they are audible in her text. She extensively records conversations with other women, including Milicent, her Aunt Maxwell, Annabella Lowborough, Esther Hargrave, and her servant, Rachel, yet she repeatedly obscures, cuts short, or redacts those with men, or she accounts for her own responses but refuses to narrate the male reply. She, in this way, denies the men a "voice," removing their ability to speak in *her* narrative, thusly reversing the novel's power scheme entirely wherein *she* muffles men while amplifying the female voice.

As she heightens women's noise but stifles male noise, Helen's acts of narration become explicitly linked with noise itself in that she not only uses narration to supervise the noise levels of her diary, but her narrative voice also functions as a sonic sounding against patriarchal voices in the text. She elevates women's utterances by explicitly documenting and privileging them, converting the journal into the sonic crux for feminizing Gilbert's narrative. Formally, Brontë situates the diary at the "heart" or center of the novel as the figural focal point for the female voices reverberating outward from this jarringly disruptive core. Emanating from this noisy locus, Helen's narration operates around a deliberate listening or not listening to the men around her, indicating the aurality of female narration in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. What she hears, she can narrate; what she refuses to hear, she will not narrate. When, for example, Milicent and Annabella depart from the manor, leaving Helen the lone woman in a house "of riot, uproar, and confusion," Helen counters the men's loudness by not only removing herself entirely from the drawing room but also by refusing to narrate the uproar. She admits to these narrative ploys when she writes, "whom among them behaved the worst, or who the best, I can not distinctly say; for, from the moment I discovered how things would be, I formed the resolution of retreating upstairs or…into the library" (298). By intentionally not hearing their "'irrational conversation,'" she thusly cannot narrate it, excising the male voice altogether from her text (301). Signifying her authority as the narrator of her own story, she also intentionally represses paternal sounds from her diary that she *can* hear, such as three weeks' worth of Arthur's dialogues, so that through her narrative voice, she "grasps" for power over male noise and *away* from the men who attempt to control her voice (Maunsell 59). Narrating, then, becomes synonymous with Helen's making noise as her narration sounds against both male characters and the male narrative, and when her diary ends, her narrative voice, replicated in a series of letters,

refuses to be silenced. In the same way that Stevens' construct of noise "carries the response of the oppressed" and "allow[s] them to…interrupt and challenge a narrator," so too does Helen's *narration* "respond" to and "challenge" her narrative "foe": Gilbert Markham (Stevens 203).

Because her diary, with its (female) noisiness, offers Helen discursive and narrative power in this "male" text, Gilbert, as the original narrator, faces the threat of being re-written or overwritten by her hand. Brontë dramatizes the imminent threat of the female narrative for and by men, especially for Gilbert, through Arthur's seizure of Helen's diary, positioning male narrative "hands" at the center of (attempted) dismantling, or "snatching" away, of Helen's narrative power/voice. This tension between a female narrator and a controlling male figure parallels the tension between Helen and Gilbert in that Arthur's interruption of Helen's narration re-frames Gilbert's doing the same as the "official" narrator of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and reveals Helen's sworn contempt for narrative exploitation at the hands of men. At Grassdale, while Helen sits writing in the drawing room, "Mr. Huntingdon…had risen, however, unknown to [her], and…been looking over [her] shoulder for [she] knew not how long" (309). His watchful reading of Helen's writing recalls Jack Halford, the male addressee of this book-length letter who also disturbingly scrutinizes Helen's diary. Helen's narrative is bound not only by a paternal account but a triple male gaze as Arthur, Gilbert (who obsessively watches her sketch), and Halford watch over her narration, seeking to authorize her tale. While reading over her shoulder, Arthur discovers her plan to escape Grassdale and "forcibly wrest[s] [the diary] from [her]" and "turn[s] back leaf after leaf to find an explanation of what he had read." She "attempts to snatch the book from his hands, but he held it too firmly" (Brontë 309). Brontë depicts a female narrative changing hands from a woman to a man, who then intrudes on Helen's ability to narrate and refuses to *voluntarily* return the diary into her hands. Helen makes repeated

"snatches" to recover her narrative and regain the power of narration, a position that repeats itself when Gilbert reclaims the role of narrator from Helen and attempts to narrate *for* her in the same way that Arthur refuses to return her diary.

Brontë foreshadows the clash between the female and male narrative voices with this tangible display of a male authority figure wresting away a female narrative mid-narration, but she places this gendered textual struggle in the *female* narrative, allowing for Helen's narrative resistance to the noise of male narration and "predatory" authorial hands. Melinda Maunsell, in her work on how "power rests in the hands" in Anne Brontë, attests to the thematics of power, gender, and narrative that play out in this scene while also corroborating Helen and Gilbert's disputes for power over the lines of a gender-conscious layered narrative (59). She argues that "snatching," as a "hand code," "indicat[es]…the claims and counter-claims which impel forcible transfers of power between Helen and Gilbert Markham, Helen and Arthur Huntingdon, and Helen and Walter Hargrave" (51). By doubling Helen's "forcible transfers of power" with Arthur to those with Gilbert, Maunsell further upholds the way in which Brontë ultimately maps this scene in the drawing room, of the female narrative forcibly "wrested" away by male hands, onto Gilbert and Helen. If Helen's snatching her diary from Arthur discloses "transfers of power," then her letters, which similarly sustain her narrative voice, in the final volume function as similar "snatches" to wrest the narrative from Gilbert and expose their competition for narrative power. Thus, Arthur's "textual predation" of Helen's diary parallels the equally noisy and "grasping" of (narrative) power that occurs between Helen and Gilbert when Gilbert "snatches" the narrator's position from her and accordingly attempts to subsume her narrative voice with *his* narrative voice in the third volume (Gordon 730). As she does with Arthur, though, Helen "[rises] to secure [her] manuscript" from male hands, using her narrative voice (Brontë 312).

Although Arthur successfully "snatches" Helen's narrative from her, and thus robs her of her power, Brontë invests the exchange of and recovery of female power in both the narrative, as a physical text, and in the role of narrating, simultaneously linking that recovery to noisemaking. It is significant, for instance, that the ensuing struggle between Helen and Arthur is not a quiet one, but one penetrated by female noise. When trying to repeatedly "snatch" her diary from Arthur, Helen admits, "I did not leave him to pursue the occupation *in quiet*" (Brontë 309, emphasis added). The "occupation" of reading her narrative is not a quiet activity, but one filled with *her* noise as she demands her diary back. Brontë thus equates Helen's grasping for her diary (i.e. her narrative power) with the refusal to watch quietly and instead to rebelliously "make noise" against Arthur's tyranny and his hold on her narrative. As Senf notes, Arthur doubles as a "narrator" who constrains Helen's life story by "[attempting] to prevent [Helen] from making her story known" (Senf 451). Their altercation, then, represents one between a female narrator and a patriarchal "narrator" figure who seeks to authorize her tale, which Brontë deftly couples with Helen's noisiness when her narrative falls into male hands. For this reason, Helen obtains the last "narrative" word when she "[rises] to secure [her] manuscript" from the table and "depart[s]" while he "[goes] on cursing and abusing…with epithets [she] will not defile this paper with repeating." She again eliminates his censuring noise by redacting it, therefore literally claiming the last (written) word in the scene. Her "rising" signifies ascendancy as she reclaims her textual "voice" to continue telling her narrative. Because Arthur cannot silence her as she continues writing, Helen achieves control of the soundscape via her narration as she authoritatively diminishes his voice to maintain her own. By the end, Helen refuses to have her narrative "in [male] hands again": "I am determined, if possible, to save myself the humiliation of seeing it in his hands again…I would sooner burn it all than he should read what I had written" (Brontë 312).

Her aversion to having her diary mishandled by men re-situates the remainder of the novel by uncovering Gilbert's role as another Arthur Huntingdon manipulating her power to narrate. As with Arthur, she refuses to allow a controlling male figure to "take" her narrative, so when Gilbert attempts to muffle her narrative voice, she makes noise with her epistolary narration.

As a sonic force that privileges women's voices, denies the male voice the right to speak in a female narrative, and enables Helen's narrative resistance to Gilbert, Helen's diary achieves her first "hijacking" of the novel from Gilbert, thusly moving towards the complete feminization of the "male" narrative by way of noise. The male narrative, in turn, begins rapidly deteriorating first from the bombardment of female noise in Linden-Car and then from the aural ascendancy of the female story and Helen's subsequent barrage of letters that occurs after her diary ends. From its centralizing position in the middle of the novel, the diary structurally and symbolically holds Gilbert's two halves together, suggesting his dependency on her manuscript rather than, as Rachel Carnell argues, Helen's dependency on Gilbert to tell her story as a "woman whose ideas triumph at the cost of their being articulated through her husband's voice" (Carnell 13). On the contrary, the interpolation of Helen's diary enacts an exchange of narratorship in favor of the female voice: a *female* narrator narrates *for* the original male narrator, Helen thusly confiscating the power of authorship from the male hand. As the creator of several texts, most notably her journal and letters, Helen achieves the power of authorship in defiance of Gilbert's insistence that he must narrate the story of the tenant of Wildfell Hall himself. Helen is no longer a character under Gilbert's authorial supervision, but a co-narrator of the same story as well as the narrator of *her* own life events, her engagement, marriage, and escape from Grassdale, that he does not have the authority to tell. As Maunsell proposes, the diary indicates "the transfer of power into Helen's [hands]" when Helen "transfer[s]…the journal into Gilbert's hands" because

he "cede[s] the narrative center" and "hand[s] [it] to Helen" (54, 56). Antonia Losano, too, reads Helen as "a creative producer in her own right" while Langland suggests that "by providing the answers we and Gilbert seek, it subordinates his narrative to hers" (Losano 22, Langland 117). Without her diary, therefore, his narrative falls apart, a structural design that reinforces the violent breach in the frame tale that Helen's journal represents. In this "bipartite narrative," Helen's narrative is the "center [that] neither wholly cleaves nor wholly holds," revealing its unruliness as a text (Carnell 24). Thus, when Gilbert contains Helen's story and voice between his halves, her discursive center and its noise spill over into the remaining male section.

Although she doesn't include Anne Brontë in her work on the female narrator, Lisa Sternlieb, in *The Female Narrator in the British Novel: Hidden Agendas*, nonetheless offers an additional lens through which to view Helen's hijacking of the male story. Sternlieb proposes the notion of a "counter-narrative" offered by female narrators in the British Novel, formed when a female narrator's "motivations of her narrative…diverge from those of the larger narrative in which she exists" (5, 3). A "counter-narrative" is "a woman's telling of the story," which engages in "the politics of narrative authority" marked, for Sternlieb, by an "ongoing, unresolved struggle for power between the sexes" (11). She further assesses the duality of character-narrators, drawing on Jane Eyre, Nelly Dean, and Molly Bloom, and the ways in which "as characters, [these women] have rarely given critics cause to suspect them, but as narrators they are gameplayers of the highest order" (6). The power for female narrators lies in the fact that they "are not simply waiting, suffering and enduring. They are constructing their stories. They achieve power, not through what they do, but through how they tell" (4). They are, instead, executing adroit, deceitful, and deliberate "narrative strategies" for their own ends and motives, "acting independently of both male desire and the stated or implied desire of the heroine" (11, 3).

She calls attention to the seeming anomaly that female character-narrators “live virtuously while telling subversively” in their respective texts (5).

Helen Huntingdon, it can be argued, is also an overtly pious character but a subversive, noisy, and rebellious narrator, who “delights in revealing” the “shocking” and “indecorous subject matter…[of] a woman’s flight from her abusive husband” (Sternlieb 3, Langland 111). She is a literal “gameplayer” at the chess table with Hargrave, but she also achieves subterfuge against Gilbert’s “larger narrative” by re-narrating it with the female voice. Helen offers a literal “counter-narrative” to Gilbert’s through her diary, which threatens to rewrite Gilbert’s opening chapters of her arrival in Linden-Car, and Helen’s noise produces a “counter-narrative” to Gilbert’s, disrupting and displacing the overlaying male frame so that *her* voice fills his story more than his own. Russel Poole, too, reiterates “the potential of the diary to present an oppositional feminine perspective” (869). Her “motivations” “diverge” from Gilbert’s in that he strives to imprison her within his story, but while appearing pious, she “plots” an escape from his textual frame. He desires the silencing of all deafening female voices, yet her narration amplifies female noise in opposition to his narrative, making more noise than he can hamper. Moreover, as his narrative continually deteriorates, her noisy epistolary interruptions revise and rewrite his insufficient and unreliable narration, confirming female noise as the “counter-narrative” to the male story. Similarly, Susan Gubar foregrounds the significance of the blank page for female authorship, proposing that the blank page counters the literary tradition in which women are “‘written over by many [male] hands’” by enabling them to write “alternative scripts” for herself (245). Helen’s once blank diary pages, then, signify her rescripting of the male narrative that attempts to write *over* her. To echo Sternlieb, therefore, “How can we *hear* [female narrators] as

silenced by men when we are reading their words?" (8, emphasis added). Likewise, Helen's narration bolsters her nosiness over the male narrative.

When Helen's diary "ends" and Gilbert's narrative resumes, Gilbert expects her narrative voice to remain silently stowed away between his sections, but on the contrary, he faces the re-intrusion of her narrative voice in a series of letters that replicate the same "narrating" voice from her journal. They bombard his narrative in the same way that voices bombard Linden-Car. Her letters, addressed to Frederick Lawrence but copied into Gilbert's letter to Jack Halford, are made even more powerful given Gilbert's (false) impression that he has effectually silenced her with the cessation of her diary entries. When she returns to Grassdale, her continual barrage of letters structurally cut in on Gilbert's continued narrative to Halford such that they challenge Gilbert's ability to narrate *her* story. Moreover, as the epistles reproduce Helen's diary entries, they enable her narrative voice to be heard over Gilbert's subsuming narrative voice and to restore her capacity as narrator. As Langland posits, even though "Gilbert Markham has resumed the narration…he has not resumed the authority to focus the bedside events" (119). That authority to narrate, rather, belongs to Helen. She "speaks" from another narrative world, making narrative noise when he insists on her silence. As a result, the final male account proves turbulent from the sheer volume of Helen's narrative interruptions that progressively weaken and consign his tale to incoherence and disparity of voice. He cannot maintain his narrative voice as *hers* continually disrupts, challenges, and interferes with his congruous narration. Female noise, then, covertly carries its sounds of subversion across the entire novel, re-writing the "masculine" segments as conversely held captive by women's voices. The female narrative voice thusly performs a radical "voice-over" to the patriarchal narrative and undoes the place of male noise and narration in the soundscape.

As her letters extend into his continued letter, her narrative structurally penetrates beyond the boundary separating her diary from Gilbert's account, belying the reverberation of her narrative voice across narrative boundaries. As her "voice" infiltrates his narrative space, she ushers herself out of her narrative prison and ushers herself *into* a male narrative, a transgression that occurs because of the sonic-like nature that Brontë invests in the act of narrating. Moreover, the letters afford her an "identifiable narratorial idiom" that differentiates her narration from Gilbert's even as those boundaries begin to collapse, recasting her epistolary intrusions as "audible" narration (Aczel 482). Gilbert faithfully reproduces the contents of her first letter, copying it in full so that once more Helen tells the story for the duration of an uninterrupted six-page letter. Brontë thusly deliberately re-orients *who* is narrating as the novel again "remain[s] for a surprisingly protracted time" in Helen's voice (O'Toole 715). In the opening line, she shifts into the "I" of the narration again, challenging Gilbert's first-person point-of-view: "Dear Frederick, I know you will be anxious to hear from me: and I will tell you all I can" (Brontë 356). According to Susan Snaider Lanser, once women are "are identified as discursive 'I's,'" they become 'individuals,' occupying the position of privileged-class men" so that Helen transforms into Gilbert's discursive equal but *without* forfeiting her *female* narrative power (26). Her vow "to tell [Frederick] all" betrays her desire to "tell all" as a narrator and with her own voice. Her letter also interrupts Gilbert and Frederick's conversation preceding the arrival of the letter, impeding both of their voices for multiple pages. Only when her letter ends can Frederick speak to Gilbert so that her narration challenges Gilbert's ability to narrate when she punctuates his otherwise uninterrupted narrative with her own voice to focalize scenes herself.

Threatened by the re-insertion of Helen's voice, Gilbert, in turn, amplifies his narrative violence in order to assert dominance over her narration and reclaim his position of narrator, a

silencing which Helen's letters continually "make noise" against. Both of them strive to be the last narrative voice "heard" in the novel. He edits, fragments, and censors Helen's subsequent letters rather than copying them in full in order to contain her noisy, disruptive narration, and by extension, her (narrative) voice, all of which converts their back-and-forth narrative play into a sonic clash. As so, Gilbert's narration, as it structurally wraps around and encloses both Helen's diary and her letters, functions as another source of male noise, but Helen's noise repeatedly "snatches" the role of narrator from him and weakens his "grip" on the narrative with her epistolary interventions. As Gilbert shifts from copying her letters in their entirety to excerpting only pieces to miming Helen's narrative voice in his "summaries" of her letters, her voice nonetheless strikes back by revising his nonsensical commentary regarding her letters. The novel thusly tilts from his narrative voice to Helen's and back again, dramatizing their struggle for authority over the narrative and control over this soundscape of narration. Gordon, for instance, reads *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a "dispensation of alternative narratives competing for our attention and hence for a textual priority" (719). In order to gain "textual priority," Gilbert attempts to regulate and suppress Helen's intrusions, and Brontë further literalizes that power struggle through a deliberate structure wherein Gilbert "wraps" his narration around Helen's by weaving in and out of her letter with his own commentary, structurally twisting her letter *into* his to signify that he has entangled and locked her voice within his narrative. He "treat[s] her letters as fallen texts which he must somehow enclose," thusly becoming an "encloser" of Helen's narrative texts (732). However, because of the "resonance" of "novelistic discourse," Helen's narrative voice reverberates across the limits that he has transcribed, narrating large sections of the story that Gilbert does not have access to (Bakhtin 332). As a result, the reader is tempted to echo Helen when she bluntly informs Gilbert, "'I don't quite believe you'" (Brontë 98).

In contrast to Helen's first letter, Gilbert only "give[s]…a few extracts from the rest of the [second] letter," so that he reduces the letter to a collection of discontinuous excerpts, some of which are contained within quotation marks of his own demarcation while others remain seamlessly embedded with no clear indication as to whose voice they belong to. The embedded parts of her letter, though, deliberately blur the boundaries between his voice and hers as she threatens to rewrite his narrative, transgressing the limitations that he "surrounds" her with. In "extracting" her second letter, Gilbert splits the letter into two unrelated sections, one recounting an argument with Arthur and the second an account of Esther Hargrave. He prefaces these two sections with a "extract" relating to himself, isolating it from the rest of her text, in which Helen writes, "Mr. Markham is at liberty to make such revelations concerning me as he judges necessary. He will know that I should wish but little to be said on the subject" (363). He pointedly places these extricated lines in quotation marks, punctually containing her remarks about him and what he can *say* while also disarranging her narrative. The two sections he subsequently copies are also "marked" or structurally confined between borders, revealing Gilbert's narrative/editorial tactics to reinforce narrative boundaries and regulate when her narrative voice "speaks." The first "extract" recounts Helen's struggle with Arthur, in which she is "obliged to be a little stiff with him…or he would make a complete slave of [her]." As she quarrels with Arthur, she finally writes, "if he would only be quiet" (364). Despite its fragmented structure, her letter nonetheless subverts Gilbert's silencing stratagems as it exposes her obstinacy to being enslaved, or held captive, by patriarchal figures and her insistence on the repression of male noise. Moreover, if their split narratives function as dialogic exchanges, then she is also, by extension, telling Gilbert to "be quiet." She speaks from within the fragments, a testament to the power of the female voice for Brontë. Both extracts reinstate her narrative voice

as she forces his tale *back* to Grassdale, and they, sans quotation marks, resemble his narration, obscuring the distinctions between their voices. In so doing, the narrative becomes as much hers as it is his, her narrative voice taking over at the precise moments where he attempts to narrate for her. When her narrative voice "sounds" across the novel, she insists on the silence of male noise, a deliberate re-resonance of Brontë's model of gendered noise, and thusly of the noise of male narration. As a result, Helen causes so much narrative noise that she covertly re-narrates the novel as her own.

With each successive letter that interrupts his narrative, Gilbert must amplify his narrative voice above Helen's so that he can be heard *over* her noisy invasions, inverting the power dynamics of the "covering" narrator and the "covered" narrator (Jacobs 207). Helen becomes louder than the narrator who contains her narrative, establishing her narration as the rebellious noise against Gilbert's tactics to muffle her. By the third and fourth letters, for instance, Gilbert no longer copies them in full or even in excerpts. He resorts to even more disturbing mechanisms to modulate her intrusive narrative voice. He summarizes her letters so that her accounts are no longer in *her* voice, but rather in his as he mimes Helen's narrative voice, disguising her narration as his own. He mimes the authority of her voice as an alternative narrator, an authority that he lacks throughout the entirety of the novel given his "bankrupt" story (Langland 116). Because her voice cannot be contained, he instead steals her voice in order to masculinize the narration. In his abridgement of her third letter, he begins as a third-person observer, reporting Arthur's relapse, but he then narrates, as if he were present, a scene that only Helen can tell, imitating Helen's language and discursive style in order to tell it *as she would*:

> The first of these communications brought intelligence of a serious relapse in Mr. Huntingdon's illness…In vain had she remonstrated, in vain had she mingled his wine

> with water: her arguments and entreaties were a nuisance, her interference was an insult so intolerable that at length…[Arthur] threw the bottle out of the window, swearing he would not be cheated like a baby, ordered the butler…and affirming that he should have been well long ago if he had been let to have his own way, but she wanted to keep him weak in order that she might have him under her thumb […]. (Brontë 369)

Gilbert details a private moment of Arthur's rage, one that only Helen can tell as the primary witness in the sickroom. It's Helen who sees Arthur throw the liquor bottle out of the window and hears his "swearing," yet Gilbert writes as if he were also present. In other words, rather than allowing Helen to narrate the scene, he tells it in his own voice, insisting on his "right" to do so as the original narrator. He attempts to conceal her ability to narrate under his narrative voice.

However, Aczel's notion of a "narratorial idiom" offers one way to powerfully locate Helen's voice in this mimetic "collapse" of "distinctions between narrators" as well as to reinforce Gilbert's replication of Helen's language (Cohn 494, Langland 119). Tracing Helen's "idiom" from her diary reveals that several sentences in Gilbert's synopsis belong to Helen, and therefore, that Gilbert has parroted Helen in his narration of her narration. For example, Arthur's "swearing he would not be cheated like a baby," "he should have been well long ago," and "that she might have him under her thumb" signify not only his personal vernacular that only Helen *can* know (Gilbert having never met Arthur) but also Helen's distinct method of relating such incidents in her diary. In prior journal entries, she records Arthur's profane abuses towards herself in the same shorthand manner without designating them as quoted speech. Gilbert's repetition of "in vain" further betrays his imitation of Helen's narrative "idiom" because she echoes that phrase throughout her diary: "In vain I attempted to drive him away" or "for I saw it was all in vain" (135, 232). Indeed, Helen's fourth letter exposes Gilbert's mimicry when she

writes, "he [Arthur] says, it never would have happened; but to be treated like a baby or a fool, was enough to put any man past his patience" (Brontë 370). Therefore, "to be treated like a baby" are *her* words that Gilbert has claimed as his own. In this way, Helen's distinguishing narrative voice proliferates even as Gilbert insists that she has no voice or when he *becomes* her voice through abstraction. As Jacobs points out, "both narrators, both narrations" possess "jarring discrepancies of tone and perspective" too great to be reconciled (208). He credits Helen with only one word from her redacted narrative, when she "terms" Arthur's behavior as an "imprudence," yet this direct insertion of *her* writing, not his pseudo-narration, re-instates the primacy of the female voice in the novel in its implication that Helen is not done speaking. Her voice, no matter how fragmented, contained, or mimed, intervenes and structurally intrudes on his narrative domain.

As Gilbert blends pieces of Helen's writing, whether through direct quotations, synopsis, or copying her voice, into his narrative, his various modes of narration wrap around Helen's letters as he surrounds whole sections, fragments, or single words of hers with his narratorial comments, formally enforcing her narrative captivity. Dorrit Cohn alludes to this ability of the narrative voice to "surround" another's narration because narrated monologue is "dependent on the narrative voice that mediates and surrounds it" (116). Gilbert's narrative voice similarly "surrounds" Helen's narrative discourse, contributing to the power dynamics that Brontë invests in their struggle over the role of narrator and *who* narrates Helen's story. As the hegemonic play of narrative voices unfolds, Helen, to return to Stevens, "retaliates" against the deafening "noise" of male narration, and his narrative containment, through the very mode that Gilbert seeks to repress: narration. In spite of Gilbert's editorial violence, Helen's first-person narration sneaks back in for pages at a time, reclaiming the role of narrator, before Gilbert can re-retrieve that

position from her. In one of her last letters, the novel once more remains in Helen's voice for an extended period, and Helen's and Gilbert's respective voices formally clash as they both slide into the "I" point-of-view within the same paragraph. Gilbert begins summarizing yet another epistle, but Helen abruptly cuts in and revises his account of *her* scene with Arthur, an interruption that Brontë reinforces through form:

> Of course, the wretched sufferer's temper was not improved by this calamity—in fact, I suspect it was well nigh insupportable, though his kind nurse did not complain; but she said she had been obliged, at last, to give her son in charge to Esther Hargrave […].
>
> 'The latter,' continued she, 'most deeply regrets the step that has occasioned his relapse—but, as usual, he throws the blame upon me. If I had reasoned with him like a normal creature, he says, it never would have happened; but…he forgets how often I had *reasoned* him 'past his patience' before […].' (Brontë 370)

Gilbert and Helen become the "I" of the narrative within the same passage, offering dual narrations that cut each other off. Gilbert starts narrating a scene between Helen and Arthur, revealing what he "suspects" about Arthur's temperament and Helen's supposedly uncomplaining nature. He again re-tells what "she said" in her letter, but Helen in the next paragraph tells us what she said herself, a deliberate form that Brontë implements in order to figuratively "split" or distinguish Helen's voice from Gilbert's. Brontë makes clear that Helen has her own voice and, unlike Gilbert, is not a narrative copy-cat.

The abrupt switch from Gilbert to Helen demonstrates the way in which Helen interrupts his attempt to narrate the "bedside events," which are pointedly her domain (Langland 119). There exists, too, a discrepancy between his depiction of Helen as a "kind nurse" and her

portrayal of herself at Arthur's bedside. While Gilbert insists on Helen's being passively "kind" as Arthur throws liquor bottles and verbally abuses her, she, from within her epistolary narration, rejoins his skewed account with a different story: "But he [Arthur] forgot how often I had *reasoned* him 'past his patience' before" (Brontë 380). Gilbert, as the reader of Helen's diary, has also "forgotten" this detail, but Helen reminds him of it, speaking across narratives. Revising his account, she frankly admits to her resentment when "he throws the blame upon [her]." Nor is she passive in Arthur's presence, but instead repeatedly "*reason[s]* him 'past his patience.'" Helen not only corrects Gilbert's portrayal of her, but she powerfully re-tells, in her own narrative voice, a scene that Gilbert has already told (the "like a baby" scene), thusly rescripting the male narrative with the female voice. Moreover, Helen's subsequent letters appear one after the other as they hastily record Arthur's demise and death, a fast-paced narrative technique that re-situates the narrative back to Grassdale as Helen narrates without interruption. In this way, Helen's narration undermines the patriarchal frame narrative as the reverberation of her narrative voice revises, corrects, and re-writes his account while "snatching" the role of narrator from Gilbert. Helen, in this way, inserts her voice so that his will *not* be the only voice heard in the soundscape of narration.

The powerful reverberation of the female narrative voice across *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* not only undermines the male narrative by resonating across Gilbert's established narrative boundaries but also by completely transforming his narrative into hers, thereby undoing both the male narrative and the fraught narrative soundscape. It is no longer the female voice imprisoned within the male narrative, but the male voice trapped by the female voice. Her letters initiate this process of reversing the narrative scheme and shifting the whole back to the setting of *her* narrative and away from Wildfell, a transformation that positions Helen as the authoritative,

primary narrator after all. Although the novel begins in Gilbert's world of Wildfell Hall, it ends in Helen's narrative world of Staningley so that the novel progresses *towards* Helen's narrative and not Gilbert's. When Gilbert travels to Grassdale and then Staningley in search of Helen after her rumored marriage, he becomes displaced from his own setting, entering instead her narrative domain. She has slipped entirely out of Gilbert's narrative confines in order to draw him into *her* narrative. She enters his domain in the beginning of the novel, but Gilbert enters her narrative by the end, reversing the power structures of the female story nested within the male story. In fact, Helen's narrative gradually takes over after the cessation of her letters, demonstrated in the way in which her and Gilbert's storylines merge in an absolute dissolution of boundaries. If "the narrative voice and the narrated world are mutually constitutive," then Helen's letters have been subtly recreating her "narrated world" from within the male story, dissolving *his* narrative setting (Lanser 4). Thus, Gilbert soon writes about characters who are only found in Helen's diary, accounting for Annabella and Lord Lowborough, Aunt Maxwell, Grimsby, and Hattersley. Helen's "characters" infiltrate his narrative, displacing his character set. Senf emphasizes that "although the story initially seems to focus on Markham…the bulk of the story concerns an entirely different group of characters in a different part of the country," people "Markham has never met" (447).

Furthermore, their reunion, marriage proposal, and marriage take place *in* the locales that Helen writes about so that it is her narrative prerogative, setting, characters, and voice that pervade and re-situate Gilbert's narrative completely. They reside in the Staningley estate after Helen's uncle bequeaths it to her, returning the novel to where Helen's diary begins. As a result, we are no longer in Gilbert's narrative at all as he travels out of his and into hers. By the end of the novel, then, Helen has made his story *hers*, countering Langland's assertion that "Gilbert

writes his story as her story" (122). Rather, Helen overturns the male narrative through female noise, imprisoning Gilbert's continued existence within the confines of her narrative space. She is, then, a "jailor," but not "her own jailor" as Jacobs contends (212). By enclosing his narrative, and thusly his voice, within her own, *she* becomes Gilbert's jailor. As so, when Gilbert arrives at Staningley, never to escape, Helen's last words in the novel are "'There now—there Gilbert—let me go'" (Brontë 406). He is trapped, but she has been "let go."

In this way, Helen Huntingdon makes so much noise with her narration that she upsets the whole novel, reversing her imprisonment within the male narrative so that ultimately, it is his story contained inside of *her* story. Brontë places the female narrator in complete control of the narrative, granting Helen control of the soundscape as her narrative voice persists while Gilbert's breaks down, no longer able to adequately narrate this story. The result is a novel, founded on a masculine frame story, that becomes radically feminized through its noise. As a narrator whose narration continues past its peripheries and who effaces paternal noise from the text, Helen, too, is a "gameplayer of the highest order," but she is a *noisy* "gameplayer," making sure that Gilbert hears her voice escaping from his prison as she "re-voices" the male discourse in the novel as femininized and female originated (Sternlieb 6, Brenkman 290). Employing a narratology that listens for "audible narration," therefore, uncovers *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s subversive narrative form that allows for, amplifies, and elevates the sounding of the female voice. Through noise, Brontë radically re-codes the female voice as a force of narrative reckoning in the novel as Helen, through her noisy narration, cripples the male narrative as an ostensibly *male* form that holds her within its confines. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, then, to echo Gilbert's "a voice—*her* voice," is not "a narrative" but "*her* narrative," creating a "female prism" of noise that cuts through the clamor of the patriarchy (Brontë 113, Auerbach *xi*).

Conclusion:

Monstrous Noise:

Looking Back (and Forward) to Jane Austen

"'Have I not said enough?'"

~Helen Huntingdon

Through her "sharp" vocality and her noisy narration, Helen Huntingdon "lay[s] waste" to the male narrative containing her and "destroys" his hold on her story with her "horrific capacity" for noise, amassing a "destructive" capacity for power and subversion (Sinclair vi). As so, her transgressive noise opens her up to the "monstrosity," as men perceive it, of *too* much female power. Her unruly sounds craft "monstrous plots" that Gilbert must keep "at bay" with his editorial violence to her narration as she first hijacks and then rewrites his tale, and the men at Grassdale view her as "monstrous" for her verbal resistance (Gordon 735, Brontë 303). In the drawing room, she fragments male speech by cutting in, commanding their silence, or refusing to narrate their voices. On the textual level, she wrests the narrative from Gilbert, claiming the agency of narrating her own story, and refuses to return that power to male hands. Her letters intervene across Gilbert's resumed letter, fracturing his account into a disjointed, debilitated text. She "speaks" over Gilbert's story through her narration, re-coding narration as a sonic strategy that negates Gilbert's suppression of her voice. She stamps her name into his text with her epistolary signatures, signing her name to his page. Like a "Gothic monster," she draws Gilbert into her narrative world, sealing him off from Linden-Car with no possibility of release (Gordon 734). After reading her diary, Gilbert, too, describes Helen as "squeezing the blood out of [his] heart" with her "eyes glitter[ing] wildly," influenced perhaps by her "monstrous" proportions of narrative power (Brontë 340). Far from a silenced or dull heroine, Helen collapses the paternal

narrative through sound in the same way that Bertha Mason collapses Thornfield, both of which are structures designed to keep women *in* when they want *out*.

As female noise seeps out from Gilbert's emasculated narrative, the sounds of women whispering, gossiping, conversing, laughing, and narrating drown out the surrounding male voices until all we can hear are transgressively noisy women. They narrate *with* sound and noisily narrate all at once, culminating in a total re-voicing of the novel though the female voice. Because of Brontë's attention to noise, Helen is heard even "beneath layers of narration" (Jacobs 205). In a novel replete with violent men, brutalizing male voices, and narrative violence that precipitates disparate and disrupted texts, women retaliate with the violence of their own sounds, exposing the seams of a fragile and impotent paternal frame. The female voice thus reaches across the "gulf" of gender in order to rewrite the male "originary" of the novel, binding the narrative together in a way that the male voice/narrative fails to do (McMaster 357). Melinda Maunsell's assertion that Anne Brontë forms a "new and valid power base" in which the "woman [is] dominant… while the man concedes power to her" proves corroborated through the novel's noise (58). Listening for noise in the novel, therefore, uncovers the influential presence of women's voices that have been, until now, concealed under the male frame tale for most critics of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It is not so much, then, that Helen Huntingdon has been subordinated, silenced, or subjugated, but that we have not been listening to her noise.

On every level of the text, Helen escapes, eluding boundaries and textual partitions because of the slippery nature of noise. It is no coincidence, then, that Susan Snaider Lanser proposes that "to find a voice (*voix*) is to find a way (*voie*)," suggesting, in extension, that "to find a voice" means to also "find a way" out of domestic prisons and locked narratives (3). As so, Brontë redefines the meaning of noise and offers a new type of female narrator, one who

makes noise within and by her narration. Her sonic stance regarding narrative voice, narration, and layered narrative structures contributes a new layer to noise studies criticism, offering a narrative that makes noise. In a truly unprecedented move, Brontë crafts a novel of seeping voices, noisy narration, and the sounds of female subterfuge, artfully drowning out the same paternal voices that insist her novel upholds the patriarchy. Like her heroine, she, too, is a "gameplayer of the highest order," and far from avowing that "she knows nothing about any slamming" or any "noise or disturbance" in *her* novel, she has, it seems, fooled us all (Sternlieb 6, Sinclair vi). She, as N.M, Jacobs observes, has already "[become]…a man" and "appropriate[d]" the voice of the patriarchy through Gilbert in order to "delegitimate" male power, suggesting an intentionality behind the sonicality of the novel (Jacobs 205). In the same way that Helen voices over Gilbert in his own narrative, so too does Anne figuratively write *over* her male narrator as the author of the novel, deliberately amplifying female utterances while deconstructing the male voice into structural pieces. It is no wonder, then, that by the end of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Gilbert Markham abhors the "noisy, toiling, striving city," for he has been overcome, deafened, and figuratively strangled by the sounds of women (Brontë 407).

Anne Brontë's sonic Victorian novel, a novel of the female voice, asks readers to engage in a new auditory reading process that listens for the noises being made by women from beneath their "layers" or "buried realities" (Jacobs 207). She requires them to hear the resonances of transgressive female voices and to follow the sound as it slips from its prison and reverberates. Her model of noise allows for a reevaluation of Nineteenth Century British novels written from the voice or point-of-view of male characters because, as Helen Huntingdon demonstrates, there may be a woman lurking behind the whole, covertly crippling paternalistic structures with the sounds of subversion and resonant narration. Brontë's novel alludes to the possibility of hearing

the crash and downfall of the "male" narrative in such texts because *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* uncovers the ability of Nineteenth Century heroines to trigger a noisy breakdown of the male frame narrative device as they secretly work from inside the narrative, "monstrously" playing with the novel's noise. As so, Brontë hints toward an entire body of subversive, noisy heroines who are furtively, but doggedly, struggling to hijack the role of narrator for themselves, executing their designs through noisy intrusions and narrative re-voicings. There is, in any case, no space in the Novel safe from the reverberations of female noise.

In looking forward (or, rather, backward in time), Brontë's model of sound also resonates through and in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) and *Mansfield Park* (1814) so much so that Brontë's and Austen's novels can be read through the lens of each other's soundscapes. That is, Anne Brontë and Jane Austen can be read complementarily through their noisy novels, which both operate around a paradigm of gendered violence, women's voices, and sonic narration. Just as Brontë dwells on the soundscape of the country estate, so too does Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* unfold within country estates and noisy drawing rooms. George Moore significantly drew parallels between Anne Brontë and Austen, arguing that "Anne had all the qualities of Jane Austen and other qualities; she could write with heat," and "if Anne Brontë had lived ten years longer she would have taken a place beside Jane Austen, perhaps even a higher place" (253). In contrast, Garret Stewart posits that the Brontës pioneered a "*novel* violence that helped make the psychology of Victorian fiction what it was to become. Jane Austen offered nothing like it" (240).

However, Brontë and Austen are not so diametrically opposed as suggested, but rather, they are brought together through noise. William Spanos, for example, notes the "imperial violence" of Austen's novel of manners in *Mansfield Park* while Nina Auerbach reads Fanny

Price as a "cannibalistic" heroine who feeds off of others. Auerbach, too, considers the "claustrophobia so many readers uncover in Jane Austen" as indicative of "Austen's prisons," which are established as "homely settings [that] have no need for the exotic terrors…[because] their inescapability is the same" (7, 20). Brontë and Austen, then, both construct novels that engage with the violence of "homely" prisons and the "claustrophobia" of the narrative for their heroines. Both code female noise as an avenue of escape from these confining prisons. Like Helen, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot maneuver through parlors filled with noisy voices. Fanny hears Aunt Norris's shrill reprimands and disrupts Sir Thomas's anecdote, which celebrates his patriarchal conquest in Antigua, with her unruly question about slaves. Anne Elliot hears Sir Elliot's belligerent tirades and intently listens to the sounds of multiple voices, including Frederick Wentworth's, circling around her at the table, in the parlor, and in the music hall. Austen places them in a soundscape of narration, in which they struggle to disentangle their voices from the "covering" narration of Austen's narrator so that Austen enables a re-assessment of free indirect discourse as a sonic narrative technique. Her employment of free indirect discourse allows for a "structural layering," in which her heroines tangle with the narrator to recover their voices from the often-indistinguishable blending of the two narrative voices (Wilkie 520). In this way, re-reading Austen through Anne Brontë's violent soundscape reveals the previously unrealized threads of Austen's noisy drawing rooms that will become Bronte's savagely noisy parlors. Austen's novels thus sonically anticipate Brontë's in terms of noise and the female voice, but without learning first how to hear female noise from within the "homely" prisons and claustrophobic narrative in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, readers are in danger of missing Anne Elliot's or Fanny Price's sounds beneath the layers of free indirect discourse that Austen carries out.

For Jane Austen, the slippage between the focalizer and the narrator that often occurs in free indirect discourse functions as a subversive site for female noise. In her soundscape, that is, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot struggle against a dissonant relationship with Austen's narrators as their voices become lost in this slippage between voices. Richard Aczel attests to the discordant narrator-character relationship in free indirect discourse, noting that "the necessary presence of the narrator's voice *within* the free indirect discourse" designates the character's "discourse [as] the other" and as a voice "tampered with rather than tampering" (478, 480). However, Anne and Fanny's focalization "tampers" with Austen's narrators by sounding over the narrator's voice, alerting us to their presence, no matter how hidden they initially seem. *Mansfield Park* exemplifies Austen's use of strong narrator figures, illuminating key moments where Fanny finds her voice apart from the narrator's rescripting. Demanding to be heard, Anne Elliot, too, breaks from her narrator to find her own voice, relying on noisy narration. Moreover, their focalization subordinates the narrative to what they see, hear, or feel. Like Helen, they will not be buried beneath someone else's narration. D.A. Miller, for instance, significantly argues for Anne Elliot's narrative hegemony over the narrator, noting that "the narration of *Persuasion*… can do little to Anne that she has not already done to herself" (71). She holds an "uncanny telepathy" with the narrator through which she "appropriate[s]" the narrator's voice (72). In the same way that Helen collapses Gilbert's narration, according to Miller, "Anne has dragged the narration down with her into an unprecedented relinquishment of its own cognitive advantage [over her]" (73). Moreover, as Helen "lays waste" to the paternal frame and consumes the male voice with her noise, Brontë places her on par with Auerbach's cannibalistic Fanny Price.

In this way, Anne Brontë's radical soundscape holds implications for female novelists both before and after her as she re-defines the legibility and audibility of the female voice and

women's subversive sounds. In addition to looking back to Austen, Brontë opens up avenues of analysis that simultaneously look forward to novels succeeding *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, including Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). By revealing the disruptive audibility of women's voices in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Anne Brontë allows for the discovery of female noise across a century of novels, gesturing towards the possibility that women were making noise long before critics were ready, or able, to hear them. It is not, then, that her novel "focuses on the way that women's views…are silenced," but rather on the way that women are *heard* (Senf 455). For this reason, after a novel's worth of her noise, Helen Huntingdon asks Gilbert, "'Have I not said enough?'" (Brontë 403). Her noise is the "monster" that he cannot "keep at bay" as she escapes the patriarchal prison only to imprison *him*, for Anne Brontë makes clear that, to return to Coleridge, "No Sound is Dissonant, which tells of Life."

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