The Role of the House inFacilitating Female Agency in the 19th and Early 20th Century Novel

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Contents

Introduction

This thesis will focus on the ways in which the house and the right to own property shape female experience in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Henry James' *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) and E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910). They span over 60 years of change in the rights of women within the home, and reflect that change through their central narratives, as well as being key canonical works of British 19th and 20th Century literature. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was Anne Brontë's second novel. Though now fairly widely lauded as one of the first feminist novels, it was met with outrage from a shocked public when first published. Although Charles Kingsley wrote in *Fraser's Magazine* that 'society owes thanks, not sneers, to those who dare to show her the image of her own ugly, hypocritical visage', many critics argued that the book was unsuitable reading for women. *Sharpe's London Magazine* argued that 'the scenes of debauchery 'are described with a disgustingly truthful minuteness, which shows the writer to be only too well acquainted with the revolting details of such evil revelry.'' (Allot 264) Upon Anne's death, her sister Charlotte Brontë resisted attempts at republication and the novel largely fell from the public eye until the late 20th Century. First published as a serial under the title *The Old Things*, James' *The Spoils of Poynton* was considerably less shocking, and was received with pleasure by critics though rarely considered one of this writer's best works. James himself, however, devoted the largest amount of space in his notebooks to its construction. The novel's preoccupation with the house appears to derive from James' own fascination with property and inheritance – a number of both his key works turn on matters of property and inheritance, such as *Washington Square* (1880), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880). Meanwhile, alongside *A Passage to India* (1924), *Howards End* is largely considered E. M. Forster's masterpiece. Lionel Trilling argues that 'Forster conceived the work as a "condition-of-England novel."' Whilst it certainly enters into the debate on social convention, class, money, art, philosophy and even empire, it is also undeniably deeply concerned with the domestic world of the house. The house of Howards End is said to be based on Forster's beloved childhood home, Rooks Nest, about which he said "I took it to my heart and hoped . . . that I would live and die there." (Trilling 114)

This thesis will examine the relation of the house to questions of female agency within these novels, and how these novels emerge from, and form part of, the shifting political, social and legal context of the 19th and early 20th Century. I shall argue that ownership and control over property proves a vital, if complex, aspect of female power in the novels. This thesis aims to show that women with control over their domestic sphere through ownership or power over the house

demonstrate considerably greater power over their own lives, movements and actions, compared to women without power over the house, who are left almost entirely disenfranchised.

I shall examine these three texts because each of them places the household centrally in the lives of the women who inhabit the novel. Each features a heroine whose interactions with these properties are vital to the narrative itself, and to the characterisation of the heroine. Each novel invites a feminist reading of its processes and an exploration of the gender identity and politics contemporary to the novels. Most importantly, however, each text features women who both have access to and power over property and those who do not. *Wildfell Hall* allows comparison between Helen Huntington and her maid, *The Spoils of Poynton* between Mrs Gereth and Fleda, and *Howards End* repeatedly compares the power and authority of the Schlegel sisters who can afford property with the helplessness of the two Basts, male and female. Each novel further allows the reader to examine changes in individual women's circumstances alongside the changing social situation. In *The Spoils of Poynton,* for example, the reader witnesses Mrs Gereth's growing helplessness as she is removed from her property and in *Wildfell Hall* the reader views Helen as niece, wife, mother, and then widow, with all the changes of household that this ensues. *Howards End,* meanwhile, invites a comparison between the two Mrs Wilcoxes, the power received from and exercised over Howards End by the first and more conservative Mrs Wilcox and the second, who has matured in a time and location which arguably empowered women more freely. This allows the critic to compare the extent to which property and power come hand in hand in a woman's life.

It must be allowed that when comparing two women within one novel many factors must come in to play – for example the difference in power between Helen Huntington and her maid in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* cannot be attributed only to property ownership. Factors such as wealth and social standing must also be taken into account. The difference between the two Mrs Wilcoxes can certainly not be attributed only to the age in which they matured and married, but also to differences in personality. This thesis will not attempt to argue that property is the sole cause of female power. It would be as intuitive to argue that women who are more powerful are more freely able to inhabit property and rule over it. I shall attempt to demonstrate, however, that the occupancy and ownership of property was a key factor in female power and the ability of women to wield influence over their own lives and those of others. This is a fascinating area of study for, whilst allowing for a deeper and more nuanced examination of gender power dynamics and female disenfranchisement between 1849 and 1910, it also allows a celebration of the power that women *were* able to wield, the sources of this power and the ways women chose to exercise it.

This thesis will examine these novels by employing a historically-informed feminist critical analysis. There is a long tradition of investigating both these particular novels and the relevance of the household within feminist criticism. Many critics explore the constraining aspect of female spaces. In "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in 'Wuthering Heights' and 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall'", Laura Berry writes that 'the conjunction between bonds and bondage is the means through which these fictions grapple with domestic enclosure' (31) She examines the narrative metaphor of marriage and house holding, and the constraint both place on women. She also examines the significance of the Custody of Infants Acts (1839 and 1873), writing that custody rights supported

> primacy of property and status in the legal relations of the family... The child is in effect a form of property and so, like all other wealth in the marriage, belongs more or less exclusively to the husband. (35)

Meanwhile Tess O'Toole argues that all forms of ownership become a significant part of marriage, for;

> The enclosure of Helen's diary narrative within Gilbert's epistolary one mimics not just the division of male and female into separate spheres but also the law of couverture. The fact that Helen's diary has become her husband's possession and that he has the power to bargain with it in a bid to recover his friend's favour reinforces this point. (718)

It is clear, therefore, that to properly understand the mother's power over the family ('a mother, as such, is entitled to no power, but only to reverence and respect' (O'Toole 134)) and over her own belongings, one must also examine their rights to property ownership.

Andrea Kaston Tange, meanwhile, writes comprehensively about the significance of female space within the house, in particular focusing on the drawing room in Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866). Tange argues, for example, that whilst Miss Marjoribanks' drawing room becomes in some ways a 'spatial metaphor for enclosure' (165), she is able, through 'taking charge of the spaces she inhabits' (164) by constructing her own drawing room to gain 'a measure of power as long as they operate within boundaries set by others.' (110) She therefore explores the nuances of the female space and both its constraining and empowering presence in women's lives. It is her critique of women's literature which most aligns with that of this thesis, and this thesis will attempt to apply conclusions drawn from her thesis to the novels here examined, in particular to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The relationship between houses and female power will be explored through three chapters. The first focuses on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and will examine the relevance of the house as a physical space within women's lives. The second examines *The Spoils of Poynton* in the context of female homelessness, shedding light on the importance of the female home in wielding power as well as the precarious nature of female inhabitance of the home. The third and final chapter explores *Howard's End* in light of these same issues. Women, able to take full ownership of the home, may exert control over their environment and exercise a relatively high degree of independence. *Howard's End,* then, will be investigated in terms of legal female ownership of the house and female inheritance.

Physical Space in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Such a lonely, comfortless home (Brontë 43)

Three houses dominate the narrative of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Stanningley; Grassdale; and finally Wildfell Hall itself. Each property takes on many dimensions within the novel and the house takes on many guises: the hothouse, the asylum, the prison and the fortress. This chapter will explore these roles alongside the physical space of the house, and the ways in which they can be used both to empower and confine women. It argues that left without the ownership of property, dependent upon first her aunt and uncle and then her husband for a home, Helen Huntington is also left without control over her own life and is in many ways trapped inside the properties owned by others. It will also contend that once Helen does gain sole residency of a property, and finally gains ownership of property on the death of her husband, she becomes able to enjoy considerably more freedom and exert agency over her own life.

Helen Huntington is the tenant of Wildfell Hall around whom the novel revolves. Her mysterious appearance at Wildfell Hall with her young son, as well as the fact that she lives alone in the large house as a single female, stirs the inhabitants of the neighbourhood to gossip and speculation. It will soon transpire, however, that she is not a widow but a wife who has escaped an abusive husband who had confined her within the house. She expresses her disdain for the confinement of girls, both in literal and figurative terms, while visiting her neighbours including Markham, the young man who will eventually fall in love with her and learn the story of her marriage. She tells Markham and his family 'you would want her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant – taught to cling to others for direction and support and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil' (26). It is an image particularly reminiscent of Rochester in another Brontë novel, *Jane Eyre* (date), who explains that he has planted Adele in a walled garden so that she may grow up pure and shielded from the evils of her mother's world (Charlotte Brontë 102). For Charlotte Brontë, these words appear to be unproblematic as Adele grows into a fine, sturdy and morally pure young English woman. Anne Brontë, however, problematizes this as the house becomes a 'hot-house', both a nurturing but also a confining presence.

Helen might well be contemptuous of this parenting style for she herself, aided only by the gentle persuasions of her aunt to think seriously about marriage, is so protected from the truths of the world that she is shocked by the depravities of her husband. This is considered the norm – indeed many contemporary critics called *Wildfell Hall* unsuitable reading for women because of the 'evils which render the work unfit for perusal…a perverted taste and an absence of mental

refinement … together with a total ignorance of the usages of good society.' (Allot 264) From early on in her married life Helen also experiences the confinement which is such an essential part of the hot-house existence. For example, within the first month of her marriage to Huntington her honeymoon is cut short for 'he wanted to get me home, he said, to have me all to himself, and to see my safely installed as the mistress of Grassdale Manor.' (159) This is because, she writes, he wishes to keep her 'as single-minded, as naïve, and piquant as I was; and, as if I had been a frail butterfly, he expressed himself fearful of rubbing the silver off my wings by bringing me into contact with society.' (159) This suggests that by coming into contact with the world the woman, delicate in her naivety, is not only damaged but made less beautiful. The wish to shield his young wife from the public simply becomes the most convenient way for Huntington to confine her, and to ensure that he may continue leading a life of leisure whilst guaranteeing she remains the dutiful housekeeper tending to the home. When Helen wishes to escape the hot-house that is Grassdale, her suitor Walter Hargrave asks her 'but what can you do in the cold, rough world alone? You, a young and inexperienced woman, delicately nurtured, and utterly—'' (278). Again, a man uses the metaphor of the hot-house bloom, beautiful and delicate, to attempt to control the movements of a woman.

The fear that the women of the novel show towards the rearing of a boy in the same hot-house, as Mrs Markham exclaims 'you will treat him like a girl – you'll spoil his spirit and make a mere Miss Nancy of him' (79), demonstrate the true worth of the hot-house education – it creates a woman unable to tend for herself in the wider world, therefore confining her to the strict social structures in which she is expected to remain. Indeed, Helen's plans of leaving Grassdale without male assistance and beginning a new life overseas are worryingly naïve as she trusts in her ability to finance her son and herself through her art in an entirely alien environment. She apparently quite blithely decides that to sink into 'poverty and starvation' (219) should be better than remaining in the patriarchal household. In the end she must replant herself under the protection of her brother, leaving her reliant on 'my brother's consent and assistance.' (213) For whilst men are allowed, indeed expected, to go 'stumbling and blundering along the path of life' (26) (Markham opens his narrative by telling the reader that his 'highest ambition [will be] to walk honestly through the world (9), women are expected to remain safely inside the (hot-)house.

Anne Brontë expresses the extent to which this can depress a young woman as full of life as Helen, who only wishes to walk alone to the cliffs and is 'overruled…it is a very long walk, too far for you.' (50) Helen asks of both her husband and, by dint of the rhetorical question, the reader, 'how can you expect me to gather bloom and vigour here; pining in solitude and restless anxiety from day to day?' (172) Similarly, she laments that her 'higher and better self' is 'doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to quite degenerate and fall away for lack of nutriment in

this unwholesome soil.' (191) Her enclosure within the hot-house risks damaging the bloom for want of those elements generally only found outside the house – sunshine and nutrient. Meanwhile her son is allowed to climb a wall and poke his giggling head over the walls of the garden of Wildfell Hall, affecting an escape from this enclosed garden that the women of the novel never fully achieve.

In many ways, however, a woman's house also becomes her fortress, a protective retreat, for the women of *Wildfell*. This is seen most acutely in the presence of Wildfell Hall itself within the novel. The house acts as a protection from the world for Helen, a secluded and thick-walled 'hermitage' (204) in which she can conceal herself from her husband and society at large. The very image of Wildfell Hall recalls the ruins of a defensive castle with 'its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes', with a 'gigantic warrior that stood on one side of the gateway, and the lion that guarded the other.' (17) The house not only looks but acts as a fortress. When Helen wishes to escape male company, she need only 'with[draw] with her child into the garden' (20) or into a different room of the house. Each time Markham enters her property he is aware that he is crossing a barrier into a space which she dominates, often likening it to a military 'invasion' (22) or 'intrusion' (38). He shares his anxiety as 'I came to her house as often as I dared' with a pretext for 'invading her sanctum' (57), needing first to brave a stern-eyed Lizzie, the guardian of the door. At Stanningley, after the chess game between Helen and Hargrave which makes it quite explicit that his pursuit of her is a military one, and one which she greatly wishes to resist, Helen enlists Lizzie 'that sharp-sighted woman' into 'descrying the enemy's movements from her elevation at the nursery-window' (256). She is therefore able to resist, as far as possible, his attacks simply by 'confining' (256) herself the house, a space which he is unable to enter. In the same way Markham becomes convinced that at Wildfell Hall, Helen is purposefully avoiding him by remaining in the house when he is nearby – a belief that does nothing to convince him his advances may be unwelcome.

Even inside the house, women appear able to create retreats for themselves, spaces in which they may protect themselves from the goings on of the outside world with physical walls. Helen, for example, may close the door on the dining room in which her husband and his guests proceed to get uproariously drunk, and is able to 'deliver my son from that contaminating influence, I caught him up in my arms and carried him with me out of the room.' (107) She can protect him from his father by drawing him into the female spaces of Grassdale; the drawing room, the library and the nursery. Throughout the novel Helen and other female characters affect their escape from company they wish to avoid by doing just that; Helen avoids Hargrave's advances by telling him 'at present I am going to take the children to the nursery' (272), and retreats from her drunken husband when 'I left the room, and locked myself up in my own chamber.' (179) He attempts to enter her physical space, and is rebuffed as 'he came to the door; and first he tried the handle, then he

knocked' and asked 'won't you let me in Helen?' to which she responds 'no' (179). This moment, among others, caused the novelist May Sinclair to call *Wildfell Hall* one of the first feminist novels. She wrote that 'the slamming of Helen's bedroom door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England.' (Browne 14) Aside from the clear implications with regards to women's ability to deny their husbands sex, this is also in part because it indicates the ability of women to create spaces within the home that are impenetrable to men.

Brontë was not the only author of the age to explore the power of the female space. Andrea Kaston Tange argues that Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* is concerned with the importance of the female space and writes of her drawing-room that 'once Lucilla Marjoribanks has established a physical and ideological space that may contain her actions…she uses this space and all it represents to expand the boundaries of her cultural space' (163). Likewise, Helen Huntington establishes her own physical and ideological space within the house and is able, to some extent, to use this space to 'expand the boundaries of her cultural space'. Helen perfects her artistic abilities in the library so that she may support herself and her son in the public space and hence escape her husband. That being said, the library largely becomes a space of escape for Helen, rather than the empowerment Tange argues Marjoribanks finds in hers.

Helen's library becomes her refuge numerous times both at Stanningley and Grassdale. For example, when she is 'not desirous of sharing Mr Boarham's company for the whole of the morning, I betook myself to the library' (124) and she calls the library her 'favourite resort' (131) considering it 'particularly my own' (167). Interestingly Thad Logan asserts that that whilst in parlours 'middle-class women played out their identities as self-denying wives and mothers and where men and children were visitants', men's' 'special spaces' were 'the study, [and] the library' (112). Helen then co-opts a room generally considered to be the space of the male. Indeed, she displays little of the appropriate feminine devotion to the parlour or drawing room expected of nineteenth-century women – when Markham is first conducted into the house it is to Helen's work room, rather than the drawing-room, that he is introduced. Helen eschews the typically female space, however, because it appears so often to be invaded: by friends, potential suitors and later unwanted guests. She regularly expresses dread at the social requirement to return to the drawing-room. She is forced to retreat, but able to invade and conquer a typically male room with her art supplies, just as 'Marjoribanks must first construct her own drawing room, a process … described by Oliphant in mock-epic, militaristic terms' (Tange 165) to create a space that is not only female, but largely personal to Helen and free of social expectations placed upon the daughter or wife.

None of the spaces dominated by women within the novel are infallible spaces, however. If the house is a fortress it is one which is constantly under siege. In fact, in many ways the invasion of the female space within the house negates the ideal of the 'women's sphere', and of female 'influence' within the house. Tange writes that Marjoribanks may 'insist on taking charge of the spaces she inhabits' (164), which is true to some extent true of Helen. When Helen reads Mr Hargrave his wife's letters she demonstrates that she disapproves of Millicent's timidity at home and demonstrates why her husband's friends consider her to be forceful within the house. On the other hand, Tess O'Toole argues that 'Brontë's novel exposes rather than reproduces the myth of power embedded in cultural constructions of the domestic woman.' (O'Toole 717) This is evidenced throughout the novel, as for every instance in the book in which a woman is allowed to retreat to safety and solitude, there is another in which a man will freely usurp her ensconced position. In two instances, as women are withdrawn into the library with their children, a man is able to enter the space and disrupt it.

In the first 'Millicent and I were with little Arthur and Helen in the library… when Mr. Hattersley came in, attracted, I suppose, by the voice of his child.' (224) He is able to enter a space which women have 'ma[de] out' for their own use, and 'disrupt 'a very agreeable morning.' (224) Moreover, he is able to use the physicality of his larger body to impose himself into the space, reclaiming ownership of it from the women, and to look upon the room as though he were a military leader surveying conquered territory as;

> Mr. Hattersley strode up to the fire, and interposing his height and breadth between us and it, stood with arms akimbo, expanding his chest, and gazing round him as if the house and all its appurtenances and contents were his own undisputed possessions. (225)

Clearly, he does not view the women as subjects likely or able to 'dispute' his ownership. In the second instance, Helen's authority over her own child is demonstrated to be null as she withdraws him from her father 'taking him with me into the library, I shut the door' (255), only for him to enter and demand the child's return as 'the father came to the room…swore at me, and took the … child away.' (255)

There are countless instances in the novel of men interposing themselves into female spaces by using their physicality. When Hargrave 'precipitated himself towards' (279) Helen in the library, she is forced to draw a weapon (in this case a perfectly feminine substitute for the sword, a 'palette knife' (279)) and 'hold it against him' (279) in order to encourage him to leave. When Helen attempts to find solace in her chamber Huntington stops her by physically restraining her 'just as I

had entered the chamber, and was about to shut the door in his face' exclaiming 'No, no, by Heaven, you shan't escape me so!'(183) He is quite correct, she cannot – forging a female space in the novel is in truth largely dependent on the acquiescence or simple disinterest of men. During one house party, as the women withdraw from the dining room to the drawing room, shutting the door on their drunken spouses, they are still able to hear their calls 'shouting through door and wall' (212)– it is impossible to shut them out. When the men enter the drawing room, they demonstrate their dominance and ownership of it by creating chaos of the female space, for example 'Mr Hattersley burst[ing] into the room with a clamorous volley of oaths in his mouth' (215), proceeding to throw books and furniture and then his own wife about the room. The women are forced to retreat, when 'I thought I had witnessed enough of my husband's degradation; and leaving Annabella and the rest to follow when they pleased, I withdrew.' (268)

It is, through this and other instances, made clear that 'female influence' over this household is minimal. Though Huntington both praises and complains of his wives ability to curb his excesses, she can in fact do no such thing, and by her own admission on household affairs she defers 'to his pleasure and judgment, even when I know the latter to be inferior to my own.' (252) Meanwhile the trite manners of speech which see men ask to 'obey' women are shown to be entirely nonsensical. Huntington asks to see Helens diary 'with your leave, my dear' before he 'forcibly wrested it from me.' (284) When Markham enters the vicarage, he asks if he will be allowed to spend time with the vicarage daughters, and without waiting for permission invades and makes himself perfectly comfortable in the centre of the female space of the hearth, bestrewn with cats and sewing, 'bringing a chair to the fire, and seating myself therein, without waiting to be asked.' (32)

Throughout the novel, men are able to enter and leave the female spaces of the house both in appropriate and transgressive ways. Helen becomes engaged when Huntington invades the sanctum of the library, as 'he drew up the sash, and sprang in' (125) through the window and Markham 'vaulted over the barrier' (83) to enter Wildfell Hall. Meanwhile women, though to some extent safe and in control within their own fortress of a house, have very much more limited freedom of movement. It is, after all, a shame that women are forced to remain in the house to avoid their ardent male suitors or hide from their husbands' 'riot, uproar and confusion' by 'retreating upstairs or locking myself into the library' (272). Ultimately, Huntington's confiscation of Helen's keys proves that she has as little control over Grassdale as she does over anything else.

It is Grassdale, then, which is most appropriately compared to the walls of a prison. Upon first arriving at Grassdale, young Mrs. Huntington is of course delighted with her new home: 'But

when we got home – to my new, delightful home – I was so happy and he was so kind that I freely forgave him all' (159). This is, at least in part, because Grassdale becomes a path of escape from the family home of Stanningley, which Helen had come to bemoan after tasting the freedom of Bath. As O'Toole argues, 'the architecture of Brontë's narrative calls attention to alternate forms of domestic containment, one deriving from the natal family, the other from courtship and marriage.' (O'Toole 716) Having been allowed contact with the public, Stanningley had become 'so tedious and dull, my former amusements so insipid and unprofitable. I cannot enjoy my music, because there is no one to hear it. I cannot enjoy my walks, because there is no one to meet' (102). This discovery of the childhood home as a restrictive space is also clear in the lamentations of Esther Hargrave, desperate to escape a mother who 'lectures me: I am … making myself a burden on her hands' (292) yet is left mouldering for 'I cannot leave them unless I get married, and I cannot get married if nobody sees me' (293). Esther is left desperately seeking a way to escape, claiming 'I should sooner run off with the butler', all the while being urged by Helen – who has grown less naïve since her own flight from the natal home – that 'you might as well sell yourself to slavery as marry a man you dislike.' (293) Helen is quick to realise that Grassdale is far more restrictive than Stanningley.

Many critics have noted the constraint at Stanningley. O'Toole argues that;

> In proceeding through the … surprisingly protracted time in Helen's painful account of her nightmarish marriage, the reader experiences a sensation that might be labelled narrative claustrophobia. The text thus produces an effect on the reader that mimics the entrapment Helen experiences in her marriage. (219)

Brontë explores the overwhelming isolation of Stanningley as Helen writes 'oh, it is cruel to leave me so long alone! He knows I have no one but Rachel to speak to, for we have no neighbours here.' (172) She confesses herself unwilling, however, to divulge her loneliness or unhappiness either to her aunt or her brother, saying 'I do not like to complain of my loneliness.' (172) O'Toole argues that 'a hellish marriage punishes Helen for succumbing to her desire for Arthur' (O'Toole 716), for failing to heed her aunts advice because of her sexual attraction. The somewhat foolish choice in spouse then is equated with a crime which must be atoned for, whose punishment and imprisonment must simply be endured. It is no wonder women are so often told in the novel that 'marriage is a serious business.' (124) Helen's movements are restricted, and her brief reprieves from the inside of her house at the beginning of her marriage, her honeymoon and her visit to London, are both cut short. When she is granted leave to stray from her house as her husband allows 'during my absence you may pay a visit to Stanningley, if you like' (207), she is constantly aware of the lenience through which she is freed and 'not willing to impose upon my husband's good nature in thus allowing me to

leave him, I made but a very short stay.' (209) More often she is simply denied the luxury of leaving her house when her husband repeatedly denies her requests to accompany him to London, and even disallows her to venture out for her fathers' funeral, for 'he would not hear of my attending the funeral, or going for a day or two, to cheer poor Frederick's solitude.' (210)

Grassdale, then, takes on the stifling atmosphere of incarceration; for example, Helen is left alone when 'the rest of the ladies withdrew the light of their presence from Grassdale.' (272) Brontë writes;

> Much of my new-born strength and courage forsook me, I confess, as I entered [the house], and shut out the fresh wind and the glorious sky: everything I saw and heard seemed to sicken my heart—the hall, the lamp, the staircase, the doors and asks 'how could I bear my future life! In this house, among those people?—oh, how could I endure to live! John just then entered the hall, and seeing me, told me he had been sent in search of me, adding that he had taken in the tea, and master wished to know if I were coming.' (239)

The reader is made fully aware of the prison she inhabits. It is as Helen enters the house that her predicament becomes unbearable, as she once again enters the stifling atmosphere of the building she will never be able to leave. The list of objects around the house, surrounding and overwhelming her, add to the claustrophobia of the moment, making the room a 'spatial metaphor of enclosure.' (Tange 165) As her unhappiness is interrupted by the necessity to continue in her duty, the weight of her house and her responsibilities press down upon Helen. As she asks 'how shall I get through the months or years of my future life in company with that man—my greatest enemy?' (243) the recurrent use of rhetorical questions wrenches the reader into Helen's despair, for they are asked to answer questions without answer, to revel in the helplessness of Helen's situation. A notice in *The North American Review* complained that the reader 'is confined to a narrow space of life, and held down, as it were, by main force.' (O'Toole 715) Helen is 'a slave—a prisoner' (287) and as she laments 'I cannot get out: He hath made my chain heavy' (288), it is clear that 'the conjunction between bonds and bondage is the means through which [Brontë grapples] with domestic enclosure.' (Berry 31)

If Grassdale is her prison, Huntington her husband becomes her jailer. As she asks, 'only this,' returned I; 'will you let me take our child and … and go?', clearly knowing the answer yet asking anyway, bartering away her fortune over which he anyway has legal rights, she is scornfully asked 'do you think I'm going to be made the talk of the country for your fastidious caprices?' She is forced to remain only 'to be hated and despised'. (241) Women in the childhood home may be expelled

from rooms - ‘I must insist upon your leaving the room!’ (258) - or sent to their bed chambers - ‘you had better retire to your room, Helen’ (133). In the marital house she receives a ‘sentence of immediate banishment…exiled’ (200) from a particular space or is chased away from it by impropriety. Huntington is able to rob her of all agency by exerting control over her private spaces within the house when he says, quite calmly destroying her hopes of freedom, ‘meanwhile I’ll trouble you for your keys, my dear.’ (285) As he confiscates her ‘keys of your cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else you possess,’ (285) it is made explicit that she has no control over the recesses of her home, that no privacy is afforded her and no agency in the control of her house or her possessions within it. As he ‘deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire: palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish: I saw them all consumed: the palette-knives snapped in two, the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney’ (285), she leaves her entirely reliant on him for the life of herself and her son, a reliance that can only be broken by being transferred to another man, her brother. This was, of course, perfectly legal. Husbands had the right to deny their wives a divorce unless the woman could prove physical abuse (the vicar also tells Markham that Helen does not have the ethical right to leave her husband, even in the case of physical abuse) and to deny wives access to their children. Even this aspect of agency is reliant on property ownership. As Berry explains, before the Custody of Infants act of 1839 ‘the father's right to custody of his progeny was largely unquestioned and legally absolute… The child is …a form of property and so, like all other wealth in the marriage, belongs … to the husband.’ (Berry 35) Lord Loughborough, then, can divorce his wife and free them both from the entrapment of a loveless marriage, a distinction Helen makes clear to him, whilst Helen can only leave through an ‘escape’ which even she herself finds shockingly immoral.

Indeed Helen, or Brontë, must constantly justify the decision. As O’Toole writes, ‘this transgressive act is sanctioned by a conservative motive,’ (O’Toole 717) which is the knowledge that she is only leaving for the good of her son. Helen is ‘a slave—a prisoner,’ but says that ‘that is nothing,’ (267) demonstrating the low value placed on women’s happiness even by themselves. She laments that ‘if it were myself alone I would not complain, but I am forbidden to rescue my son from ruin.’ (287) For her to leave for her own sake would be beyond the pale, for she herself decries her actions, saying ‘I am fully alive to the evils that may, and must result upon the step I am about to take.’ (283) Her decision must also be justified with the addition of a trustworthy (by dint of being a man) male narrator to frame her diary entry. It is his unflinching belief in her moral uprightness and deeply-rooted goodness, ‘her character shone bright, and clear, and stain less as that sun I could not bear to look on’ (382), and his unshakeable and outspoken belief that her story of psychological abuse at the hands of her husband must clear her of all wrong-doing, that works as a stabiliser to an

undeniably shocking tale. Even this stabilising influence was not enough for many critics, amongst them her own sister Charlotte, who felt that *Wildfell* was inordinately scandalous.

Helen's very escape from Grassdale, carried out in secret under the cover of darkness, demonstrates the extent to which her home had become a prison. Her 'trembling joy' in leaving Grassdale behind her as she writes 'thank heaven, I am free and safe at last' (303) brings relief both Helen and the reader as the suffocating cloister that was Grassdale is left behind. The 'hilarity' found in the simplicity of a 'breeze on [her] face' and the 'yellow lustre' of the sun demonstrate just how 'cloistered' and 'sunless' (307) she has really been. The very chapter headings, '*Concealment', 'A plan of escape'* and *'Boundary past'* make it very clear that Grassdale was as much prison as home. Brontë herself seems to have written with an urge to clear the claustrophobia of the Victorian home as she compares herself to a cleaning woman who 'undertak[ing] the cleansing of a careless bachelor's apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises, than commendation for the clearance she effects.' (O'Toole 717)

It is quite clear in *Wildfell*, however, that as much as a house can be a prison it can be an asylum (of course the word 'asylum' itself perfectly encapsulates the many guises of the house – a place of safety, a place of care, but which can also be a place of confinement for those of shocking temperament, and indeed Helen writes that 'they would think I was mad' (218)). Asylum for the purposes of this paragraph will mean place of safety. Helen is saved from her husband and her miserable incarceration, as well as from the uncertainties of attempting to forge a living alone, 'for who could tell how long I might have to struggle with the indifference or neglect of others,' (189) by the very house she is able to move herself and her child into. Several times simply the thought of Wildfell Hall is enough to save Helen, as 'I will forbear to think of my quiet asylum in the beloved old hall' (294), 'I thought of my asylum in shire, and made no further objections' (299) and 'the atmosphere of Grassdale seemed to stifle me, and I could only live by thinking of Wildfell Hall' (300). The joy with which Helen perceives Wildfell Hall makes it clear that a house is more than a prison or a hothouse in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* Until this point the reader has associated Wildfell Hall with a certain negativity of feeling which remains as Helen describes the 'grim, dark pile', the 'ruinous mass' with a 'desolate court.' (27). It had previously been described in gothic terms with a 'desolate field… enclosed by stone wall', and a 'haunted hall.' (49) Her joy, then, as she says 'but now, each separate object seemed to echo back my own exhilarating sense of hope and freedom' (314), as she revels in the hopes for her future and her escape from incarceration, it becomes clear how desperately in need of this escape she was and from what a 'stifling' environment, the 'prison of despair' (314) she leaves behind. No matter how dilapidated Wildfell Hall may be, it represents a greater agency than she has ever experienced.

Despite the luxury and wealth of Grassdale, it is Wildfell Hall which provides a refreshing counterpoint to this stifling atmosphere. Even at Grassdale Helen remains almost entirely isolated, and her movements outside of her house remain restricted both by the landscape and the women of the town who surround her. She is forced to paint only her own home ('There is a sad dearth of subjects…I took the old hall once…and again…and again…for I really have nothing else to paint' (37)) and when she attempts to venture further she is curbed by a woman telling Markham 'Oh, don't tell her Gilbert! Cried she; 'she shall go with us…it is a very long walk, too far for you.' (50) Nevertheless, as she extols the virtues of her large but 'dilapidated, rickety old place' (48) it is clear that she longs for space. She defends her home by telling the Markhams that 'the rooms are larger and more airy… the unoccupied apartments…are very useful for my little boy to run about in on rainy days when he can't go out…there is a garden for him to play in, and me to work in.' (48) Though she is careful to assert that it is her male child, rather than herself, who longs for this freedom, she is no longer corralled inside her own house.

Her situation, however, remains undeniably precarious. The women of the town, and their shock at the idea of a single woman living alone, threatens to drive her from the only asylum she has found. She remains only a 'tenant', with no legal right to the property, or indeed to any property at all. The insecurity is clear when she says 'indeed I cannot be too thankful for such an asylum, while it is left me.' (43) It is only upon the death of her husband and jailer that she is able to move with a certain freedom in the world; even then, the ownership of property itself threatens to prevent her from marrying the man she loves as he stands cowed on the other side of her mansion walls. Nevertheless, her discussion with Lizzie, who tells her 'I have no home, ma'am, but with you,' and means it literally for 'if I leave you I'll never go into place again as long as I live… I should have to find my own board and lodging out of 'em somewhere, or else work among strangers: and it's what I'm not used to: so you can please yourself, ma'am' (300) mitigates this. Her distress, as 'her voice quavered as she spoke, and the tears stood in her eyes' (300) reminds the reader that the ownership of property, or the means to inhabit property, is a luxury for the Victorian woman and one which can act as her salvation, her 'hermitage' her 'asylum'.

O'Toole argues that 'attempts to read Helen's second marriage as an event which redeems the domestic ideal compromised by her first marriage must ignore evidence about Gilbert's shortcomings and the troubling implications of his transfer of the contents of her diary to his friend.' (723 O'Toole) To me, however, the character of Markham reads more of the folly of youth gently nurtured by the hand of a good woman, in contrast Huntington's genuine evil which cannot be. O'Toole's reading focuses on the continued restriction of Helen in her marriage with Markham which, while surely by modern standards is and would always be one of inequality, is in a proto-

feminist text perhaps the best we can expect – indeed Brontë went rather too far for many of her contemporaries. Helen is the more worldly-wise of the relationship, and the one who owns property. Indeed, this fact alone endows her with such power that Markham is concerned he will appear to be scrounging after her for money. Helen is able to refuse the suitor the reader assumes to be Hargrave and she, it appears, genuinely loves Markham. She has surely transplanted herself – with the help of her brother, the death of her husband and the tenancy and acquisition of various properties – from a situation of great constraint into one of genuine happiness. Whether the reader may consider her, by modern standards, emancipated is surely another issue and one which is less relevant; although, of course, her property will become her husbands upon marriage, and she is merely the guardian of Grassdale, keeping it for its male heir.

In *Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Helen Huntington is trapped in the marital house, unable to influence her husband's actions in the public sphere while he is still able to exert considerable control in the domestic sphere, the 'woman's domain'. To a large extent her predicament mirrors the context out of which Brontë wrote; her aim, to shed light on the plight of abused women, made her novel overtly shocking to her readers. Legally, married women had few rights over their children, their home, or indeed their body. It is these facts which eventually force Helen to flee the confinement of her marital home, to literally escape from the domestic sphere of her house and marriage with Huntington. She able to live at Wildfell Hall only under the protection of her brother, and as a single woman in sole possession of a property, she is constantly under suspicion. The house also plays an important role in her independence, however – she has a property to flee to. The next chapter will explore the significance of this, for it will look at women left without this property to rely on.

Homelessness in *The Spoils of Poynton*

Poynton was the record of a life (James 47)

The Spoils of Poynton explores the dispossession of Mrs Gereth from her beloved home. Her story reflects the experiences of many women of the time but, as Henry James details in his diaries, it is based in particular on a story he was told at a house party. James explores the case of a real woman who had been forced out of her home by the marriage of her son and who had 'rebelled at her inevitable dispossession-under the British property system' by emptying the house of all belongings and taking them with her into 'exile.' (James 103) The story seems to have caught his imagination and empathy to a deep degree, and he writes of 'the mother's natural pain at being unhoused was thus intensified by losing the collection which was the emotional core of her life.' (James 103) He explores the 'British custom' of unhousing the mother, a custom which he finds to be cruel – a sentiment echoed by Fleda, Mrs Gareth and the narrator during the course of *The Spoils of Poynton*. As Richard Lyons, author of "The Social Vision of *The Spoils of Poynton*" argues, 'it is possible… to see in *The Spoils of Poynton* … James's social concerns.' (59) These concerns are evident not only in the narrative of Mrs Gareth, but of Fleda as well, for left homeless she is forced into a life of perpetual movement, continually looking for someone on who she can rely in order to survive.

This chapter will explore the complex portrait of female homelessness created by James. It will argue that in the ownership of property Mrs Gereth is left with considerably greater power over her own life and that of others than Fleda possesses, who in her homelessness is forced to act on the whims of those around her. Nevertheless, it will also argue, by viewing Mrs Gereth as she becomes defunct in a patriarchal society which values women in their role as wife and mother, that James demonstrates that female power over the home is ultimately reliant on the men in their lives allowing them to exercise it. In exploring how the loss of Poynton affects Mrs Gereth it underlines both the ultimate powerlessness of women over the properties they inhabit as well the importance of this power to the psychological health of women, and therefore the devastation that follows its loss.

James writes that 'Poynton, in the south of England, was this lady's established, or rather her disestablished home, having recently passed into the possession of her son.' (41) Mrs Gereth is described as 'established' at Poynton, before this comfort is removed from her before the reader's eyes. James demonstrates the great genuine tragedy of being forced to leave one's home – an eviction that Owen Gereth treats with unconcern. James establishes, for example, the length of time Mrs Gereth has been devoted to her home; 'She had lived for a quarter of a century in such warm

closeness with the beautiful that, as she frankly admitted, life had become for her a kind of fool's paradise. She couldn't leave her own house without peril of exposure.' (41) With the word 'exposure' James reminds the reader that the house is more than a possession or set of possessions, it is one's protection from the world. To lose this is to be like 'some tropical bird, the creature of hot, dense forests, dropped on a frozen moor to pick up a living.' (42) To be forced to leave this protection is to be vulnerable, even more so in Mrs Gereth's case, for 'the great drawback of Mrs. Gereth's situation was that, thanks to the rare perfection of Poynton, she was condemned to wince wherever she turned.' (42) Her happiness and establishment at her home in Poynton is demonstrated again as she reminisces that 'then there had been her husband's sympathy and generosity, his knowledge and love, their perfect accord and beautiful life together, twenty-six years of planning and seeking, a long, sunny harvest of taste and curiosity.' (41) Possessions become so much more than possessions; they are memories of a life. James also explores the extent to which each object belongs spiritually, though not legally, to Mrs Gereth; 'lastly, she never denied, there had been her personal gift, the genius, the passion, the patience of the collector.' (41) This makes Owen's assertions that 'if there were a few things at Poynton that were Mrs. Gereth's peculiar property, of course she must take them away with her' (61) crude and unimaginative. All of it is hers, and yet legally none of it is: 'Mr. Gereth had apparently been a very amiable man, but Mr. Gereth had left things in a way that made the girl marvel… everything was to go straight to his son.' (43)

James makes this disparity between true ownership and legal ownership clear when he writes 'no account … had been taken of her relation to her treasures, of the passion with which she had waited for them, worked for them…watched them, loved them, lived with them.' (43) At this point the reader is left with the impression that Mrs Gereth has been robbed, despite the fact that the situation is legal - expected even – and that in fact it is Mrs Gereth who will steal the items when she removes them. As Berry argues, 'by every standard of taste and aesthetic appreciation Mrs. Gereth is right to retain her hold on Poynton, but by every other standard her rule is illegitimate – a usurpation.' (187) Fleda is left 'aghast, as it came home to her for the first time, at the cruel English custom of the expropriation of the lonely mother' who is given 'a maintenance and a cottage in another county.' (13) The word 'maintenance' is lacking in love and care, the mother is 'lonely' and the cottage is not near her old home or family but 'in another county'. She is removed from everything she knows.

James explores Mrs Gereth's grief in great detail. Indeed, it becomes clear to the reader that her despair approaches madness or hysteria as James writes 'this was the misery that haunted her, the dread of the inevitable surrender…They were present to Mrs. Gereth… with a vividness that at moments almost ceased to be that of sanity.' (43) Fleda's own empathy for Mrs Gereth initiates the

reader into similar empathy for '[Fleda] felt indeed…both a respect and a compassion that she had not known before; the vision of the coming surrender filled her with an equal pain.' (48) To add insult to injury, Mrs Gereth must hold up the example of her French friend who 'had the house in Paris, she had the house in Poitou, she had more than in the lifetime of her husband …because she had to the end of her days the supreme word about everything.' (38) This must be compared to the apparent 'concession' granted to her as 'she was of course fully aware of Owen's concession, his willingness to let her take away with her the few things she liked best'. Mrs Gereth ridicules this in just the way James has ridiculed the suggestion Mrs Gereth should take the things that are 'particularly hers'; "Liked best"? There wasn't a thing in the house that she didn't like best.' (65)

Owen says that Mona 'had made him feel that Mrs. Gereth had been liberally provided for, and had asked him cogently what room there would be at Ricks for the innumerable treasures of the big house.' (61) Owen's belief that she is being treated fairly – even generously – only enhances the indignity with which she is truly treated, for no character but Fleda is capable of empathising with her, or believing she deserves better. Owen continues that 'Ricks, the sweet little place offered to the mistress of Poynton as the refuge of her declining years, had been left …. by an old maternal aunt…a defunct aunt.' (61) The idea of a 'refuge' for her 'declining years' demonstrate that the unmarried women, now 'defunct', useless, is to be hidden away, deserving of nothing better than a 'sweet little' place to live the rest of her life now she is no longer useful. Mrs Gereth's assertion that 'she had never been near the place: for long years it had been let to strangers, and after that the foreboding that it would be her doom had kept her from the abasement of it' (64) is held up alongside Owen's jovial assertion that it 'wasn't a place like Poynton—what dower-house ever was? —but it was an awfully jolly little place.' (61)

Fotios Sarris writes that 'though there may be no reason to doubt Mrs. Gereth's "loyalty" to a "noble" ideal of beauty, we should not be misled by the remark that she had no "crude love of possession.' He argues that the key word is crude, and that the 'crude love of possession'' is what motivates the Brigstocks; Mrs. Gereth is driven by a desire for possession that is perhaps less "crude" because it is less mercenary, but one that is no less fierce than that of the Brigstocks.' (54) This appears very clear in light of textual evidence. It is in many ways ground-breaking to find a woman partially (for other critics have argued that her character is softened by the fact the wishes to help Owen find a wife worthy of their house) freed of the excessively constraining motherly instinct to the extent that she may value something above her child. Lyons writes that 'of course, one of the questions raised by James's comments in the "Preface" as well as by the treatment of Mrs. Gereth in the novel, is whether this inheritance is truly something valuable or whether it does not represent a restrictive or even destructive force.' (63)

James makes it quite clear that one's possessions are more than the importance of 'value' and capitalism. Rather Poynton is 'the sum of the world' (49), and each work of art is treasured as Mrs Gereth says 'there are things in the house that we almost starved for! They were our religion, they were our life.' (53) Lyons acknowledges that Poynton 'represents a home, a shared life, an achieved beauty valued by a community of taste based on passion, sensibility, and suffering.' (63) Though her devotion to her possessions will of course become a destructive force, and such devotion to possession is critiqued by James in this novel and in other works, such as *Portrait of a Lady*. In *The Spoils of Poynton,* however, this devotion seems rather more important and empathetic than the distant and cursory valuation of Poynton by Mrs Brigstock who, like Austen's infamous Mr Elton, 'turned up the underside of plates and the knowing but alarming raps administered by her big knuckles to porcelain cups' (56) in order to value them monetarily. Meanwhile Mona wants the items only because she is denied them, and Alan Roper argues that 'James makes sufficient play of the … vulgarity of the Brigstocks to enable us to understand Mrs. Gereth's position.' (199) Owen sees the art simply as practical furniture and cannot see their value at all, and the paper references 'Mr. Gereth's own seat, famous for its unique collection of artistic curiosities' (169) valuing them as a tourist, interested on in passing in 'curiosities'. When the paper reduces the much loved house to 'his' and filled with 'noted collections,' one contrasts this ultimately dismissive touristic, fame and value related instinct with the devoted love of Mrs Gereth. There is certainly none of Mrs Gereth's passion and devotion replicated here. Like Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End*, the house comes to be wrapped up entirely in the identity of the women, 'they were *us*! And now they're only *me'* (53), yet both women are forced to watch as their houses are changed or destroyed or lost, Mrs Gereth having only just had to lose her husband. Roper provides some evidence that Mrs Gereth's passion is largely justified. He references James' own preface, in which he writes 'the passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty would, like that of antique Helen of Troy, set in motion.' (James xiii) He remarks that the 'Trojan elders thought that Helen was not worth the having and should be returned to Menelaus, but they quite understood why she would.' (James xiii)

Many critics have argued that James mocks Mrs Gereth and her sensibilities with her overwrought expressions of grief, minimising her 'heroism'. Her moments of overwrought and admittedly ridiculous passion, however, only add to the possibility of empathy – she is sent to the edges of sanity by her loss. Owen Gareth, armed with the will of his father, forces a sad, mad, *desperate* old lady from her home. Mrs Gereth is then left shattered as she tells Fleda 'you're going abroad with me…That's all that's left for me now.' (167) (It is worth noting here that Fleda has in many ways become another object to the collection Mrs Gereth has so zealously amassed. It appears here that Fleda's presence acts as a comparable replacement for the chairs, vases and paintings that

Mrs Gereth has lost ownership) Fleda herself considers that 'if her friend should really keep the spoils she would never return to her. If that friend should on the other hand part with them, what on earth would there be to return to?' (105) She recognises that Mrs Gereth's being is wrapped up in her spoils, and that to separate them from her is to destroy her. Moreover, there are moments of desperately sad but understated mourning – the final scenes of Mrs Gereth see her quietly broken, weeping on a sofa as 'at last Mrs. Gereth too sank down again. Mrs. Gereth soundlessly, wearily wept' (176), and staring listlessly in a chair. This is compared with Owen's bluff lack of awareness, his assertion that 'it was the furniture she wouldn't give up; and what was the good of Poynton without the furniture? … she may make it devilish awkward?' (61) Fleda acknowledges his failure to understand the true value of the house and its spoils to Mrs Gereth as she says 'the furniture—the word, on his lips, had somehow, for Fleda, the sound of washing-stands and copious bedding, and she could well imagine the note it might have struck for Mrs. Gereth' (61) for ultimately 'Owen had from a boy never cared, had never had the least pride or pleasure in his home.' (102) It cannot be denied, however, that 'for Mrs. Gereth herself that he reserves his sharpest ironies.' (Roper 194) Roper uses the example of a harried Mrs Gereth the morning after her first night at Waterbath, as James writes 'it was hard for her to believe a woman could look presentable who had been kept awake for hours by the wall-paper in her room.' (12) Nina Baym argues that 'this satiric tone, of course, diminishes Mrs. Gereth's stature and undermines her heroic posture.' (104)

One could read the novel as a comparison in poverty – Mrs Gereth's loss is held up against Fleda's genuine homelessness. Compared to Fleda, Mrs. Gereth's troubles can begin to seem trivial. It would be incorrect and unfair, however, to argue that Mrs. Gereth's troubles *are* trivial. Indeed Fleda often seems to feel Mrs Gereth's troubles more deeply than she does her own (many critics, including James himself, have pointed out that Fleda's instinct for sacrifice verges on the absurd, which is perhaps why she will be compared to both a nun (175) and to a religious sacrifice (28) by Mrs Gereth. This chapter will later discuss the role of Fleda as the homeless companion in the novel.) James writes;

> Now that she was really among the pen-wipers and ash-trays she was swept, at the thought of all the beauty she had forsworn, by short, wild gusts of despair … The chill struck deep as Fleda thought of the mistress of Ricks reduced, in vulgar parlance, to what she had on her back. (102)

Fleda's future so entirely entwines with Mrs Gereth's that even when she mourns the lack of a home she thinks of Mrs Gereth's own hardships. This thesis will not compare the pain of two women, but rather explore the different disempowerments they both face.

Fleda faces disempowerment to an extremely large extent. Baym argues that 'the Fleda of the notebooks… begins as a character of simple, high-minded disinterestedness, and ends as a person with a complex passion for sacrifice.' (103) It cannot be overlooked, however, that, while at times Fleda does appear to choose self-sacrifice over personal gain, she is often forced into sacrifice by circumstance. Very early on, while listening to Mrs Gereth's passion for her house and her dread of disposition, the narrator says that 'it was fascinating to poor Fleda, who hadn't a penny in the world nor anything nice at home, and whose only treasure was her subtle mind.' (41) James does not leave her destitute; he recognises that her 'subtle mind' is indeed a gift. Lyons argues that James often focuses on a 'central figure whose intelligence and sensibility are hemmed in, constrained, and finally doomed by isolation, dependence, poverty.' (64) She is left then, with 'intelligence and sensibility' but indeed left 'constrained…dependant' and poverty-stricken by her circumstances. As James writes,

> Fleda, with her mother dead, hadn't so much even as a home, and her nearest chance of one was that there was some appearance her sister would become engaged to a curate whose eldest brother was supposed to have property and would perhaps allow him something. (41)

Her nearest hope is distant, with only the 'nearest chance' of an 'appearance' of an 'engagement' to a curate whose 'brother' was 'supposed' to have property and 'might perhaps allow' him a living. She could hardly be further removed from this chance. In fact, however, Fleda displays no appearance of envy towards her sister who does end up in the vicarage, her marriage built upon the female dependence on a man for property ownership; 'Maggie's union had been built up round a small spare room.'(106) Her sister's home becomes to seem a prison and an obligation and her sisters life is not presented as preferable, as she is entrapped in her own way, 'now distinctly doomed to the curate.' (73) On the other hand, her sister equally recognises that Fleda lives a life of confinement and obligation; neither circumstance appears appealing. Fleda, as a woman in the last years of the 19th Century, continues to have very limited opportunity to make her own money and support herself. Like Helen Huntington 50 years before, her only opportunity is 'arming herself for the battle of life by a course with an impressionist painter.' (41) She and the narrator make clear that a paintbrush is an inadequate weapon in the battle of life.

Fleda, then, has only one recourse: that is, to make herself useful and available to richer friends who may protect her in exchange for companionship. She is judged harshly for this as she acknowledges that 'people *were* saying that she fastened like a leech on other people—people who had houses where something was to be picked up: this revelation was frankly made her by her

sister.' (73) Owen makes it perfectly clear, however, that she has little other choice when he asks her 'if you *should* leave my mother, where would you go?' (76) He has made the correct assumption – she is unable to leave for she has nowhere to go, acknowledging 'I haven't the least idea.' When asked 'I suppose you'd go back to London', she merely repeats, 'I haven't the least idea.' She has no alternative answer. She is unable to avoid the fact, for when he states, 'You don't—a—live anywhere in particular, do you?' and then feels shame as 'she could see that he felt himself to have alluded more grossly than he meant to the circumstance of her having, if one were plain about it, no home of her own.' (76) James writes that 'one just couldn't be plain about it' (76) but this only avoids the inevitable truth. She does not have anywhere to go, however distasteful she begins to find Mrs Gereth's schemes. Fleda does also attempt to avoid the possibility of homelessness as James writes: 'Fleda, wound up as she was, shrank from any treatment at all of the matter, and she made no answer to his question. 'I *won't* leave your mother,' she said. 'I'll produce an effect on her; I'll convince her absolutely.''(77) Her home is dependent on both making her happy and him happy, and he appears aware of it. This dependency means that she is forced to feel Mrs Gereth's fear of dispossession as well as her own, 'for she reflected that in Mrs Gereth's remaining there would have offered her a sort of future—stretching away in safe years on the other side of a gulf.' (48) She is left wanting, a 'hungry girl whose sensibility was almost as great as her opportunities for comparison had been small.' (48) This, of course, becomes a source for suffering to her, and 'nothing could come next but a deeper anxiety. She had neither a home nor an outlook.' (105) She is forced, indeed, to suspend the living of her own life in favour of others with 'nothing in all the wide world but a feeling of suspense.' (105)

Each of her homes, she is aware, is not her own, for she is chased from place to place by the Gereths' schemes and by her own poverty as James writes 'it was intensely provisional, but what was to come next?'(105) Roper writes 'this topography is only lightly sketched in, but it nevertheless has relevance to the progress of the campaign, which follows Fleda from point to point as she vainly seeks a refuge.' (184) Many critics, and James himself, have called Fleda a 'free spirit.' (James xii) She is forced into this 'freedom' – if it can be called that - by circumstance, however. The man upon whom a single woman should be able to rely is unreliable, for 'her father paid some of her bills, but he didn't like her to live with him.' (41) When she does stay with him, she is made to feel an intruder as he makes 'her feel by inimitable touches that the presence of his family compelled him to alter all his hours.' (104) She has no space that is her own – she is a guest at Bridgewater, at her father's, at her sister's, at Poynton and at Ricks, and spends the latter half of the novel 'constantly forced to flee the scheming of Mrs Gereth…characteristically expressed in terms of … search for a refuge.' (Roper 187)

In her homelessness, Fleda becomes subservient to those she relies upon to survive. Her sister laments that 'poor Fleda, [was] at every one's beck.' (194) Fleda is indeed at everyone's behest from the moment she is introduced to the reader and as she is 'constantly summoned to Cadogan Place' (40) to visit Mrs Gereth. It is clear that this is not an arrangement she feels completely comfortable with, for considering her 'imperious friend' she had a sense 'partly exultant and partly alarmed' of having become necessary.' (41) Even to the man she loves, and the man that purportedly loves her, she barely registers as sentient in her subservience and 'he was conscious only that she was there in a manner for service.' (60) Fleda is indeed imperative to Mrs Gereth for 'in her isolation she seizes upon the intelligent and sympathetic Fleda Vetch as an ally for the coming struggle.' (185) At the same time she is 'being charged with was that of seeing Mrs. Gereth safely and singly off the premises.' (61) This leaves Fleda herself entirely isolated, for 'she is "the sole messenger and mediator" between mother and son' (Lyons 188) Fleda is continually pulled between her two duties, 'she had her duty—her duty to Owen—a definite undertaking' (121) and also her duty to Mrs Gereth, but this offers her no security for herself and little room to consider her own desires[1], for 'there was no sense of possession attached to that; there was only a horrible sense of privation.' (134)

At the hands of Mrs Gereth and her son, Fleda is destined to suffer greatly. The manipulations performed by Mrs Gereth are particularly shocking to the reader, for example when 'Mrs. Gereth simply offer[s] Fleda to Owen.' (James 42) Baym writes that 'this crude gesture …makes [Mrs Gereth] decidedly more brutal and less sensitive than originally envisioned.' (104) Although this is entirely accurate, it fails to evaluate just how deeply Fleda is affected by this painful and embarrassing moment. Indeed, she considers leaving Mrs Gereth at that moment before deeming this an impossibility. The scene is made even more painful in its repetition, as Owen is sent to her father's house, foiling the wishes of Fleda 'to abandon Owen, to give up the fine office of helping him back to his own' for 'when she had undertaken that office she had not foreseen that Mrs. Gereth would defeat it by a manoeuvre so simple.' She could not have anticipated such an event, because 'the scene at her father's rooms was of Mrs. Gereth's producing.' (98) Her will is entirely extinguished in Mrs Gereth and Owen's battle for Poynton. As James writes 'Fleda had listened in unbearable pain and growing terror, as if her interlocutress, stone by stone, were piling some fatal mass upon her breast. She had the sense of being buried alive, smothered in the mere expansion of another will.' (175) Mrs Gereth views Fleda less as a person in her own right than as an expansion of

[1] Critics such as McClean have accused Fleda of being manipulative and self-serving. As I will argue later in this chapter, however, Fleda very rarely acts on her own desires. Though she expresses a desire both to live with Owen and to live at Poynton her actions, in particular in rejecting Owen's advances, often appear designed to fulfil the very opposite of her wishes. She displays a level of self-sacrifice often bordering on masochism.

her will to the extent that she is 'secretly surprised at her not being as happy to be sacrificed to the supremacy of a high standard as she was happy to sacrifice her'. She realises that 'she was cared for only as a priestess of the altar' (57) and when Fleda accepts her place beside Mrs. Gereth, the wordless assent is compared to the vow of a nun. Lyon argues that 'James is, therefore, willing to allow the constraints of Fleda's situation and state of mind to resonate in the description.' (Lyons 74) A nun's life, of course, is traditionally one of denial of personal needs, superseded by the needs of the divine. In Fleda's life Mrs Gereth and the fight for Poynton must become her divinity, for it is upon her that she relies on for her existence; her living, her food, her shelter.

This sense of deprivation becomes particularly acute as Fleda is asked to accompany Mrs Gereth as she 'wondered an instant if this were not practically a demand for penal submission—for a surrender that, in its complete humility, would be a long expiation.' (192) She is forced to surrender her freedom and her very self to Mrs Gereth and Poynton. The cruelty with which Mrs Gereth treats a heartbroken Fleda after she rejects Owen is extreme, telling her 'you must excuse my saying that you're literally unpleasant to me to meet as you are.' (183) Fleda is only worth acknowledging when she is of use to Mrs Gereth. Fleda is left deeply damaged by her relationship with the two Gereths as she thinks 'I haven't a rag of pride. I used to be a proud girl…no more…I've been bought as low as a girl can be'. Robert McLean finds 'Fleda a 'cunning' girl who 'victimizes' Mrs. Gereth and finally falls, a 'victim of pride and ambition.''(359) This is an entirely unfair evaluation of Fleda, given the manipulation with which she is at all times subjected to at the hands of the Poynton. She has to survive in the houses of others as she has no home of her own and the choices for employment remain limited. Her attempts to manipulate them are all attempts to get the spoils back to Poynton, a Poynton she understands will, if this occurs, never be hers.

Throughout the novel it is made clear how strong Mrs Gereth's wish to defend Poynton is. As Roper writes, 'it would be impossible to overlook the importance of the battle imagery, which forces itself upon our attention in the very title.' Throughout the novel there is 'the struggle, the opposing sides, the siege or defence, to heroism, spying, surrenders, and ultimatum.' (Roper 183) This leaves Poynton a battle ground, so Owen visits 'to reconnoitre without encountering the enemy' (James 66), Owen treating Mrs Gereth as a recalcitrant tenant rather than a member of his family as 'when at the end of a fortnight Owen came down once more…to see what his mother was doing.' (66) Mona and Owen attempt to 'stand a siege' and the removal of the spoils becomes 'Mrs. Gereth's defiant gesture to the would-be besiegers, and she explains how she managed her coup in terms drawn from a military manual' (Roper 63) as she tells Fleda 'I was quiet and I was quick. I manoeuvred, prepared my ground; then at the last I rushed!' with 'a little army of workers.' The war for Poynton becomes one of the great wars of history, as Mrs Gereth refers to her 'dread migration…

I've crossed the Rubicon.' (73) This is to be a battle between civilized Greeks and their barbarian invaders- Mrs. Gereth, in fact, twice refers to Mona Brigstock and her mother as 'barbarians' (32, 185). In James' own forward the battle for Poynton is likened to the battle for Helen of Troy and 'Mrs. Gereth has more justification for not surrendering her beautiful prize than Paris ever had.' (188)

This comparison is, of course, overwrought and ridiculous. Sarris argues that 'James use of battle imagery is the ultimate irony of the work.' (Sarris 103) At the same time as making light of the women themselves it makes light of the British institution in which mother and wife are turned against each other. In many ways, however, it is not humorous at all – these women are genuinely forced to battle for what they love, in Mrs Gereth's case, and what they are entitled to, in Mona's case. Fleda meanwhile is 'struck, was even a little startled with the way Mrs. Gereth had turned this over—had faced, if indeed only to recognize its futility, the notion of a battle with her only son.' (44) It is clear women must fight for their property in a world which allows limited power to women. Mrs Gereth's willingness to fight to the end in her desperate situation, that despite 'recognizing the futility' of battle with her only son she is nevertheless willing to 'fight to the death.' (56) Indeed, this sacrifice is often presented as noble, as Fleda thinks 'to have created such a place was to have had dignity enough; when there was a question of defending it the fiercest attitude was the right one.' (56) Mrs. Gereth is determined to do all she can to resist Mona's occupation of her beautiful home as 'pale but radiant, with her back to the wall, she rose there like a heroine guarding a treasure. To give up the ship was to flinch from her duty.' (63) James never allows the reader to forget the precarious hold she has on her reign, and the right to it, as he calls her both 'a reigning queen' *and* 'a proud usurper.' (46)

Roper writes that 'her recognition of its eventual futility derives from the fact that Owen has legal right on his side and can at any time call up a mercenary army of lawyers and policemen to his assistance.' (185) Owen would be able, unlike any of the women, to exert genuine force if he chose to, though in reality he allows himself to be guided by the women in this case as he asks Fleda "You think, then, as [Mona] does, that I *must* send down the police?' with a 'mixture of reluctance and dependence.'(115) The fight for Poynton is certainly presented by James and by many of the characters as a female battle; it is arguable that Owen is as much a pawn in the game between Mrs Gereth and Mona. Owen is presented as fumbling and weak, not 'in fighting trim. He had no natural avidity and even no special wrath' (viii, 95) and is, perhaps, as horrified by the battle as is Fleda as Mrs Gereth tells Fleda 'it's because [Owen is] weak that he needs me.' (97)

At the finale of the book, however, it becomes clear that this battle for property causes nothing but destruction. It is destructive to Fleda, certainly, but it is also intensely destructive to Mrs Gereth herself who finds herself 'rigid in a chair, her eyes strange and fixed.' (204) By the end of her battle she is exhausted, telling Fleda 'I'm too tired – I very nearly don't care.' (191) It is equally damaging to the relationships of the novel as Fleda's 'repugnance breaks the close sympathy which had formerly existed between her and Mrs. Gereth, … she is joined by Owen, who is appalled by the vulgar light in which Mona now shows as a result of the squabble.' (Sarris 99) Poynton is equally damaged by the battle. Roper writes that 'when Fleda spends her first night at the treasure-crammed Ricks, the spoils …are more like ''chopped limbs'' which remind her of the ''gaps and scars'' that they will have left at Poynton.' (Roper 182) It is the finale, though, which cannot help but stand in the mind of readers as a great metaphor for the destruction created by the fight for property women are forced by law and circumstance to engage in. The destruction of Poynton was an immutable fact throughout the writing of the novel, and 'throughout the long composition of the Spoils James never wavered in his sense of the inevitable denouement-the destruction of Poynton, the ''horrible conflagration.'' (James 232) Roper argues that it is because the barbarians have won that Poynton burns down, for the fire was started by the carelessness of servants during the absence of the young owners, and it was precisely this lack of proper care and this reliance on ''clumsy servants'' which Mrs. Gereth feared would be the result of her son's marriage to Mona' (Roper 190) As well as this Poynton burns because of a terrible gale. Poynton burns, then, partly as a result of Mona's barbarian carelessness and partly as a result of 'the 'whirlwind of passion engendered by the whole bitter contest.' (Roper 191)

In Mrs Gereth, James creates a female, matriarchal character who is allowed impulses of her own that are not entirely maternal. Even in allowing her a justified passion other than her child James creates a character who is somewhat liberated from the expected role of women in the home. Unlike many other critics, I view James' representation of Mrs Gereth as more empathetic than ironic, and therefore the novel itself as being more a critique of the socially accepted unhousing of women past their use as wives and mothers, rather than (or at least to a greater extent than) a critique of Mrs Gereth's materialism. In both Fleda and Mrs Gereth he creates women unable to preside over their own 'domestic empire', which both highlights the important role of property ownership in the agency of women and the relative lack of both for women of the 1870s. We now look forward, then, to *Howards End*, which in particular in the Schlegel sisters reflects a changing society which allowed women, to a greater extent, the power to rule their own domestic spheres.

Inheritance in *Howards End*

It is old and little, and altogether delightful (Forster 8)

Like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *The Spoils of Poynton* before it, *Howards End* revolves around properties - in this case, around Wickham Place and most significantly around Howards End itself. The novel is significantly different, however, from its predecessors. It is both written and set after the passing of both Married Women's Property Acts (1870 and 1882), arguably both a cause and symptom of societal change which saw women gain more influence over their 'domestic empire.' (Elliot, 19) By the writing of *Howards End*, indeed, women are struggling for power in the public as well as the domestic spheres, a fact reflected in the characterisations of both Schlegel sisters. The passing of the laws, however, have a demonstrable and significant influence in the novel for it is due to these laws that Mrs Wilcox may declare that Howards End is hers and hers absolutely, having not passed into the legal ownership of Mr Wilcox on marriage, and which therefore allows her to bequeath her home to Margaret Schlegel. Of course, female power over the house is not absolute in the novel, as demonstrated by Mr Wilcox's ability to prevent this inheritance as easily as Owen can cast Mrs Gareth from her lifelong home. Indeed, ultimately Margaret is only to gain ownership of Howards End through marriage to its male owner.

This chapter will explore these contradictory urges within *Howards End.* It will argue that women, in particular Margaret, having gained the power of ownership over their properties also have significantly greater power over their own lives and their own properties. It will note the difference in generations between the two Mrs Wilcoxes and consider also the difference in their values. It will tentatively attribute this difference in generation to the difference in agency expected and given to the two women, both over their properties and their lives (though the individual circumstances and personalities of the two women cannot be ignored as alternative factors in this). Also crucial to the understanding of how property works in the novel is the figure of Leonard Bast, who is without the means to purchase his own home and therefore has far less control over his own life than the Schlegel sisters, and arguably than Mrs Wilcox. The much maligned Jackie Bast is left equally powerless by her lack of financial means. This difference is one both Margaret and Helen acknowledge and are deeply troubled by (in the case of Mr Bast at least, as neither appear to feel excessive empathy for Jackie, considering her more a symptom of Mr Bast's lesser circumstances than anything else). This chapter, however, will focus on the disparity between the two Mrs Wilcoxes as it is primarily interested in the inheritance of Howards End itself.

Women are granted control over household matters in *Howards End*, and their ownership, or in the Schlegel's case tenancy, of the house imbues them with power over it. From an extremely young age Margaret has some power over household matters as when her mother dies and Aunt Munt offers to move in, Margaret decides that 'no, they could manage much better alone.' (18) She therefore ascends to the head of the household, as the eldest girl, by denying another woman the chance to take this role from her. When her father dies it is quite clear that she maintains control of all responsibility of the house, taking on leadership of the other children and the household staff despite her young age. Helen and Margaret 'ruled alone at Wickham Place' free of any male influence (for Tibby's authority becomes hardly worth mentioning, 'little need be premised about Tibby … dyspeptic and difficile') (Forster 33). In fact in many ways Tibby takes on the more feminine role of the household, displaying Forster's 'ever-changing attitudes regarding prescribed gender roles for both men and women' (Clark X), arranging and pouring tea and bowing, though for the most part through lack of real interest, to the authority of his sisters. He busies himself with sandwiches and music while his sisters 'talked to each other and to other people, they filled the tall thin house at Wickham Place with those whom they liked or could befriend. They even attended public meetings' for 'sexual equality [was an] intelligible cr[y] to them' (Forster 31). Moreover, although 'the title marks the English home as the novels definitive 'place'' (Weihl 445), unlike in *Wildfell Hall* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, women are allowed and seen out of the home - though upon marriage and entrance into the patriarchal system Mr Wilcox does attempt to curb this. Margaret asks Mr Wilcox, upon being told she may not accompany him somewhere that there are no hotels nearby, 'are you aware that Helen and I have walked alone over the Apennines, with our luggage on our backs?' To this Mr Wilcox, in an attempt to begin restricting her movements, replies 'I wasn't aware, and, if I can manage it, you will never do such a thing again.'

Their way of life is certainly not without its constraints. Virginia Woolf argues that 'Margaret, Helen … are closely tethered and vigilantly overlooked.' (Woolf 35) Helen and Margaret are indeed closely and somewhat fearfully watched by Mrs Munt who worries that 'sooner or later the girls would enter on the process known as throwing themselves away…it was dangerous, and disaster was bound to come.' (19) She is proven correct first at Helen's botched engagement to Paul Wilcox and finally at the birth of her illegitimate child –one can only assume Mrs Munt would consider such a moment one of 'disaster'. Nevertheless, the power that the house gives the girls is fairly extraordinary when compared to that of Helen Huntington a half century before. They choose their own guests, 'unshaven musicians, an actress even, German cousins (one knows what foreigners are), acquaintances picked up at Continental hotels (one knows what they are too)' (19) and, to the shock of Mrs Munt, many of them are male; 'The number of men you get here has always astonished me.'

(44) Compared with the suspicion visited on Helen Huntington because of her own perfectly respectable male visitors it is clear to see the significance of this.

Alan Sinfield writes that 'the Schlegels represent a finer sensibility: they are artistic, not altogether English, gifted with human understanding, sincerity, and even sexual spontaneity. And they are feminine. Margaret says that theirs is a 'female house'' (Sinfield 35). Theirs is a 'female house', but it is a female house with freedom of expression and in which the women may live as they choose. Upon the publication of *Wildfell Hall* the Examiner praised the Brontës (the paper believed it to written by Charlotte) because they 'do not lounge in drawing-rooms or boudoirs.' (Allot 264) Now though the house need not be considered a space of idleness and silence, and the female space can be a space of industry. It should be mentioned that throughout the novel the reader is reminded that Margaret and Helen are not ordinary English girls and they have had a 'unique education' (17). They are othered by their Germanness: ''Oh, I forget she isn't really English,' cried Evie. 'That would explain a lot.'' (147) Nevertheless, the female house is no longer relegated to the ownership of the pitied and faintly ridiculous maiden aunt or widowed mother, a house like Ricks which is tucked out of the way and acts merely as compensation for the family home such a woman could have had or used to have. The female household can now be free, intellectual, and powerful.

The authority of Mrs Wilcox over Howards End is a different matter. In many ways her power is limited – a subject that will be explored later in this chapter. Mrs Wilcox is in fact what could be considered the ideal mother and wife of the period, or perhaps even of an earlier period. She forgoes public power, 'sometimes think[s] that it is wiser to leave action and discussion to men' and is 'only too thankful not to have a vote myself.' (76) The power that Helen ascribes to her in the in her opening letter to Margaret, however, is clear. It is a subdued power, and 'Mrs. Wilcox is quieter than she was in Germany' (10), but Helen views her to be the real authority of the house, imbuing her with almost mystical power when she says 'Mrs Wilcox knew', replying to Margaret's 'knew what?' simply with 'oh, everything' (30). This quiet authority is demonstrated when Mrs Munt, in a misguided attempt to rule her nieces' household for them, brings chaos to Howards End. Mrs Wilcox, upon seeing 'Charles angry, Paul frightened, and Mrs. Munt in tears' acts with deftness and immediacy, and 'she did not ask questions.' She gently directs affairs to her own will, giving orders to each individual present so that 'Miss Schlegel, would you take your aunt up to your room or to my room, whichever you think best. Paul, do find Evie, and tell her lunch for six' and waits until 'they had obeyed her' (26) before moving on. She is not constrained by the dictates of society, refusing to act 'as a competent society hostess would have done.' (27) When Charles protests she cuts him off, turning away and 'stooping down to smell a rose' (27) so that the conversation is ended on her own terms.

Mrs Wilcox values this domestic authority highly. Though she forgoes political or public power she is horrified by the Schlegel's lack of control over their own home – that is, the power to continue residing there as she exclaims 'vehemently: 'It is monstrous, Miss Schlegel; it isn't right… I do pity you from the bottom of my heart.' (81) Ultimately, though, both houses owned by women - Howards End and Wickham Place - are as insecure as Helen Huntington's grip on Wildfell Hall. Though under decreasing pressure from society, the women of the novel are under increasing pressure from a new threat to the housing market, the exponential growth of the city, 'the expanding urban landscape, subjected to repeated melting and reconfiguration.' (Weihl 452) Wickham Place is to fall to this 'new adversary' as 'values have risen too enormously. They mean to pull down Wickham Place, and build flats like yours.' When Mrs Wilcox exclaims 'but how horrible!' Margaret replies 'landlords are horrible.' (81) In fact, however, the Schlegels are dispossessed of their home not by the social machinations of earlier novels, by suspicious and vengeful scandal-mongers as in *Wildfell Hall* nor cruel and greedy wives as in *Poynton*, but simply by the indifferent and unifying march of progress. Mrs Wilcox asks 'can what they call civilization be right, if people mayn't die in the room where they were born?' (81) Forster explores a new kind of civilization, one based on rapid movement rather than constancy, one with that 'shallow makeshift note that is so often heard in the modem dwelling-place. It had been too easily gained, and could be relinquished too easily.' (48) Not only Wickham Place but endless homes 'would be swept away in time, and another promontory would arise upon their site, as humanity piled itself higher and higher on the precious soil of London.' (13)

Howards End is also under constant threat, first of being torn down and then 'ruined, absolutely ruined, by restoration' (12), the much-lamented fate visited on the cathedral which brings the families together. Indeed, the story of Mrs Wilcox's ownership of Howards End is in many ways a great tragedy, though a tragedy hidden among the pages of the novel and unnoticed by any of the characters but Miss Avery. Frederick Hoffman puts it very neatly when he says '[Mrs Wilcox] is never happy away from Howards End. But the condition is precarious indeed, and one is never sure whether she is fighting a losing battle. A garage has been built, Charles' car stirs up the dust' (Hoffman 252). It is clear from the opening of the novel the extent to which Mrs Wilcox's life is wrapped up in Howards End. She claims personal ownership of it early on, when she says 'I lived at Howards End long, long before Mr. Wilcox knew it. I was born there' (70), and Margaret remarks that 'Mrs. Wilcox's voice, though sweet and compelling, had little range of expression… Only once had it quickened--when speaking of Howards End.' (69) Howards End, it is clear, is the most significant part of her life, and Margaret regards her as so distressed she is 'inclined to hysteria' when she exclaims 'Howards End was nearly pulled down once. It would have killed me.' (81) The

phrase is ambiguous, for the reader will later learn that there were two moments Howards End was nearly pulled down; first when Mrs Wilcox was in danger of losing her inheritance entirely, and second when Mr Wilcox takes financial control of the estate and sets about 'restoring' it, lamenting to Margaret that he should have 'rebuilt the house.' Margaret sees him 'as a deliverer' for it is true that 'Henry had saved it; without fine feelings or deep insight, but he had saved it'. Margaret, at least, 'loved him for the deed.' (194)

The deed did not come without a cost, however, and it is a cost which is slowly revealed, though always far from explicit, in the pages of the book. One example of this cost is the fate of Mrs Wilcox' pony and its paddock. Mrs Wilcox tells Margaret that **'**my husband built a little [garage] only last month, to the west of the house, not far from the wych-elm, in what used to be the paddock for the pony.' (70) It is clear from the onset that the pony carries significance, for 'the last words had an indescribable ring about them.' Margaret clearly realises the significance of the pony and Forster holds the reader a moment to fully appreciate it – only 'after a pause' does Margaret ask, 'where's the pony gone?' It is an ominous moment to which Mrs Wilcox replies only 'the pony? Oh, dead, ever so long ago.' (70) The reader is left certain that there is a significance to the animal, though it is unclear what the significance is. There is a story that is yet to be revealed, and it will be revealed over a hundred pages on, after the death of Mrs Wilcox. Margaret, and quite possibly the reader, has forgotten the exchange of the pony, and does not react when Henry tells her, also quite oblivious of importance of the pony, that **'**when I had more control I did what I could: sold off the two and a half animals, and the mangy pony, and the superannuated tools; pulled down the outhouses…Garage and so on came later.' (172) The reader now understands that Mr Wilcox rid Howards End of Mrs Wilcox' pony, and it is a memory which clearly continues to hold significance for her until her death, though for Mr Wilcox it is simply a chore comparable to throwing away damaged tools. Finally, Charles reflects 'what battles he had fought against her gentle conservatism! … With what difficulty had they persuaded her to yield them to the paddock for [the garage]--the paddock that she loved more dearly than the garden itself!' (90) Charles tells the reader how dearly Mrs Wilcox had loved the paddock, and the reader may therefore infer her love for the 'mangy pony' Mr Wilcox careless disposed of in the march of progress at Howards End and the pain this will have bought her. Yet Charles himself utterly fails to recognise the pain which the garage must have therefore bought her, or to recognise that if she loved the paddock more even than the garden she must have been distraught by the loss. He recognises only the inconvenience that her apparently bewildering love of the paddock brings. This is made all the more upsetting by the casual admittance of 'how she had disliked improvements, yet how loyally she had accepted them when made!' (90) Charles can only see 'improvements' where Mrs Wilcox, and perhaps the Schlegels, can see – and

feel – the destruction bought by restoration. Yet she is 'loyal' and therefore does not complain, and the Wilcox's will never know the pain she must feel. Ms Avery is perfectly able to understand, and to share, this pain however, as she tells Margaret 'it has been mistake upon mistake for fifty years', repeating this mantra at the mention of Mrs Wilcox's children, the supposed inheritors of the house, 'mistake upon mistake', said Miss Avery. 'Mistake upon mistake.' (134)

The relationship between Miss Avery and the Wilcox family is another indication of the loss faced by Mrs Wilcox when Mr Wilcox assumed responsibility of the farm. The reader is told of the events surrounding Miss Avery's wedding gift to Charles and Dolly, a gesture that is derided as Miss Avery is described and treated as poor, slightly demented household help. It soon transpires, however, that 'she had known [Charles'] …great-grandmother--the one who left Mrs. Wilcox the house. Weren't both of them and Miss Avery friends when Howards End, too, was a farm?' (193) There had been a connection of friendship between the Averys and the Howards, and there was even the suggestion of family, for 'then hadn't Mrs. Wilcox a brother--or was it an uncle? Anyhow, he popped the question, and Miss Avery, she said 'No.' Just imagine, if she'd said 'Yes,' she would have been Charles's aunt.' (194) Dolly finds it frightfully amusing that Howards End should pass out of the hands of Howards into the hands of Wilcoxes, and relations between the two families are destroyed – indeed the Wilcoxes cannot even consider that the relationship was ever of importance, considered only 'negligently.' (195) The family discusses it as Dolly says 'Miss Avery hates us all like poison ever since her frightful dust-up with Evie.' (248) There is much tragedy, then, connected with the passing of Howards End into the hands of the Wilcoxes. As Miss Avery says, however, that 'Wilcoxes are better than nothing, as I see you've found.' (134) The farm falls into disrepair because there are 'no more men left to run it' (184). For the time being, then, until women gain the independence necessary to run a successful business, the Howards must rely on the Wilcoxes who at least 'keep a place going, don't they?' (134) With the ascendancy of the competent and independent Schlegels, however, Howards End returns to hands that will properly care for the property and the rift between the housekeeper family and owner of the houses are fixed as Miss Avery's grandson plays in the field with Helen's young son.

Howards End is, if utterly reduced, a novel about the inheritance of property. There are two senses of inheritance of Howards End; the legal, and the spiritual. Whilst the Wilcox men have the power to prevent Mrs. Wilcox's final bequest on her death bed, that of leaving Howards End to Margaret, they are unable to prevent Margaret's spiritual ascendancy to Howards End and ultimately, of course, this will be followed by her legal entitlement to it. Leslie White argues that 'for many readers… the novel's competing impulses are resolved not in marriage, as was traditional in

the novel of manners, but in the child of Leonard Bast and Helen Schlegel, presumably the inheritor of Ruth Howard Wilcox's house and land.' (White 43) The Wilcox family is able to prevent the legal inheritance of Howards End by Margaret simply by failing to comply with the wishes of Mrs Wilcox. Forster writes

> It is natural and fitting that after due debate they should tear the note up and throw it on to their dining-room fire. The practical moralist may acquit them absolutely. He who strives to look deeper may acquit them--almost. For one hard fact remains. They did neglect a personal appeal. The woman who had died did say to them, 'Do this,' and they answered, 'We will not.' (94)

Indeed, they see Mrs Wilcox' request as an assault to their family values, and she is accused of being 'treacherous to the family, to the laws of property … Treacherous! treacherous and absurd!' (96) They are deeply offended by the possibility of Howards End moving into the possession of one outside the family and argue that 'that note, scribbled in pencil…was unbusinesslike as well as cruel, and decreased at once the value of the woman who had written it.' For them, then, this perfectly legitimises their actions. Their reaction, however, only proves the extent to which they fail to understand Mrs Wilcox, her relationship to Howards End, and the intention of her bequest. For the Wilcoxes she has broken first and foremost the rules of law and business, she has been 'treacherous…to the laws of property', her note is derided for being 'unbusinesslike' before it is for being 'cruel'. Mr Wilcox may grandly 'announce' that 'The whole thing is unlike her,' but it does not make his statement any more accurate, rather it makes it perfectly ridiculous.

> The Wilcoxes concerns are almost entirely practical;
>
> How did she expect Howards End to be conveyed to Miss Schlegel? Was her husband, to whom it legally belonged, to make it over to her as a free gift? …Was there to be no compensation for the garage and other improvements that they had made under the assumption that all would be theirs some day?' (96)

Hoffman argues that 'Howards End is a lovely place inhabited ambiguously by Wilcoxes who understand it only as a place that Mrs Wilcox cherishes.' (Hoffman 249) I would argue that, however, their understanding is lesser even than this, for they do not understand the depth to which Mrs Wilcox cherishes Howards End. They understand it as a physical space which is theirs to own, that could be of practical use but is not. They fail to understand her and therefore they fail to understand the house that is so central to her and to which she is so central. They fail to recognise her view of the house as spiritual, as Forster makes perfectly clear when he writes

> It was contrary to the dead woman's intentions in the past, contrary to her very nature, so far as that nature was understood by them. To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir. (97)

Margaret, on the other hand, does understand her relationship with Howards End to a greater extent, when she realises that in refusing to visit Howards End simply because of practicality she has, in some intimate way, failed Mrs Wilcox. Mrs Wilcox 'must communicate her mission in life to Margaret Schlegel, must will it and Howards End to her. The life … has barely enough minuets in it to find her successor. Almost the selection fails to take place, but Margaret shows adequately enough her sensitivity.' (Hoffman 252)

The spiritual inheritance of Howards End from woman to woman is clear throughout the novel. One of the most spiritual, deeply rooted both physically and mythically, aspects of the house is of course the 'sacred' wych-elm tree with its pig's teeth. Mythical knowledge of the tree is passed from Mrs Wilcox first to Helen and then Margaret, and it is knowledge Mr Wilcox, if he ever knew it, failed to value. Mr Wilcox, indeed, denies any special significance of the tree and is, indeed, shocked when Margaret's knowledge turns out to be correct, 'to Mr. Wilcox's surprise she was right. Teeth, pigs' teeth, could be seen in the bark of the wych-elm tree.... 'Extraordinary!' he cried. 'Who told you?' The unspoken source of the knowledge when Margaret says ''I heard of it one winter in London,' … for she, too, avoided mentioning Mrs. Wilcox by name' (174) only adds to the sense of the mystical surrounding it. Whilst Henry experiences only a landlord's concern for his property as he tells Margaret, 'I shouldn't want that fine wych-elm spoilt' (170), Margaret sees the importance of the tree as a spiritual being as James writes 'no report had prepared her for its peculiar glory. It was neither warrior, nor lover, nor god... It was a comrade, bending over the house, strength and adventure in its roots.' (173) This is a demonstration, or an extension, of her understanding of Howards End as a spiritual entity, and therefore proves herself a suitable 'spiritual heir.' (95)

The Wilcoxes see the house only as a physical presence, and their imposition on it is purely physical – they hack the lawn with croquet bats and nail exercise machines to trees, as Helen relays when she writes to Margaret of

> Charles Wilcox practising [croquet]…suddenly he started sneezing and had to stop. Then I hear more clicketing, and it is Mr Wilcox practising, and then 'a-tissue, a-tissue': he has to stop too. Then Evie comes out, and does some callisthenic exercises on a machine that is tacked to a … tree – they put everything to use – and she says 'a-tissue' and in she goes. (9)

Significantly, only once this activity has stopped does Mrs Wilcox emerge to enjoy the house at a deeper level; 'And finally Mrs Wilcox reappears, trail, trail, still smelling hay and looking at the flowers.' (10) Indeed all of the Wilcoxes, all of the men in the novel, are allergic to Howards End. They are unable to remain there for any duration due to hay fever, a trait derided by Miss Avery who says 'there's not one Wilcox that can stand up against a field in June – I laughed fit to burst while he was courting Ruth' to which Margaret responds 'my brother gets hay fever too.' (159) The other Wilcoxes 'use' the house, and in a way that is destructive – they poke arches into the grass and tack things to trees. But they are forced away, the house protects itself, and Mrs Wilcox only appears when they are *gone*. She makes no attempt to use the house, but simply enjoys it. She is demonstrably not allergic to Howards End that she smells the hay and in the final line of the book Helen and Margaret show the same imperviousness when they revel in the fresh hay and the others sit inside, 'the field's cut!' Helen cried excitedly--'the big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!' (324) As White writes, 'the ending [exhibits] harmonious formal and thematic resolution, and [many commentators] see the promise of the famous epigraph "Only connect..." as having been realized.' (White 43) This final scene celebrates the female ownership of Howards End, the inhabiting of the house by those who fully understand its spirituality and who the house does not reject. As Dolly, always saying the most astute things without ever meaning to says, 'it does seem curious that Mrs. Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she get it, after all.' (323)

It is an inheritance that is managed –naturally or preternaturally – by Miss Avery and the spirit of Mrs Wilcox. There are numerous indications of the preternatural, perhaps predestined, ownership of Howards End by Margaret and Helen. Miss Avery's mistakes Margaret for the former Mrs Wilcox, 'oh! Well, I took you for Ruth Wilcox,' (212) sets up a nursery in '[in] the room that Helen had slept in four years ago' which seems to unnerve Margaret who 'turned away without speaking' (257) and she is assured that 'a better time is coming now, though you've kept me long enough waiting. In a couple of weeks I'll see your lights shining through the hedge of an evening.' (259) Miss Avery is correct, for 'in the final scenes of Howards End, Schlegels are ascendant and Wilcoxes shamed and acquiescent.' (White 43) White writes that

> For Stone, Margaret and Helen Schlegel are domineering, destructive elitists who, having established at Howards End an idyllic sanctuary of 'personal relations' and 'the inner life,' permit the devastated, uncomprehending Henry Wilcox to reside there. (White 43)

I find this a singularly unfair reading of the Schlegel sisters. Margaret does not revel in her glory but is somewhat disturbed by it as 'there was something uncanny in her triumph. She, who had never expected to conquer anyone, had charged straight through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives.' (321) To me this reading of the sisters has something of the tone of the younger Wilcoxes' desperate suspicion of female ownership; Mr Wilcox needs a refuge, and he is provided it. Stone can perhaps be answered with the same dialogue which greets Paul's grumbling 'it's apparently got to suit us' to which Mr Wilcox response 'I beg your pardon, my boy. You have only to speak, and I will leave the house to you instead.' (319) So, the book concludes: 'I leave Howards End to my wife absolutely…And let everyone understand that; and after I am dead let there be no jealousy and no surprise.' (320) Early on in the novel the narrator asks; 'Is it credible that the possessions of the spirit can be bequeathed at all? Has the soul offspring? A wych-elm tree, a vine, a wisp of hay with dew on it--can passion for such things be transmitted where there is no bond of blood?' (95) By the close of the novel it appears the answer is yes.

Throughout the novel there is a deep suspicion surrounding the encroachment of women into the family through marriage, leading to female inheritance of the house. The Wilcox children in particular demonstrate deep distrust of Margaret at several moments. First, when Mrs Wilcox's letter leaving Howards End to Margaret is revealed, they accuse her first of influencing their mother and then skirt around the suspicion that she may have been in league with the doctors or caregivers to gain Howards End, saying 'She got twice or three times into the nursing home. Presumably she is awaiting developments.' (96) Their fears are summed up by Dolly's confused and incorrect exclamation that ''she wants Howards End.'…'I tell you--I keep on telling you--Miss Schlegel--she's got it--your mother's left it to her--and you've all got to move out!'' (93), an exclamation which demonstrates how little the children's suspicions are based in fact. These suspicions are left largely unspoken but when Mr Wilcox baldly says 'she's not in collusion with the matron. I'm absolutely certain of it. Nor was she with the doctor. I'm equally certain of that' (97) it becomes clear how absurd his children's suspicions are – indeed what nefarious deeds they suspect of a woman who has essentially treated them with kindness.

Their virulence is shocking in its violent imagery. Charles states ''I wish she would [come to Howards End,' he said ominously. 'I could then deal with her.'' (97) Later, when her engagement to Mr Wilcox is announced, Dolly says 'I could positively scratch her eyes out.' (200) Their distrust of both Schlegels remains a relentless undercurrent to the narrative ('I don't mean to forget these Schlegel sisters!' (201)), and Charles finally declares 'Miss Schlegel always meant to get hold of Howards End, and, thanks to you, she's got it.' (201) This is always juxtaposed with Helen's horror at

the idea of marrying into the Wilcox clan and Margaret's forceful assertions that Mr Wilcox must 'bother justice; be generous!' (198) to his children.

Even the family's considerations of Miss Avery, Howards End's housekeeper, has a peculiar undercurrent of suspicion. The family is entirely unamused by Dolly's cruel but ultimately innocent laughter at the idea that Miss Avery might have inherited Howards End and been Charles' aunt, whilst her sending of a present means they 'think she meant to be invited to Oniton, and so climb into society.' (250) It is clear that the family's distrust is entirely based on a sense of encroachment on their own property – they fail to value Howards End as its own entity because 'it is impossibly small. Endless drawbacks…not a place to live in.' (128) Their presuppositions about the Schlegels' motives are simply informed by their own - 'when people wrote a letter Charles always asked what they wanted.' (96) It is their own sensibilities, their desire for ownership, which informs this, as for him 'want was to him the only cause of action.' (96) All this indicates, however, that the suspicion of female property ownership remains a constant from the 19th Century and the writing of *Wildfell Hall* to 1910 and the writing of *Howards End*.

In *Howards End* the ownership of property is the greatest source of power to the female characters. Mrs Wilcox, though she does not support women's suffrage, is so disturbed by the idea that Margaret is not able to exert power over the household through the ownership of property that she bequeaths her sole ownership of her own house. Similarly, Margaret Schlegel feels most powerless when she is unable to control the sale of her own home. The struggle for power in the novel, indeed, is played out almost entirely through relation to property. When Margaret allows Mr Wilcox to help her in the search for a new property she cedes some control to him which equates almost to a courting ritual. She wrests back this control, however, through the struggle for the right to stay in Howards End for the night with her pregnant sister. Though the men (and indeed the Schlegel sisters) may discuss politics, the empire, and the economy in the end it is the ownership of property, passed in spirit if not in law from one woman to another, and the fight for power over the domestic sphere, which confers real agency in the novel.

Conclusion

The role of the house plays a vital part in each novel, in demonstrating and conferring female agency within the novel and allowing readers to explore how these novels emerge from, and form part of, the political, social and legal context of the 19th Century. These novels span over half a century of extraordinary change in the rights of women within the domestic sphere. They saw the passing of the Custody of Infants Acts (1839 and 1873) and the Matrimonial Causes Acts (1859), so that by 1910 women wielded considerably more power within the domestic sphere. Most relevant to this thesis, The Married Woman's Property Acts (1870 and 1882) gave married women the right to own property. Voting rights for all people were dependant on property ownership until 1918 with the Representation of the People Act, and before this ownership of property even furnished woman with some power in the political sphere, as the Municipal Franchise Act (1869) enabled single or widowed women who owned certain properties to vote for local municipal councils. These changes are reflected within the contemporary literature.

In *Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Helen Huntington is trapped in the marital house, unable to influence her husband's actions in the public sphere while he is still able to exert considerable control in the domestic sphere, the 'woman's domain'. The contemporaries of Helen Huntington had virtually no legal rights over their bodies, their children or their houses unless widowed, and the father was granted automatic custody of any child upon separation or divorce. The book which emerges from this time therefore creates a vision of the house which is closed, claustrophobic and confining. Nevertheless, in having a house to which to flee Helen also finds freedom in the house. In *The Spoils of Poynton* James explores the 'British custom' of unhousing the mother, a custom which he finds to be cruel. In both Fleda and Mrs Gereth he creates women unable to preside over their own 'domestic empire', which both highlights the important role of property ownership in the agency of women and the relative lack of both for women of the 1890s. *Howards End*, and in particular the Schlegel sisters, reflect a changing society which allowed women, more at least than previously, the power to rule their own domestic spheres. In *Howards End* the ownership of property is the greatest source of power to the female characters and concludes with the female ownership of its titular property. The fight for power over the domestic sphere confers real agency in the novel.

We can infer, then, that as novels begin to be written out of a time of greater female freedom over the home this change is reflected in the novels. Between the publication of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848 and *Howards End* in 1910 women gained more control over the

domestic sphere and a greater ability to own houses, and in turn this conferred on them greater control over their own lives. This change is reflected in the disparity not only between 1848 and 1910, but between women with wealth and those without, and those fulfilling different roles in a patriarchal society. In each novel, those women with access to property exert considerably greater power than those without. The house therefore is a key factor both in the novels and in the lives of the women contemporary to them.

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