

***The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* (1848) Residence at the BBC: Neo-Victorian Adaptations in the 1960s and 1990s**

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Abstract:

Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) has never been adapted for the cinematic screen and only twice for television. The first adaptation was a four-episode serialisation that was broadcast on BBC2 over the Christmas period in 1968-69. Nearly three decades later, BBC1 showed another three-episode version in 1996. While Brontë's novel presents many difficulties to adaptors, it also enabled the BBC to experiment within the generic conventions of the classic serial. This article argues that both productions should be positioned within the wider web of other neo-Victorianism culture. Even though screen adaptations of Victorian literature have been central to the evolution of neo-Victorianism as a phenomenon, they have received limited attention from neo-Victorian critics, with recent scholarship in this area concentrating on postmillennial examples. This failure can be attributed to influential but too rigid definitions of neo-Victorianism that have led to the canonisation of certain works and the marginalisation of others. This article responds to and aims to steer a recent turn in the field calling for more flexible and inclusive conceptualisations of neo-Victorianism to account for its changing functions in present-day culture. In particular, I argue for the necessity of engaging with screen representations of the Victorians throughout the twentieth century such as the two television versions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Keywords: adaptation, Anne Brontë, BBC, classic serial, feminism, gender, neo-Victorianism, television, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

In 1967, the playwright Christopher Fry proposed to the British Broadcasting Corporation that he adapt for television Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), then a comparatively obscure novel. His offer reflected the BBC's established reputation as a maker of 'classic serials', a genre that adapts literary sources for television, which viewers are encouraged to perceive as 'classics' on the basis of their adaptation.¹ In response to Fry, David Conroy, the Head of BBC2 Classic Serials, wrote that he and his script editor were "very much intrigued by your choice of

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novel, for neither of us think that it can be dramatised into television form” (Conroy 1967). Revealingly, Brontë’s text has never been remade as a film and only two television adaptations exist. One is Fry’s suggested four-episode serialisation, which BBC2 broadcast over the Christmas period in 1968-69. The other is a three-episode version directed by Mike Barker with a screenplay by David Nokes, a production that aired on BBC1 in 1996.

This article analyses the difficulties but also the possibilities that Brontë’s novel presents to screen adaptors in order to make important interventions in the field of neo-Victorian studies. My most obvious contribution is the examination of two works that the field has yet to acknowledge. Though the 1996 television version has received some attention, this scholarship either predates the firm establishment of neo-Victorian studies or does not engage with the field (see, e.g., Sierz 1998, Caughie 2000, Cardwell 2002, Brosh 2008, Pérez Ríu 2015). Meanwhile, no significant work has been done on the incompletely preserved 1968-69 adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and it would be fair to say that the production has faded from scholarly and cultural memory.²

This article, furthermore, aims to invite a new critical turn within neo-Victorian studies arising from dissatisfaction with prior influential definitions of neo-Victorianism. Those earlier definitions have come from critics with a predominantly literary perspective indebted to Linda Hutcheon’s concept of postmodern historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988), many of whom strove to differentiate neo-Victorian fiction from other forms of cultural engagement with the Victorians (see, e.g., Shiller 1997, Gutleben 2001, Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010). Recently, several voices have argued that those strict, rather exclusive definitions have unintentionally created a neo-Victorian canon that marginalises many other works (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014, Kohlke 2014, Cox 2017). More “suitably elastic” conceptualisations of neo-Victorianism are long overdue and will enable better comprehension of this cultural phenomenon’s “shape-shifting” (Kohlke 2014: 27).

In response to this call for more flexible definitions of neo-Victorianism, I intend to reorient the field’s attention towards several neglected avenues of enquiry through discussion of the two screen adaptations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Until quite recently, neo-Victorian criticism “tended to privilege ‘literary fiction’ over and above other genres and mediums” (Cox 2017: 104). Although some new

scholarship deals specifically with neo-Victorianism on screen (see, e.g., Primorac 2018), it still favours contemporary post-millennial examples. Meanwhile, only limited research has looked beyond a small selection of canonical novels to engage with or recover earlier re-imaginings of the period (Kohlke 2014: 32).³ That propensity is especially pronounced when it comes to film and television. Whereas a dizzying amount has been written about twentieth-century versions of the Victorians on screen, it mostly derives from film, television and adaptation studies and much of this work does not explicitly engage with neo-Victorianism.⁴ As such, the field needs to consider more fully “the impact of the costume drama in television and film over the past half century or more” on neo-Victorianism’s many forms and in different periods (Whelehan 2012: 274).

The field will only attain a holistic understanding of the Victorians’ cultural influence once it historicises, theorises and contextualises how and why different decades have reinvented the Victorians. Such a shift will enable rediscovery of those screen texts that have traditionally been neglected, such as the two marginalised television adaptations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Neither would fit comfortably within more rigid conceptualisations of neo-Victorianism but both belong within the profusion of Victoriana that appeared in the 1960s and 1990s. Additionally, comparing the two adaptations provides us with insight into the legacy of first-wave feminism at different points in the twentieth century.

To begin, I outline the complex narrative structure of Brontë’s novel in order to discuss the difficulties experienced by its adaptors. Thereafter, I examine the 1968-69 serial before turning to discuss the 1996 production to illuminate the varied influence of wider neo-Victorian cultural trends and fashions on the two productions. The article’s final section delineates the problems encountered and the solutions found by adaptors working in different decades, both with distinct relationships to Victorian literature and culture. As will become apparent, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is rather intractable source material because it does not mesh with the conventions of the classic serial. However, on the two occasions when it wanted to experiment with those conventions, the BBC used Brontë’s novel to undertake strategic acts of “of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis).

1. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848)

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall has rarely been interpreted for the screen. The most obvious explanation is that it has never achieved comparable fame to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).⁵ Unlike those novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has never benefitted from a glossy classical Hollywood adaptation akin to Samuel Goldwyn's *Wuthering Heights* (dir. William Wyler, 1939). Consequently, adaptors rarely consider Anne Brontë's novel as source material and their reluctance prolongs the novel's cultural marginalisation. Yet *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* did not always suffer from such lack of appeal, while *Wuthering Heights* only managed to achieve great popularity following the 1939 adaptation.⁶ Clearly, other reasons exist for the paucity of adaptations of Anne Brontë's work.

Another partial explanation is that adaptors tend to overlook *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because it has an exceedingly complex plot and narrative structure. Although similarly intricate in form, *Wuthering Heights* does not use the epistolary devices employed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Anne Brontë's second novel consists of numerous documents that create a nested narrative structure, which binds together while maintaining two separate but interlocking plots that, in a further complication, occur in different time frames. The first plot relates to Helen Huntingdon's courtship with Gilbert Markham; the second plot concerns her disastrous first marriage to the debauched Arthur Huntingdon. At its most basic, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* comprises several retrospective letters from a middle-aged Gilbert to his brother-in-law, Halford, explaining how Gilbert came to marry Helen twenty years earlier. In his correspondence with Halford, Gilbert relives events that occurred in 1827, when an attractive and mysterious widow calling herself Helen Graham took up residence in Wildfell Hall near his family home in the village of Linden-Car. The young Gilbert becomes fascinated by Helen, an artist who paints landscapes to support herself and her young son, but their initial acquaintance is marred by various misunderstandings, including his suspicions about her possibly illicit relationship with another neighbour, Frederick Lawrence.

To clear up these misunderstandings and inform him about her past in her own words, Helen gives Gilbert a copy of her diary covering the period 1821-27. Transcribed into his letters to Halford, the diary section takes up more than half of the novel. Set mostly in Grassdale, the home of

Helen's first husband, the journal relates Helen's early infatuation, gradual disillusionment with and escape from her husband Huntingdon, an abusive alcoholic. Once Helen's diary ends, the narration reverts back to Gilbert and the two plots become entwined, as Helen returns to Grassdale to tend to her husband during the terminal stages of his addiction. At the same time, Gilbert's first-person perspective becomes fragmented and displaced by the incorporation of letters from Helen to Frederick, revealed to be Helen's brother. Distanced from Helen, Gilbert can construct only an incomplete picture of what happens to her until their reunion in the final chapter, which draws the two plots back together. The complexity of the novel's narrative and structure indicates why adaptors have tended to overlook this novel.

Nowadays, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is regarded as "something of a classic of mid-Victorian feminist protest", but that consensus took a long time to coalesce (Ward 2007: 151). For much of its critical history, even admirers found fault with the novel and often attacked its epistolary form. One of the most influential was George Moore, who remarked in 1924 that:

Anne broke down in the middle of her story, but her breakdown was not for lack of genius but of experience. An accident would have saved her; almost any man of letters would have laid his hand upon her arm and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer, saying "here is my story; go home and read it." Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling. Moreover, the presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given to them, would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story. The diary broke the story in halves[.] (Moore 1930: 216)

Condescendingly, Moore implies that Brontë demonstrated her shortcomings as a writer due to a lack of male guidance. Nevertheless, Moore's patronising claim illuminates some of the problems that adaptors of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* face. His comment that "the story" becomes broken in "halves" elucidates how Helen's journal and letters introduce a

second plot that resists integration into the primary plot concerning her courtship with Gilbert.

Yet the complexity of that same narrative structure also means that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a highly ambiguous work that is ripe for neo-Victorian adaptation and reinterpretation. On the one hand, the independent heroine uses her written words to tell her own story, while throwing light on the undocumented suffering of many nineteenth-century women. In this respect, the novel engages with the central campaigns of the first-wave of the feminist movement, including married women's rights to their property and the custody of their children. Jessica Cox goes as far as to argue that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a "forerunner" to later New Woman fictions and that Brontë's engagement with prominent feminist concerns "when the organised woman's movement was just beginning to gain momentum" makes her "an important early Victorian feminist writer" (Cox 2010: 312). Additionally, the novel foregrounds a woman's creative expression in writing and other forms; Helen is the only heroine in a Brontë sisters' novel to work as a professional artist. On the other hand, the epistolary form emphasises that "she cannot *speak* her story" and it possibly confirms doubts about the boorish Gilbert's character (Gordon 1984: 719, original emphasis). From Elizabeth Signoretti's perspective, Gilbert's use of the diary is an illegitimate "appropriation and editing" of Helen's words and an effort to "contain and control" his wife (Signoretti 1995: 21). However the novel's multiple intercalated texts are interpreted, Brontë's work provides significant opportunities to "re-write the historical narrative of the period by representing marginalised voices" and "other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian" (Llewellyn 2008: 165), particularly from latter-day feminist perspectives.

In different ways, both television serialisations recognise *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* feminist themes and how those themes are enhanced by the novel's epistolary form. Yet the embedded documents create various problems for adaptors. In 1967, Fry acknowledged the issue even as he sought to convince Conroy that Brontë's work was suitable for television. His letter to Conroy states that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* "is a better novel than usually supposed, and I'd like to try and bring its virtues into focus", even as he "admit[s] they're blurred by its blemishes and the long-drawn-out diary section" (Fry 1967). His remarks echo Moore's judgement in 1924, throwing into relief that the novel's epistolary form introduces

impediments not found in *Wuthering Heights*, a novel that is otherwise as structurally intricate. In spite of such hindrances, the BBC has adapted *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* for the television screen twice. Although operating in very different circumstances, the organisation looked towards Brontë's novel to feed the cultural fascination with the Victorian period in the 1960s and then again in the 1990s.

2. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1968-69)

A notable aspect of the 1968-69 screen version of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is its sympathetic treatment of its heroine Helen (Janet Munro). Throughout the production, she displays dignity and courage in spite of the suffering that her villainous husband, Huntingdon (Corin Redgrave), inflicts upon her. Helen's qualities are made apparent during the third episode in a scene set in Grassdale, in which she waits with several other women for her male dinner guests to arrive. The men can be heard carousing off screen, and they continue to behave in a drunken, boorish manner once they appear. To the situation, their wives react differently: Helen is upset but composed; the complacent Annabella Lowborough (Angela Browne) smirks; Milicent Hattersley (Janet Key) snivels. The chaos reaches its zenith when Milicent's husband (Donald Burton) violently interrogates her about her tears. The other men's passivity prompts Helen to reprimand Hattersley by pointing out that Milicent "was crying for shame and humiliation for you" (Sasdy and Fry 1969: 'Revolt', Episode 3). Her reproach results in Hattersley throwing the sobbing woman onto a nearby couch. Such incidents reveal the adaptation's readiness to engage with the still contemporary feminist issues – including domestic violence – that amplify the neo-Victorian potential of any adaptation of Brontë's 1848 text.

Yet the features that make *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* good neo-Victorian source material shocked many of its Victorian readers and made the 1960s adaptors initially hesitate. When Fry approached him, Conroy expressed interest but also disbelief that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* could "be dramatised into television form, principally because of the nature of its content" (Conroy 1967). That same content resulted in the novel being identified as "an early example of the sensation novel" (Pykett 2005: 91), a genre that has greatly influenced neo-Victorianism. The rakish alcoholic Huntingdon, for instance, not only engaged Victorian readers' fascination with scandal, but also appealed to neo-Victorian viewers' desire to

encounter the darker – usually seedier – side of the Victorians. Additionally, the 1960s witnessed the publication of the novels that have been crucial to the construction of the neo-Victorian canon, like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). In this cultural context, Conroy probably overcame his initial scepticism because Brontë's novel provided the BBC with an opportunity to make an adaptation with a distinctly neo-Victorian flavour that could capitalise on existing popular tastes.

I would identify the 1968-69 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as belonging to a larger trend of neo-Victorian screen adaptations made by the BBC in the 1960s. In my view, these productions are neo-Victorian because they indicate an interest in extending (even while remaining within) the conventions of the classic serial. Such serials have long been a major part of the BBC's drama output due to its status as a public service broadcaster. Ever since it ceased to be a private company in 1927, the BBC has justified its licence fee on the basis of its mission to "inform, educate and entertain" the nation (BBC 2018).⁷ One of the most reliable ways to accomplish this duty has been to adapt iconic works of cultural heritage, first for radio and then for television. Such adaptations, notes Iris Kleinecke-Bates, satisfy the expectation of "respectability and quality demanded by the public service ethos" even as the programmes' popularity show "their potential to offer the entertainment value which is necessary to draw in audiences" (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 58). Hence, the organisation could position itself as edifying the nation by broadcasting a screen version of a novel by a Brontë sister, albeit the least famous one, in the late 1960s. The choice of this particular Brontë novel suggests a desire to experiment and go outside the small pool of literary texts – predominantly those written by Charles Dickens or Jane Austen – that the BBC adapts regularly. This situation does not mean that other works "do not get adapted, but that their adaptation is a rare occurrence, and their narratives challenge dominant conceptions of the genre" (Butt 2012: 167).

Even so, the 1968-69 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* does not overtly overturn the expectations of the classic serial and it makes sense that the production has escaped the notice of neo-Victorian studies (and other fields). Apart from its incomplete preservation, the serial's appearance and dramatisation of the novel supports Richard Butt's observation that:

the volume of classic serials produced by the BBC between the late 1950s and the late 1980s demanded relatively standardized production practices which inevitably manifested themselves in the consistencies of narrative structure and pacing, set design and iconography[.] (Butt 2012: 162)

As an adaptation, the 1968-69 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* might appear rather unimaginative in its striving to preserve as many incidents and as much dialogue from the novel as possible. That approach reflects the BBC's efforts to fulfil its educational mission by giving the impression of faithfulness towards its adaptations' literary sources. In the words of Thomas Leitch, the BBC promises to protect its viewers "from the shock of experiencing any new thoughts or feelings that would not have been provoked by their source texts" (Leitch 2007: 6). Nevertheless, adapting Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a risky choice that signals a willingness to deal with more challenging, controversial source material than usually associated with the genre.

The risk makes more sense if we examine what was happening at the organisation during that time, particularly in relation to the channel BBC2. The creation of BBC2 reflects successive changes in the landscape of British broadcasting. From its inception, the BBC's purpose has been debated and this discussion intensified with the launch of the profit-driven, populist station ITV in 1955. ITV exposed the BBC's lack of mass appeal but also represented the potential dissolution of "public service values in the face of commercial 'excess'" (Cooke 2015: 59). Such anxieties meant that when the government was considering a new television channel, it eventually granted the rights to run the channel to the BBC. Thus, BBC2 was born and began broadcasting in 1964. A few years later, however, the channel was still struggling to establish a clear identity and attract a large enough audience to justify its existence. To rectify this problem, "it was felt that the channel needed a prestigious programme, an 'event', in order to raise its profile and attract new viewers" (Cooke 2015: 91). The answer was *The Forsyte Saga* (1967), a twenty-six-episode serialisation of John Galsworthy's series of novels published between 1906 and 1921.

The Forsyte Saga successfully expanded the generic boundaries of a BBC classic serial in a manner that paved the way for an adaptation of *The*

Tenant of Wildfell Hall soon afterwards. As befits the genre's educational associations, classic serials tended to be shown during the Sunday "teatime slot" and, for many decades, were intended for a family audience (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 24). Unlike those programmes, *The Forsyte Saga* was broadcast on Saturday evenings, and the decision reflected "a shift in the treatment of classic novels from early evening educational programming to a stronger emphasis on drama and sometimes a more daring choice of material" (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 24). The serial (and its source material) can be included in a more flexible definition of neo-Victorian, because the adaptation signifies the BBC's willingness to present the 'other' side of the Victorians. One episode, for instance, includes – what was then – a frank depiction of marital rape that acknowledged the mental and physical suffering of many middle-class Victorian women (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 24-26). The series' representation of the period also resonates with other contemporaneous neo-Victorian works, including *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).⁸ A few days after the final episode of this landmark television serial aired, Conroy replied to Fry's proposal to adapt *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Brontë's novel afforded BBC2 another chance to explore more mature, unsettling subjects through its exposure of the systemic oppression experienced by many nineteenth-century women. To this end, the serial retains many key scenes from the novel that demonstrate Helen's difficulties in escaping from her alcoholic womanising husband. In the third episode, for instance, Huntingdon foils Helen's plans to abscond to America by taking away her valuables. Although not delving into the intricacies of coverture, the adaptation recognises that Brontë's novel critiques a legal doctrine that meant women were "divested of [their] autonomous legal status" after marriage (Ward 2007: 153). Another thread running throughout the serial is the awareness that the nineteenth-century marriage market turned women into commodities that men could claim, disregard or exchange. In the second episode, Huntingdon informs Helen that his friends are annoyed by their recent engagement, particularly Hargrave who intended to "marry you as soon as he had sown his wild oats" (Sasdy and Fry 1969: 'Marriage', Episode 2). The next episode features an incident in which Hargrave attempts to entice Helen to leave Huntingdon for himself. Despite her refusal, he tries to force himself upon her, and Helen (who happens to be painting) brandishes her pallet knife to protect herself. The third episode

also clarifies women's status as objects when Lord Lowborough (John Quentin) discovers that his wife, Annabella, has been unfaithful with Huntingdon. To assuage Lowborough's anger, Huntingdon offers Helen as a consolation.⁹

Here and elsewhere, the adaptation resembles and anticipates later neo-Victorian works that explore the tension between "received notions concerning the period's strict sexual codes and restrictive female roles" and the emergence of the feminist movement (MacDonald and Goggin 2013: 2-3). As in Brontë's novel, the televisual Helen is not part of any organised campaigns but her plight serves as a potent reminder of some of first-wave feminism's key concerns. Her inability to leave Huntingdon, for example, underscores why early feminist activism focused on married women's rights over their property. To the extent to which she can, Helen behaves in a manner that reveals her to be courageous and protective towards other women. Hence, Helen tries in vain to save the younger Milicent from sharing her fate of a bad marriage. Such moments emphasise that Helen seizes her limited opportunities to challenge the structural inequalities that oppressed many nineteenth-century women. Helen's actions make her an inspiring proto-feminist figure with similarities to the feisty heroines of many post-1990s screen adaptations of nineteenth-century literature, e.g. in *Middlemarch* (BBC1, 1994) or *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC1, 1995).

Additionally, the 1968-69 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* recounts Helen's narrative in a manner that lends itself to more flexible, inclusive conceptualisations of neo-Victorianism. Like the novel, the adaptation foregrounds that Helen controls the telling of her abusive marriage. Near the beginning of the second episode, a furious Gilbert (Bryan Marshall) demands answers from Helen about her close relationship with her landlord Frederick (William Gaunt). During their exchange, Helen asserts herself and criticises Gilbert for believing village gossip about the nature of her friendship with Frederick, giving him her diary to rebut such accusations. For the rest of the second episode and all of the third, Gilbert is shown sitting at his desk at Linden-Car Farm reading through Helen's journal. Helen's act turns Gilbert, and by extension the serial's viewers, into witnesses of her terrible marriage to Huntingdon and her undeserved suffering, as well as the period's invidious gender politics. The document ensures that the dissolution of Helen's marriage is told from her "ex-centric" perspective (Hutcheon 1988: 12). In this respect, the serial anticipates how

later neo-Victorian works would undertake the act of “restoring traumatic pasts to cultural memory” (Gutleben and Kohlke 2010: 31) – in this case the untold pasts of women’s marital abuse.

This production reveals the benefits of theorising neo-Victorianism more inclusively. Critics’ failure to consider this adaptation is understandable as 1968-69’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared in the wake of other, more obviously mould-breaking engagements with the Victorians, like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Such critical selectiveness, however, gives the impression that certain privileged works emerged from a vacuum rather than a larger constellation of cultural texts dealing with the legacy of the Victorians. Positioning the 1968-69 adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* alongside contemporaneous neo-Victorian examples enriches our understanding of canonical and non-canonical neo-Victorian works simultaneously. Although not as obviously innovative as other cultural response to the Victorians in the 1960s, the 1968-69 production contributed to the BBC’s efforts to shake up the cosy connotations of the classic serial. Nearly three decades later, the BBC wanted to push the genre in new directions again and turned to Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* once more.

3. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1996)

The 1996 adaptation reveals important shifts in twentieth-century attitudes towards the Victorians. Comparing it with the 1968-69 production also clarifies how the “characteristically static shooting style of earlier televised adaptations of the canon, framed by confined period sets, gives way to a much more self-consciously artistic treatment of these narratives within screen space” (Griggs 2016: 29). Indicatively, the 1996 version is much more violent, sexually explicit, and stylistically ambitious than its television predecessor. Such qualities are apparent in an invented vignette in the second episode that aims to convey the sexual haze of Helen (Tara Fitzgerald) and Huntingdon’s (Rupert Graves) honeymoon period. It mostly consists of close-up shots of him kissing his way up her midriff and pulling aside her undergarments as he whispers, “I’d like to keep you in a museum [pause]. Just for me [pause]. I’d come and look at you” (Barker and Nokes 1996: Episode 2). During this interaction, the camera mainly shows her abdomen and includes only a few brief shots of her face. The editing cuts up her body to introduce a note of menace that foretells the abuse that Helen

will later undergo at Huntingdon's hands. The visual and aural effects combine to make Helen's limbless, white-clothed abdomen look like a Classical marble torso in a gallery. The resemblance foregrounds another of the production's prominent themes: Helen's struggles as an artist.¹⁰ Her statue-like appearance and Huntingdon's words remind us that artistic women have borne the brunt of the patriarchal assumption that women exist merely to be "simultaneously looked at and displayed" (Mulvey 1975: 11). Like the earlier adaptation, the 1996 serial takes up the feminist issues in Brontë's novel but it offers a far more developed consideration of the matter of women's creative expression.

This interpretative slant and the BBC's decision to tackle Brontë's challenging novel again can be attributed to various factors, not least the institutional context. During the 1990s, the BBC still had to negotiate the challenge of producing simultaneously informative, educational and entertaining programming but under markedly different conditions thanks to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Thatcherism had attempted to "apply free-market principles to broadcasting", creating a "consumer-led culture where the broadcasters were forced to compete with an increasing number of competitors for a share of the audiences" (Cooke 2015: 172, 173).¹¹ Prior to that point, concerns about the effect of the free market on British television led to a 1988 White Paper, which suggested that public service principles could be protected by the introduction of a quality threshold. Though this proviso meant that public service broadcasting existed in principle, the solution created the problem of needing to define what constituted genuine 'quality'. During that debate, two ITV programmes were "repeatedly invoked to carry the meaning of quality television": *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) (Brunsdon 1990: 84). Neither was based on a 'classic' work of literature, but both represented ITV's encroachment onto the territory of the classic serial most associated with the BBC, which had spent most of the 1980s making other types of drama (Giddings and Selby 2001: 77). Hence, the BBC spent much of the 1990s recouping its reputation for creating prestigious but popular literary adaptations to fulfil the new terms of its public service commitments. Classic serials made at this time are notable for their employment of "filmic devices" such as long, slow shots, 'invisible' editing and 'naturalistic' acting "in order to give a sense of artistic 'seriousness' to the programme" (Cardwell 2002: 34). During this period,

moreover, the organisation looked beyond its usual standbys of Austen and Dickens and selected several nineteenth-century novels “only recently considered as part of a canon of classic works of literature” to be source material for classic serials (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 101). Among those works was Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The conditions that produced both adaptations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* underscore that a more fluid conceptualisation of neo-Victorianism requires the field to engage more thoroughly with the media industries that produce neo-Victorian culture. In many cases, rigid definitions discourage such analysis through the unspoken assumption that ‘genuine’ neo-Victorianism is often incompatible with commercial success. While most critics acknowledge the money-making potential of neo-Victorian culture, even of canonical works like A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990), they tend to display a degree of discomfort, not to say queasiness with that fact. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, for instance, take a mostly inclusive approach but still differentiate between neo-Victorian novels and novels that are merely “meeting a market demand” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 23). When theorising screen adaptations, they are even more suspicious about whether such projects are “seeking to provide a new angle on the nineteenth century” or simply trying to “make a fast buck” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 232). This sort of interrogation indicates reluctance to consider the neo-Victorian screen works’ production contexts in sufficient depth while failing to recognise “literature’s seedy commercial identity” (Whelehan 2012: 289). Moving beyond such prejudices, however, will enable the field to grapple with the complex interconnections and influences that comprise neo-Victorian culture.

In the case of the 1996 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the BBC evidently desired to tap into a wider fashion for women-driven literary film and television adaptations and dramas set in the nineteenth century. Many such works featured spirited anachronistic heroines, whose narratives culminated in and bound together seemingly “[post]feminist empowerment with erotic fulfilment” (Brosh 2008: 127). Trying to capitalise on this trend, the BBC made a number of extraordinarily successful adaptations centred on energetic, opinionated heroines, including *Middlemarch* (BBC1, 1994) and *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC1, 1995). Such productions were also concurrent with and drew on a spate of ambitious artistic nineteenth-century novel adaptations and Victorian costume dramas made by feminist

filmmakers.¹² Those filmmakers included Jane Campion, the writer and director of the commercially profitable and critically lauded *The Piano* (1993). *The Piano* is one of the few screen texts to attract significant attention from neo-Victorian critics and has firmly entered the neo-Victorian canon (see, e.g., Primorac 2018: 115-122). An art-house movie that became a “cross-over success” (Vidal 2012: 126), *The Piano* provided a useful model for the BBC when the institution was trying to produce a ‘quality’ neo-Victorian drama that appealed to a wide audience in a competitive media marketplace.

The success of *The Piano* led the BBC to see new potential in the youngest Brontë sister’s overlooked novel. A tale of a woman who supports herself as an artist after leaving an abusive husband, Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* enabled 1990s television makers to create a production that recalls the plot and some of the themes explored in Campion’s neo-Victorian film.¹³ Through overt allusions to Campion’s work, the adaptation positions itself as a similarly “artistic, feminist, woman-orientated” production (Cardwell 2002: 191). In the third episode, for example, Helen can be seen painting at the seaside before she chases her son beside the water. The set-up echoes a key moment in *The Piano* when Ada (Holly Hunter) plays her piano on the beach while her daughter dances to the music. In terms of its palette and *mise-en-scène*, the serial looks darker and moodier than the BBC’s previous production of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) or ITV’s *Emma* (1996), an Austen adaptation first broadcast on the same night as *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*’s last episode.¹⁴ Television critics, moreover, noted the 1996 screen version’s complexity and resistance to costume drama clichés while comparing it to *The Piano* (Sierz 1998: 24). This reception underscores that 1996’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was recognised as part of a perceptible phenomenon in the 1990s for revisionist engagements with Victorian literature and culture.

The feminist revisionary aspect of the production is most apparent in the handling of the artist plot in Brontë’s source material. Through its heroine, Brontë’s work explores the difficulties that the woman painter must negotiate as a figure who disrupts the “proper flow of aesthetic desire, placing it in the hands of the female subject rather than relegating women to the role of the desired object” (Losano 2008: 44). The men in the novel rarely give as much attention to Helen’s artworks as to Helen herself. During Helen and Huntingdon’s courtship, for example, he interrupts her

when she is painting in the library. After a quick inspection, he informs Helen that he would fall in love with the female figure in the painting “if I hadn’t the artist before me” (Brontë 1996: 160). Their interactions underscore how the Victorian world was one “structured by sexual imbalance”, in which the act of “looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 1975: 11). In the library scene and in many other incidents, Helen’s bodily presence distracts and prevents male characters from examining and appreciating her work, thereby implicitly negating both the female viewpoint and women’s artistic capabilities.

Similarly to Brontë’s novel, the 1996 adaptation draws attention to Helen’s inability to evade male eyes, particularly in its interpretation of the novel’s artist plot. As in the novel, the televisual Huntingdon interrupts Helen in the library in the second episode. When he enters the room, he dynamically circles a static Helen before coming up behind her and making a brief performance of looking at her painting but mostly examining her body. Mirroring his movements, a tracking shot simultaneously revolves around Helen, so that she remains caught between his gaze and the gaze of the camera. A similar ensnarement occurs in the first episode when Gilbert takes Helen to sketch a landscape. A tracking long shot shows Helen sitting in solitude, until Gilbert walks into view and stands behind her, looming over her shoulder and looking downwards. Once again, Helen is suspended between two gazes. In a hostile manner, she states, “I don’t care to be observed”, and though he agrees to stop, his eyes immediately glance back to her (Barker and Nokes 1996: Episode 1). In both scenes, the adaptation foregrounds the male characters’ inability to envision any scenario other than one in which Helen “holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey 1975: 11).

Yet the 1996 adaptation is an ambitious work that sought to do more than simply transpose the novel’s representation of Helen’s difficulties to the television screen. That aim is clearly evident in the influence of *The Piano* and other neo-Victorian works that delved into the complexities of women’s conflicting desires for erotic fulfilment and creative expression. In Champion’s film, the character Baines (Harvey Keitel) purchases Ada’s piano and allows her access to her instrument in exchange for the opportunity to gaze at and fondle her body. In the beginning, the representation of Ada’s playing renders the viewer complicit with her unwilling objectification by Baines. That theme is most apparent in a scene

which shows her sitting at the piano in a state of partial undress with her hair tied up in an intricate style to expose her neck and upper back. Yet her eroticisation becomes less straightforward when she enters into a consensual sexual relationship with Baines, a development that enables the film to offer a more nuanced portrayal of women's desire and of the politics of the gaze. More specifically, feminist filmmakers like Campion explore the "convergence of visual and narrative pleasures" with its potential to construct "a specifically feminine position, which is active and mercurial" (Vidal 2012: 160).

The 1996 adaptation attempts something similar. As discussed, Helen is uncomfortable with Gilbert's roving eyes when he takes her on sketching trip but the next scene shows that her feelings have changed. Occurring midway through the first episode, the scene opens with a shot of the nape of Helen's neck where she is presented in a virtually identical pose to Ada in *The Piano*. The camera moves around Helen to reveal that she is sitting at her easel, while encouraging the examination of her body. At this point, Gilbert enters to make it apparent that the shot initially corresponded with his perspective, rendering the viewer complicit with his gaze. Yet the scenario differs from other moments of the protagonist's objectification. In the many other instances when the camera circles Helen, the quickness of the movement creates the sense that she is either losing control or being entrapped. The slower motion here suggests her lack of panic and consensual invitation of the gaze, an impression reinforced by her flirtatious repartee with a respectful Gilbert and her revealing costume, which exposes her décolletage (in contrast to her high necklines in previous scenes). The dialogue and the actors' performance make clear that Helen has come to enjoy what Laura Mulvey has termed her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1975: 11, original emphasis). As Belén Vidal remarks, recent adaptations and costume dramas have increasingly sought to engage with "the formative narratives of feminism – the struggle for women's self-expression, the identification between women artists now and then – while filtering them through the politics of romance" (Vidal 2012: 128). The 1996 screen version participates in this broader neo-Victorian trend, while resisting the taint of 1990s 'victim feminism', which Brontë's literary representation of female trauma might evoke.

The theme of women's conjoined erotic/artistic self-expression is absent from the earlier adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which

predates many of the obvious influences on the 1996 screen version. Such differences underscore that neither production can be extricated from the wider fashions for (re)interpreting, (re)discovering and (re)visioning the Victorians in the 1960s and 1990s. Yet neo-Victorian studies will not be able to theorise or even appreciate the importance of contemporary cultural contexts until it refrains from arbitrarily demarcating neo-Victorian works on the basis of highbrow 'quality' and popular mass cultural productions.

4. Adapting *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Problems and Solutions

Made nearly thirty years apart, the two BBC adaptations enable us to appreciate the changing trends in neo-Victorian culture over the twentieth century via their contrasting approaches to re-interpreting Brontë's novel for television. In particular, the productions dealt differently with the novel's epistolary elements and the second competing plot that draws attention away from the primary plot of Helen and Gilbert's courtship. To solve this issue, the 1968-69 and 1996 television versions used strategies indicative of their respective cultural moments. The earlier adaptors' approach reflects the expectation that a BBC classic serial maintain the appearance of 'fidelity' towards its source material. Although expectations of faithfulness had not entirely disappeared in the 1990s, the later adaptation diverges more frequently from the novel, privileging a very different expectation, namely that classic serials feature "modern sexual chemistry" (Nelson 2001: 40). This alternative requirement had a significant impact on the reinterpretation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a feminist *Künstlerroman*. The adaptors' handling of the novel's artist plot reflects the broader "context of postfeminist chick flick/lit culture in the 1990s", which frequently peddled "contradictory" narratives set within "a pre-feminist historical setting to create postfeminist fantasies of romantic emancipation" (Ascheid 2006: n.p.).

Despite their differences, both adaptations had to deal with the issue that the novel re-enacts its own reading multiple times through its embedded documents, with Gilbert's character engaged in a visually uneventful act for long sections of the primary plot. The difficulty is most apparent in the 1968-69 production, which attempts to preserve most of the individual documents in the novel (with the exception of Gilbert's framing letter to Halford).¹⁵ As outlined earlier, Helen gives Gilbert her diary at the beginning of the second episode. He returns to Linden-Car where he reads

the details of Helen's first marriage to Huntingdon, the events of which unfold over most of the second and the entire third episode. Initially, the fourth episode reverts back to Gilbert, who briefly visits Helen before learning that she has returned to her dying husband; thereafter, Gilbert only gains news of Helen from reading her letters to her brother Frederick. The production does try to enliven its representation of Gilbert's reading through various methods. In the episodes dramatising Helen's diary, the 1968-69 production inserts scenes featuring Gilbert in Linden-Car to fill in lapses in her narrative or demonstrate his reactions to Helen's shocking tale. In episode three, for example, parallel editing switches between the two temporal frames to portray Gilbert responding to the dramatic revelation that Frederick is Helen's brother.

Contrastingly, the 1996 production solved the problem of Gilbert's static reading by omitting most of the epistolary devices apart from Helen's diary. Gilbert again receives the journal at the beginning of the second episode, much of which he spends reading. Yet in a major divergence from the novel plot, the third episode commences with Gilbert's discovery of Helen's return to Grassdale and an invented episode in which he pursues her. Once he learns of her departure from Wildfell Hall, Gilbert takes up the diary to inform himself – and by extension the viewer – about the breakdown of Helen's marriage and her escape from Huntingdon. This narrative is relayed through flashbacks until the episode switches to the 'present' to reveal Gilbert reading of Helen's decision to leave Huntingdon. The revelation galvanises him to follow her, and he is shown agitatedly perusing the rest of the journal in a carriage. Gilbert only finishes the diary as he arrives in Grassdale, where he fails to convince Helen to abandon the ailing Huntingdon. These changes inject new excitement into what is a short and sober meeting between Helen and Gilbert in the novel. In so doing, the screen episode introduces movement, dynamism and passionate intensity into Gilbert's otherwise passive reading.

The 1996 adaptation invents Gilbert's journey to Grassdale to combat another major issue with its source material: his role as Helen's reader means that the two are estranged for most of Brontë's novel. Consequently, the television characters have limited opportunity for shared screen time and their separation further defuses the romance plot and its potential erotic charge. In the 1968-69 production, Helen and Gilbert part at the beginning of the second episode. After he finishes her journal in the

fourth and final episode, they have one brief meeting but do not see one another again until they are permanently reunited. The 1996 adaptation overcomes the problem to some extent by having Gilbert come to Grassdale, thus managing to briefly incorporate him into *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* second plot. Nevertheless, Helen again refuses to accompany Gilbert, and the two remain separated until Huntingdon dies and she returns to Wildfell Hall a free woman. In spite of the substantial changes from the novel, Gilbert and Helen in the 1996 version are distanced from each other for most of the third episode, which mainly consists of scenes of the Huntingdons in the present and from earlier in their marriage (before Helen escaped to Wildfell Hall). Gilbert and Helen's lack of contact could have been largely avoided if Brontë had dispensed with the novel's embedded documents or if the adaptors had followed Moore's advice and had the heroine "tell the young farmer her story" (Moore 1930: 216). Such an approach would have enabled adaptors to bring the couple together more frequently in "entrancing" scenes during which Gilbert could have responded directly to Helen as she told her tale (Moore 1930: 216).

Moore identifies a further impediment for adaptors when he bemoans that the heroine's lack of "voice" and "gestures" diminishes her bodily "presence" on the page (Moore 1930: 216). Initially, Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* provides only Gilbert's descriptions of his encounters with Helen and his reports of gossip about her until Helen's diary gives us her self-representation in written form. Although regarded as a technical error by Moore, the epistolary devices deliberately foreground key themes in the novel. A victim of domestic abuse, Helen chooses "not to put her body on the line" and presents "only her inked words" (Stewart 2009: 120, original emphasis). Even in the sections of the novel where the vulnerable heroine seems most exposed, textual screens hide her from sight. After she returns to the dying Huntingdon, for instance, the literary Gilbert can only gather information about her from the "provokingly unsatisfactory" letters that she sends to Frederick (Brontë 1996: 455). That obstruction makes further sense if we recall that Helen is a painter who struggles to evade the male gaze. For Antonia Losano, the inclusion of Helen's diary transposes "a product of her aesthetic production (her diary) between her body and the male viewer or reader" (Losano 2008: 75). In other words, her journal enables her to direct attention away from herself as an "artwork (tangible appreciable object) to artistic producer" (Losano 2008: 75). That

strategic redirection is responsible for Moore's lament that no "man of letters" had "laid his hand upon [Brontë's] arm" to prevent her from making her heroine absent during the telling of her tale (Moore 1930: 216). Moore's frustration with Brontë's incorporeal heroine is so extreme that he imagines a "little romance of intervention", in which a male figure of literary authority manhandles the author until she renders her female character's body more readily available to the desiring and possessive (male) gaze (Losano 2008: 74).

While the female protagonist's absence in the novel appears to have been a minor issue for the earlier adaptors, the 1996 adaptation takes significant steps to ensure that Helen's character has more presence on screen. When the 1968-69 production was made, dramatising Helen's diary seems to have produced a sufficiently visible heroine. The 1996 adaptors, however, introduced various changes to give a fuller picture of Helen's location and physical existence at moments when her novelistic counterpart remains hidden. This contrast is most apparent after Helen returns to her dying husband in Grassdale. In the novel, neither Gilbert nor the reader can be sure of Helen's whereabouts or her feelings towards him until the final chapter. As a result, the literary Gilbert comes to believe incorrectly that Helen is engaged to another man. Unlike the novel, the 1996 adaptation directly represents Helen after she returns to Huntingdon in episode three. Rather than relaying Gilbert's incomplete perspective and mediated knowledge, the adaptation concentrates on her and instead tells "Helen's story completely from her point of view" (Sierz 1998: 26). For that reason, the serial reverses the misunderstanding, so that Helen is the one who becomes convinced that Gilbert is marrying someone else. On her return to Wildfell Hall, as Helen's carriage goes past the church, she sees Gilbert kissing Eliza Millward (Miranda Pleasence), who is clad in a wedding dress. A crestfallen look upon her face, Helen continues her ride without realising that Gilbert was congratulating Eliza on her marriage to someone else. In this way, the later screen version consistently provides far more direct access to Helen and her state of mind than Brontë's novel. In Carmen Pérez Rúa's view, the production might occasionally give us Gilbert's perspective but "Helen, because of her omnipresence on screen and the frequent adoption of her perceptual point of view, remains a primary focalizer" (Pérez Rúa 2015: 47). Accordingly, the adaptation presents the protagonist's "circumstances from her own perspective as, first an amateur, and then a

professional artist in a way that shows keen awareness of the formidable obstacles women found within the social context” (Pérez Ríu 2015: 45). To an extent, I agree with Pérez Ríu because the 1996 production does recognise the practical barriers that prevented most nineteenth-century women artists from pursuing professional careers.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Pérez Ríu’s discussion overlooks how the television character’s greater immediacy creates significant contradictions in the production’s self-conscious effort to present itself as a feminist reinterpretation of the *Künstlerroman* plot in Brontë’s novel.¹⁷

Those contradictions manifest most clearly in the screen portrayal of Helen as an artist who is entrapped by – but sometimes willingly acquiescent to – the male gaze. While the serial emphasises Helen’s perspective, it also exemplifies how “neo-Victorian costume dramas’ representations of Victorian women offer the fulfilment of postfeminism’s impossible goals, with the added frisson of engaging with sexual taboos and corsets” (Primorac 2018: 7). As mentioned, one scene opens with a shot of the nape of Helen’s neck in order to foreground her erotic feelings, while betraying the visual and thematic influence of *The Piano*. Yet Campion’s work conceptualises the relationship between the heroine’s desire and creativity in a very different way. Ada’s music is celebrated in visually stunning scenes accompanied by Michael Nyman’s bestselling score. The presentation of her piano-playing elucidates that the film positions “a woman artist, Ada, in the traditionally male role of the Romantic artist” (Knight 2006: 26). Consequently, she makes a great sacrifice when her pursuit of romantic and sexual fulfilment damages her ability to play her instrument. In contrast to Ada, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* heroine is “a hard-headed commercial painter rather than a Romantic genius” (Franklin 2013: 127).¹⁸ Her television counterpart takes a similar pragmatic attitude; as Helen flirts with Gilbert over her easel, she tells him that she paints “in the public taste. Pretty pictures devoid of feeling. Don’t forget, this is how I earn my living” (Barker and Nokes 1996: Episode 1).¹⁹ Perhaps fittingly, the adaptation rarely provides viewers with the opportunity to appreciate or examine what Helen has created in detail.²⁰ This occlusion presents no problems apart from in scenes where the camera objectifies Helen to imply that she is an Ada-like character. The tensions that arise around Helen’s “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” are less developed and not interwoven with key themes as in *The Piano* (Mulvey 1975: 11, original emphasis). Hence, Helen’s body

merely serves to overshadow her artworks. That overshadowing occurs even though the 1996 production suggests elsewhere that the heroine wants to escape the male gaze. Inadvertently, the adaptation reproduces what it also critiques: the objectification of the women artist.

The 1996 adaptation reconfigures *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a romance to rectify what Moore identified as the novel's major flaw, its ruining of a potentially "passionate and original love story" (Moore 1930: 216). Moore's reservations make sense if we remember that various theorists of the novel have argued that the courtship plot is central to the genre. Influentially, Ian Watt argued that "the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage" (Watt 1974: 148-149). Such a description suits *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s primary plot that results in Gilbert and Helen's marriage. Yet that narrative becomes disrupted with the inclusion of various documents that ensure that Helen's unhappy union with Huntingdon – a sort of anti-romance – becomes the central concern of the novel. As Kelly Hager observes, "the embedding of a failed marriage plot within this apparently conventional courtship plot suggests that [the] traditional plot is being questioned from the inside out" (Hager 2010: 29). The novel deliberately frustrates the romance, even as it facilitates another union. That frustration accounts for much of the difficulty of adapting Brontë's text for the screen.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall undermines and displaces the conventional courtship plot to make itself an improbable adaptation project. In contrast to the youngest Brontë sister's novel, other nineteenth-century works are adapted far more frequently because they comply more readily with existing film and television genres. Indeed, such privileged texts have often been "instrumental" in the development of those genres in other media due to the fact that "the relationship between film/television and literature is one of reciprocity" (Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 92). Jane Austen's frequently adapted *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), for instance, is easy to rework for the screen as its author helped create the "formula" for the romantic comedy (Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 93). Similarly, *Jane Eyre* is one of the "founding texts" of Gothic romance with the result that new screen versions tend to conform with the conventions it helped establish (Yiannitsaros 2012: 289). Of course, *Jane Eyre* does feature a failed marriage, but Jane and Rochester's happier union ultimately triumphs. In

contrast to *Jane Eyre*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* takes pains to ensure that the narrative of the Helen's first marriage has to be "read alongside the courtship plot that frames it, as a cautionary tale" (Hager 2010: 29). To bring the courtship plot to the fore, the 1996 adaptation extensively restructured the novel's narrative. Such efforts attest to the fact that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* resistance to established novelistic conventions renders it similarly resistant to the conventions of the classic serial, a genre associated with romance.

Many of the same difficulties apply to *Wuthering Heights*, but Emily Brontë's novel is easier to adapt because it lacks *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* epistolary devices. Like Anne Brontë's work, *Wuthering Heights* undermines its central courtship narrative through a complex double plot, which is challenging to compress into the standard film length of two hours. To deal with that issue, many film versions de-emphasise or entirely omit the novel's second generation of characters. The 1939 adaptation, for instance, has been memorably described as forcing the novel "into a conventional Hollywood mold, the story of the stable boy and the lady" (Bluestone 1966: 99). Such an approach cannot work for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because the embedded documents ensure that Helen and Gilbert's courtship is impossible to extricate from the plot concerning her marriage to Huntingdon. As such, reconfiguring *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to prioritise the courtship plot requires adaptors to introduce significant changes. Revealingly, the 1996 version diverged from the novel in a calculated fashion that resulted in a less disembodied, sexier interpretation that privileged the romance at the expense of the more overtly feminist, female artist plot. In light of these tensions and contradictions, it seems hardly surprising that only television adaptors with the luxury of three or four episodes have had the tenacity to try and interpret this novel's convoluted double plots for the screen, in spite of the postmillennial vogue for neo-Victorianism.

5. Conclusion: Reconceptualising Neo-Victorianism

In the 1960s and the 1990s, the decision to adapt Brontë's convention-defying novel appears to have arisen from the unique set of demands placed upon the BBC. At these separate points in its history, BBC adaptors seem to have chosen Brontë's novel because its various difficulties also provided opportunities to create prestigious and original 'quality' television that

distinguished the BBC from its competitors. More specifically, Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* features mature unsettling themes and a de-emphasised courtship plot that enabled its adaptors to "challenge dominant conceptions" of the classic serial (Butt 2012: 167). Such conceptions, however, could not be fully exploded as the productions had to still entertain viewers and avoid veering too wildly from the organisation's usual fare. Hence, the earlier production tackles unusually dark subjects but nonetheless attempts a 'faithful' interpretation of Brontë's novel in keeping with the approach of other classic serials at the time. The subsequent adaptation is a more overtly inventive interpretation that, nevertheless, sought to contain and reconfigure the more formally disruptive aspects of its source material. Although neither example radically overturned generic conventions and viewer expectations, the two television versions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were a way for the BBC to demonstrate its ability to do what it had always done best even as it innovated within certain confines.

On both occasions, adaptors must have been nudged towards seeing the novel's adaptive possibilities by the broader cultural context that included several contemporaneous and successful neo-Victorian works. The BBC appears to have turned to Brontë's novel to capitalise on wider neo-Victorian fashions. The two adaptations underscore how views of the Victorians shift in ways that are incremental, "never linear", and "exist side by side with more traditional representations" (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 203). The field can only comprehend such developments if it broadens its conceptualisation of neo-Victorianism.

When I undertook this cultural excavation, my aim was to critique the emergence of a canon within neo-Victorian studies. I am not arguing for the expansion of the canon to include these two adaptations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* on the basis of 'quality'. Rather, I am convinced that the adaptations are worth studying because – not in spite – of the fact that neither represents the 'best' or most 'original' instances of neo-Victorian adaptive practice. Indeed, the two productions are highly derivative of other works and, at least from a feminist perspective, could have undertaken more daring revisions of Brontë's literary source. Yet the television versions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deserve analysis because both exist within a larger web of neo-Victorian culture, interlinked with market forces, and tell us more about different cycles of neo-Victorianism. By taking such an approach, I have been indirectly contesting the many definitions of neo-

Victorianism that often inadvertently construct or perpetuate “distinctions between high and low culture” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014: 8). Those distinctions deserve particular scrutiny as they exist in tension with the widespread acceptance that neo-Victorianism is a postmodern phenomenon (see Kohlke 2014: 29).

Such efforts to broaden the conceptualisation of neo-Victorianism do risk the term losing its specificity. However, this tendency can be counteracted by recognising the distinctiveness of different decades’ responses to the Victorians. Throughout my contextual analysis of the 1968-69 and 1996 BBC versions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I have pointed out the adaptations’ similarities and connections to other canonical neo-Victorian works. My approach illustrates and helps construct a sense of the ongoing – though not necessarily ‘progressive’ – evolution of neo-Victorianism. The field has reached a crucial turning point: it needs to re-interrogate its reasons for differentiating ‘neo-Victorian’ texts from other forms of cultural engagement with the Victorians.

That discussion has already begun to take place. As Cox notes, the concept of neo-Victorianism is “metamorphosing into a more expansive and inclusive category. Currently, the two clearest trends are the increasing acknowledgement of the significance of popular culture, and the inclusion of global texts” (2017: 122). Cox does issue an extensive warning about the “neo-imperialistic” dangers of this global expansion but otherwise endorses greater inclusivity, especially the embrace of more popular texts (Cox 2017: 123). I welcome this shift towards the popular but think it also needs to tackle the matter of periodization simultaneously. Of course, some of the earliest neo-Victorian criticism responsible for canonising earlier twentieth-century texts focused on novels like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Yet the field has offered only limited consideration of less self-consciously postmodern works that are contemporary to or even predate Fowles’s novel. My discussion of the two adaptations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* supports Kohlke’s exhortation that the field should be actively trying to recover material “missed during earlier surveys” (Kohlke 2014: 32). Such overlooked texts are key to achieving a fuller comprehension of “neo-Victorianism as a developing thread throughout post-Victorian society” (Whelehan 2012: 273). For those reasons, my analysis draws attention to the fact that the BBC hoped that Brontë’s novel could be turned into a classic serial with popular appeal at different periods of the broadcaster’s history in

response to different neo-Victorian fashions prevailing at the time. As the novel's past adaptations indicate, the field requires a more expansive and flexible conception of neo-Victorianism that considers 'popular' media adaptations and 'canonical' or 'literary' fictions on a level of equality, within a shared field of mutual influence.

These two adaptations do not appear to be the end of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s recurrent residence at the BBC. In a public talk about the Brontë biopic *To Walk Invisible* (BBC1, 2016), the screenwriter and television auteur Sally Wainwright has mentioned that the BBC has commissioned her to work on another potential television production of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.²¹ If made, that adaptation will be released in 2020 to coincide with the bicentenary of the youngest Brontë's birth. Wainwright has an impressive pedigree for such a project. She previously created *Sparkhouse* (BBC1, 2002), a gender-flipped version of *Wuthering Heights* set in the contemporary period, and was responsible for *Happy Valley* (BBC1, 2014 –), a gritty, female-led police drama series that makes significant allusion to the same novel. Whatever Wainwright does with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, her version for the BBC is likely to be another distinctive neo-Victorian interpretation of Brontë's novel drawing on the postmillennial contexts of its production.

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Notes

1. For a discussion of the problems associated with the term 'classic', especially when applied to television adaptations, see Cardwell 2000: 2-3, 108-109.
2. Its first episode, 'Recluse', has not been preserved and I have based my discussion of it on a shooting script held at the BBC Written Archives. The remaining three episodes can be viewed by appointment at the BFI Library, London (UK).
3. Scattered examples can be found (e.g. several chapters in Benjamin Poore's 2017 edited collection *Neo-Victorian Villains: Adaptations and Transformations in Popular Culture*). A notable exception is Caterina Maria Grasl's *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrection: The Victorians in Historical Middlebrow Fiction, 1914-1959* (2014).
4. In her monograph *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* (2010), Dianne Sadoff turns her attention to screen adaptations of Victorian fiction from the 1930s onwards but refrains from using the term 'neo-Victorian' in her study. Meanwhile, Iris Kleinecke-Bates has offered a temporally wide-ranging discussion of the Victorians on television and explicitly engages with neo-Victorianism in *The Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005* (2014). Nevertheless, she does not apply the label 'neo-Victorian' to earlier examples like *The Forsyte Saga* (1967).
5. This lack of fame can be largely attributed to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* initial reception and subsequent publication history. For further discussion, see Hargreaves 1972.
6. The first edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appears to have sold out in six weeks, quicker than either *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* (Barker 2010: 666), and whereas "*Jane Eyre* had from the beginning found both adaptors and imitators, *Wuthering Heights* at best seemed to inspire glancing references" (Stoneman 1996: 144). Prior to Goldwyn and Wyler's adaptation, *Wuthering Heights* made the transition from page to screen only once in 1920. Contrastingly, the first film adaptation of *Jane Eyre* was in 1909 and a further nineteen cinematic and television versions had been made by 1939 (see lists of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* derivatives in Stoneman 1996).
7. Those words are often attributed to John Reith, the BBC's first Director General, who also stipulated that the corporation had a duty to "lead, not follow" its audience, "but it must not lead at so great a distance as to shake off pursuit" (Reith qtd. in Briggs 1995: 54).

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8. Like Fowles's novel, the serial tackled the issue of Victorian sexuality in a newly explicit manner, and it strove to present "the Victorian age as a period of social constraint and hypocrisy" (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 27).
 9. Writing in relation to the novel, Ward notes that another "symptom of a common law in dire need of reform" is that "the jurisprudence on this particular matter, the offering of an unwilling wife to other men, was not held to represent a form of mental cruelty" (Ward 2007: 156).
 10. For another discussion and contrasting interpretation of this adaptation's presentation of the woman artist, see Pérez Rúa 2015.
 11. Amongst other changes, the 1990 Broadcasting Act imposed a new quota on the BBC for productions made by independent companies, and the organisation was significantly restructured in order to make its programmes more "cost-effective" (Cooke 2015: 173).
 12. Generic labels are a contentious issue. I have chosen the term 'costume drama' because it connotes "a refusal of historical or literary authenticity" and "the pleasures and possibilities of masquerade" (Pidduck 2004: 4). Such a description is fitting for these particular films.
 13. *The Piano*, moreover, was originally intended to be an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* and retains various similarities to that and other novels by the Brontës, including *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.
 14. For further discussion of the competitive scheduling and contrasting reception of the 1996 adaptations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Emma*, see Sierz 1998: 22-24.
 15. In all likelihood, the adaptors were unaware of the existence of the framing letter to Halford. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the vast majority of editions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were missing the letter to Halford and other important sections of the novel. For further discussion of these omissions, see Hargreaves 1972: 113-119 and 1977: 115, 117-119.
 16. Like the novel, the 1996 adaptation draws attention to the disadvantages that Helen faces as a woman artist. The first episode, for example, makes clear that "Helen, like many other nineteenth-century women painters, does not sell her products directly, but requires masculine intervention in the market" (Losano 2008: 77), with her brother acting as her agent.
 17. Meanwhile, Aleks Sierz has briefly commented on how the serial's "voyeurism" smacks of "apolitical post-feminism" but not in relation to the production's artist plot (Sierz 1998: 25).
 18. Early in the novel, for example, she disabuses Gilbert of any notion that she might paint for "amusement" rather than profit (Brontë 1996: 47).

19. Pérez Ríu rightly notes that Helen's "statements allude to her conscious professionalization and highlight Helen's pride and self-possession in spite of (or possibly because of) her descent on the social scale after her flight in exchange for freedom and independence" (Pérez Ríu 2015: 52). Nonetheless, she fails to discuss the tension between the dialogue and Helen's visual objectification within the scene.
20. Pérez Ríu makes the valuable point that Helen's paintings tend to be featured as props or as an aspect of the *mise-en-scène* that provide insight in the character's emotional state. For while the adaptation "hardly ever exploits [Helen's] pictures in ways that might convey the impression of artistic quality", her amateurishly daubed landscapes do evoke the "wild and suggestive" moors associated with the Brontë sisters (Pérez Ríu 2015: 52). Such visuals temper the production's efforts to portray her as a professional who produces paintings not for self-expression but in order to meet marketplace demand.
21. Wainwright was speaking at an event entitled 'An Evening with Sally Wainwright and Ann Dinsdale' at the Ilkley Literature Festival, April 19, 2017.

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