

**The Hauntings of Charlotte Brontë:
Review of Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (eds.),
*Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and afterlives***

Catherine Paula Han
(Cardiff University, Wales, UK)

Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (eds.), *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and afterlives*

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017

ISBN: 9781784992460, £75 (HB)

Charlotte Brontë might have died in 1855, but her cultural influence is alive and kicking. In 2016, the bicentenary of her birth was celebrated with a diverse array of neo-Victorian activities. One of the most prominent was *Charlotte Great and Small* (2016), an exhibition curated by the neo-Victorian novelist Tracey Chevalier in her role as the Brontë Parsonage Museum's creative partner. Additionally, Brontë was the subject of multiple critical commemorations, including Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne's edited essay collection *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and afterlives* (2017). Published as part of the Manchester University Press book series 'Interventions: Rethinking the Nineteenth Century', the volume describes itself as "engaging with current interests in Victorian afterlives with the aim of demonstrating the richness, variety and complexity of Charlotte Brontë's cultural impact" (p. 3).

As this stated aim makes clear, the volume shares many concerns with neo-Victorian studies and several chapters are in explicit dialogue with the field. Essays are split into two groups, both of which speak to existing and emerging trends within neo-Victorian studies. The collection's first half is entitled 'Ghostly afterlives: cults, literary tourism and staging the life', and its contributors consider the evolving, competing myths surrounding Brontë. Much of the material covered speaks directly to the prevailing and

Neo-Victorian Studies

11:2 (2019)

pp. 228-237

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2628735>



current neo-Victorian interest in life narratives and writing or biofiction, biodramas, and biopics (see, e.g., Heilmann 2018). Neo-Victorian scholars will also be interested in the texts addressed and approaches taken in the second section: ‘Textual legacies: influences and adaptations’. As is to be expected, there are several essays on the cultural progeny of *Jane Eyre* (1847), but the volume also includes chapters analysing the cultural and popular fortunes of Brontë’s lesser-known works, including her poetry. Another praiseworthy aspect is that numerous contributors tackle different forms and media – such as theatre, web series, book illustrations and erotic makeover novels – that reveal the magnitude of Brontë’s legacy. Illustrating this point further is Kimberley Braxton’s appendix ‘Charlotte Brontë’s cultural legacy, 1848-2016’. Although a fully comprehensive list would be impossible to compile, Braxton’s contribution (and the entire essay collection) is a treasure trove of primary texts, in which neo-Victorian scholars will be able to find many gems for future study. In this respect, *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and afterlives* should spur neo-Victorian studies to resist its earlier inclination to “identify and define a neo-Victorian canon”, a tendency that has led to the privileging of “‘literary’ fiction over and above other genres and mediums” (Cox 2017: 102, 104).

Most excitingly, many essays raise timely questions about the periodisation of neo-Victorian studies. Once, it was confidently assumed that the first examples of neo-Victorianism were Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969). More recently, various critics have urged the field to re-theorise earlier cultural engagements with the Victorians as neo-Victorian (see, e.g., Whelehan 2012, Kohlke 2014). Support for this position can be found in the many chapters in the collection dealing with the modernist period. As will be discussed, Emma Liggins and Amber Pouliot respectively propose that interwar texts inspired by Brontë either anticipate or can be defined as prototypical examples of neo-Victorianism. Such claims are potentially fruitful due to wider critical interest in rethinking the relationship between the Victorians and modernists,¹ an enterprise that could simultaneously reveal intriguing new directions for neo-Victorian studies but also be guided by the field.

Also noteworthy is the fact that many individual contributions (and the volume as whole) do not maintain a strict separation between the Victorian era and later periods but discuss them in conjunction. With this

fluid approach, the collection is able to investigate the cultural legacy of Brontë and her work from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, thereby providing context and background for twentieth- and twenty-first-century neo-Victorianism. Hence, Regis and Wynne's 'Introduction: Picturing Charlotte Brontë' gives a brief history of Brontë's portraits and other visual representations from ca.1833-4 to 2016, an overview that adumbrates the intertwinement of the desires "to 'see' and 'know' the author" (p. 26). In so doing, they illustrate the uncertainty about Brontë's physical appearance in order to reflect on the larger limitations of our knowledge about her. While Regis and Wynne are at pains to emphasise that the historical Brontë remains an enigma, they also shed light on her transformation into a cultural icon whose dual – seemingly conflicting – identities as a woman and writer still provoke fascination. That observation serves as an excellent foundation for many of the contributors' discussion of Brontë's cultural legacy.

Wynne sets that endeavour in motion with her opening essay 'The "Charlotte" cult: writing the literary pilgrimage from Gaskell to Woolf', an insightful survey of writers and literary tourists' shifting perceptions of Brontë in the fifty years after her death. A key strand of the analysis explores how Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) continues to shape later affective engagements with Brontë as well as the Haworth-centred tourism industry that continues to thrive. Demonstrating the complexity of Gaskell's work, Wynne reveals that this biographical portrait is the wellspring for the highly simplified, still dominant cultural perception that Brontë was physically and imaginatively trapped in Haworth.

Yet subsequent essays reveal the existence of alternative narratives about Brontë. In 'The path out of Haworth: mobility, migration and the global in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and the writings of Mary Taylor', Jude Piesse considers the intellectual, literary, and mutually beneficial exchanges between Brontë and her schoolmate Mary Taylor. A feminist who migrated to New Zealand where she was involved in various business ventures, Taylor inspired the character of Rose Yorke in *Shirley* (1849) and was herself a published author. This chapter posits that one of Brontë's "most radical legacies" can be located in Taylor's fiction and travel writing (p. 60). In Piesse's view, Brontë's conclusions about middle-class women's opportunities for global mobility and employment were further developed in Taylor's travelogue *Swiss Notes* (1875) and her novel *Miss Miles* (1890).

Dominant versions of Brontë's life are also challenged in Charlotte Mathieson's essay 'Brontë Countries: nation, gender and place in the literary landscapes of Haworth and Brussels'. Mostly concentrating on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century but also taking in the near present, Mathieson considers the tradition of literary pilgrimages in Brussels to sites associated with Brontë and her protagonist Lucy Snowe from *Villette* (1853). According to Mathieson, tourists' accounts construct the Belgian capital as "a space where an alternative narrative unfolds, one that offers possibilities of reading the crafting of female independence through cosmopolitan interactions" (p. 80). Additionally, the chapter argues convincingly that these visitors allow "alternative discursive formations of Brontë as female writer", which enable "her legacy to be considered from a multiplicity of national perspectives" (p. 92). Contesting the myth that Brontë was a paragon of domesticated Victorian femininity, both Mathieson and Piesse's essays align with neo-Victorian studies' recent moves towards adopting a more global perspective (see, e.g., Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015).

Similarly thought provoking are the next two essays, which reveal that characteristic neo-Victorian tropes and themes were already present in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century responses to the Brontës. Firstly, there is Amber Pouliot's chapter 'Reading the revenant in Charlotte Brontë's literary afterlives: charting the path from the "silent country" to the seance'. Pouliot excavates the roots of the ubiquitous representations of the Brontë family as either haunted or haunting figures. To explain this phenomenon, Pouliot draws attention to how Gaskell – another recurring apparition in this volume – injected supernatural and gothic elements into Brontë's life in the process of semi-fictionalising the other author. Pouliot goes on to trace how the Brontë's association with spectres persisted into nineteenth-century commemorative poetry and interwar biofictions (see p. 112). As mentioned earlier, Pouliot argues that the interwar material should be categorised as neo-Victorian, and she is clearly aware of the substantial amount of neo-Victorian scholarship on ghosts (see, e.g., Arias and Pulham 2010). Nevertheless, her engagement with this critical corpus is transitory and could have been further developed.

Somewhat surprisingly, no references are made to neo-Victorianism in Amber K. Regis's 'Charlotte Brontë on stage: 1930s biodrama and the archive/museum performed'. Such an exclusion is a shame in view of

Regis's argument, which explicates the profusion of theatrical plays about the Brontës in the decade before the Second World War. Many of these playwrights were responding to advances in scholarship and tourism (especially the opening of the Parsonage Museum in 1928) that provided new access to the Brontës' home, as well as making accessible an expanding body of texts and relics. Although often authorising certain versions of the family's lives, these dramatic works simultaneously display keen and frequently meta-theatrical awareness of "those ineluctable gaps, elisions and errors that permeate the historical record, textual and material, rendering provisional any attempt to write or perform a life" (p. 117). Highly self-reflexive, these plays exhibit clear affinities with later postmodern texts and could be employed to add nuance to current understandings of the development of neo-Victorianism, particularly neo-Victorian biofictional writing, over the course of the twentieth century.

In the volume's next section on the cultural influence of Brontë's works, Anna Barton considers Brontë's literary legacy within her own period in "Poetry, as I comprehend the word": Charlotte Brontë's lyric afterlife'. Brontë has never achieved widespread recognition as a poet and, at first glance, her poems have had only very limited dissemination beyond the 'Bell brother's' *Poems* (1846), a publication that famously sold only two copies (Barker 2010: 589). Barton not only challenges such a view but also the distinction between Brontë's prose and poetry, exploring the complex implications of Brontë's incorporation of original songs and poems into her novels, especially within the context of Romantic and Victorian discourses.

More extensive engagements with neo-Victorianism as a concept are undertaken in the remaining essays. The subsequent chapters delineate Brontë's literary legacy beyond her own oeuvre, with two chapters devoted to the cultural impact of *Villette* (1853). First of all, in 'The legacy of Lucy Snowe: reconfiguring spinsterhood and the Victorian family in inter-war women's writing', Emma Liggins argues that modernist women writers discovered feminist succour in Gaskell's biography and Brontë's literary works. In particular, Brontë's life and her novels enabled fictional and auto/biographical writers – such as Winifred Holtby and May Sinclair – to reimagine the figure of the spinster in more affirmative terms. For Liggins, these modernist works engage with Brontë's Victorian legacy in a similar manner to subsequent neo-Victorian texts' self-conscious acts of "(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians"

(Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). Unfortunately, the chapter refrains from developing this thread in greater depth, but it does serve as a useful jumping off point for scholarship interested in expanding the temporal scope of neo-Victorian studies.

Benjamin Poore's 'Hunger, rebellion and rage: adapting *Villette*' also tackles the afterlife of Lucy Snowe. Brontë's final novel has never been adapted for cinema, and the two television versions are missing and presumably lost. Rather than "lamenting" this lack, Poore examines the narrative's reinterpretation for radio and theatre since the late 1980s (p. 183). At the beginning, he considers the novel's critical fortunes before identifying the main difficulties that Brontë's text presents to adapters. The rest of the chapter investigates the different approaches taken when reinterpreting Brontë's text for the airwaves and the stage. What becomes clear is that many adapters' decisions indicate an effort to render the misanthropic heroine and the notoriously inconclusive (as well as potentially depressing) plot palatable to contemporary audiences. Yet as the chapter aims to demonstrate, "the solutions that radio and television adapters have found can force us into a reassessment of *Villette*'s power and distinctiveness" (p. 183). While Poore does not mention neo-Victorianism, his chapter reveals neglected avenues that could be explored in future research, including on neo-Victorian radio dramatisation.

One essay that does deploy neo-Victorianism as a critical framework is Alexandra Lewis's 'The ethics of appropriation; or, the "mere spectre" of *Jane Eyre*: Emma Tennant's *Thornfield Hall*, Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* and Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights*'. This piece enlarges our understanding of the impact of Brontë's most well known novel while musing on some of the ethical implications of neo-Victorian fiction's invocation of the Victorians to construct contemporary identities. Comparing three different but highly self-conscious novels, the chapter analyses the ramifications of different authors' efforts to recover silenced voices as well as the inevitable muzzling of other aspects of Brontë's text. Such concerns remain a prominent area for neo-Victorian studies, although the chapter could have referred to more current scholarship. For this reader, the essay exhibits rather dated suspicions about the 'worth' of some contemporary reimaginings of *Jane Eyre*. The conclusion ends with a plea for Brontë's novel to be recognised not only as a source for "twenty-first-century reworkings of the literary past" but "also on its own terms: as vibrant 1847

original, ensnared by no neo-Victorian net” (p. 217). Those anxieties sit oddly with the postmodernity of the works under discussion and neo-Victorian studies’ recent reflective turn in relation to “the perceived hierarchical ‘value’ of various types of fiction” (Cox 2017: 102-103). Aside from this issue, however, the chapter offers careful readings of the individual contemporary works’ allusions to and rewritings of *Jane Eyre*, especially in the case of *Sixty Lights*.

Jane Eyre owes much of its continuing cultural presence to the novel’s chilling deracination of Bertha Mason and the powerful reconstruction of the same character’s subjectivity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Even prior to the publication of Rhys’s novel, the first Mrs Rochester underwent many notable creative and critical permutations, as Jessica Cox details in “‘The Insane Creole’: the afterlife of Bertha Mason’. Sketching out notable trends in portrayals of this troubled and troubling figure, the chapter surveys a huge number of the texts from across a range of media, dating from 1848 until 2014. Taking a broad-brush approach, the essay anchors itself by concentrating on three particularly telling aspects of Bertha’s representation: her mental illness, her physical appearance, and her gory death. These foci enable the discussion to distinguish itself from prior scholarship on Bertha’s afterlives (see, e.g., Stoneman 2008; Mann 2011), especially as regards Cox’s consideration of the difficulty of depicting Bertha’s demise. At various points, the chapter had the opportunity but abstained from referring to neo-Victorianism. Nevertheless, it constitutes a useful overview and reference point for any discussion of this character’s manifold cultural resurrections.

In her contribution, Cox observes that *Jane Eyre*’s cultural significance continues to grow due to the internet, and Monika Pietrzak-Franger further discusses this facet of the novel’s afterlife in ‘*Jane Eyre*’s transmedia lives’. The chapter examines the web series *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre* (2013-14) and its surrounding online community, which sprawled across many platforms. Positioning the series within the context of other neo-Victorian phenomena, Pietrzak-Franger uncovers how this media landscape affords new opportunities for engaging with Brontë’s text (although she is careful not to exaggerate the viewership’s interactive participation). Ultimately, Pietrzak-Franger suggests, *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre* reveals “that the relevance of Brontë’s novel today seems to lie in its propensity to accommodate discussions about both gender and self-

expression” (p. 254). Beyond those conclusions, this essay is interesting as a case study of an ‘unfaithful’ adaptation that de-emphasises the source material’s courtship plot and recasts Jane Eyre as an artsy, contemporary vlogger who reflects on her process of self-mediation. This essay, therefore, underscores how the field could benefit from increasingly less rigid definitions of neo-Victorianism.

More evidence for the necessity of this shift appears in Louisa Yates’s “‘Reader, I [shagged/beat/whipped/f****d/rewrote him]”: the sexual and financial afterlives of *Jane Eyre*’. Yates examines the fashion for ‘erotic makeover’ novels – literary classics republished with the insertion of sexually explicit encounters – that appeared in the wake of E. L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), another work with significant allusions to Brontë’s best-known novel. Most intriguingly, the chapter situates Clandestine Classics’ *Jane Eyre* alongside D. M. Thomas’s *Charlotte* (2000), a sequel to Brontë’s text and Rhys’s novella mentioned in many early efforts to theorise neo-Victorianism (see, e.g., Gutleben 2001). This approach enables Yates to make the argument that erotic makeovers appropriate neo-Victorian critical discourse to describe their texts as recovering the repressed lost histories of the ‘other’ Victorians’ sexuality in order to disguise their market imperatives. Concurrently, this essay calls attention to how academic discussion has had a history of overlooking the financial underpinnings of neo-Victorian fiction. Despite overstating the critical reluctance to acknowledge the commercial motivations of many neo-Victorian works, this chapter illustrates the necessity of considering the mutual influences and exchanges between canonical but also less esteemed neo-Victorian phenomena. In this respect, Yates’s essay stands out as an ambitious intervention in the field.

Overall, neo-Victorianists will find much to admire and ponder further in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and afterlives*. From a critical perspective, most of the essays helpfully signpost but do not tread potentially significant paths for neo-Victorian studies. As discussed, many contributors acknowledge without fully pursuing promising roads of enquiry that intersect with important debates in the field. When viewed as a whole, furthermore, the collection appears to miss a trick by not offering any overarching analysis of Brontë and her works’ association with ghosts and haunting. Almost without exception, the chapters either sustain a discussion of or provide further examples of Brontëan revenants. Hence the volume

would have benefitted from an attempt to theorise those phantoms in either the introduction or an afterword, particularly if it had drawn on existing and sophisticated work on neo-Victorian spectrality.

To some degree, such criticisms are mitigated by the fact that the collection was primarily intended to memorialise Brontë's cultural legacy on an important anniversary. The volume's many allusions to neo-Victorianism still manage to enlighten us about the current state of the field. Most obviously, *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and afterlives* creates a bridge between neo-Victorian studies and the subfields in Brontë studies devoted to tracing the Brontë family's ever-proliferating mythologies and the cultural dissemination of their works. Although these strands of Brontë research and neo-Victorian studies arose contemporaneously,² they initially overlapped less than might be expected.³ References to neo-Victorianism in Regis and Wynne's collection, however, indicate that the two areas have become increasingly enmeshed, while also demonstrating that the concept of neo-Victorianism has very much achieved broader critical acceptance.

Notes

1. For instance, the conference *Transitions: Bridging the Victorian-Modernist Divide* was held at the University of Birmingham (UK) on the 9th and 10th of April, 2018.
2. Both subfields came into existence after Patsy Stoneman's ground-breaking *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (1996) and Lucasta Miller's equally influential *The Brontë Myth* (2001).
3. For instance, the term 'neo-Victorian' never appears in Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann's edited collection *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (2007).

Bibliography

- Arias, Rosario and Patricia Pulham (eds.). 2010. *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barker, Juliet. 2010. *The Brontës* [1994], rev. edn. London: Abacus.

-
- Cox, Jessica. 2017. 'Canonization, Colonization and the Rise of Neo-Victorianism', *English: Journal of the English Association* 66:253, 102-123.
- Gutleben, Christian. 2001. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Heilmann, Ann. 2018. *Neo-/Victorian Biographilia and James Miranda Barry: A Study in Transgender and Transgenre*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise. 2014. 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal', in Boehm-Schnitker, Nadine and Susanne Gruss (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*. New York: Routledge, 21-37.
- Mann, Paisley. 2011. 'The Madwoman in Contemporary Adaptations: Depictions of Rochester and Bertha in Recent Jane Eyre Film and Television Adaptations', *Brontë Studies* 36:2, 152-162.
- Miller, Lucasta. 2002. *The Brontë Myth*. London: Vintage.
- Primorac, Antonija and Monika Pietrzak-Franger. 2015. 'Introduction: What Is Global Neo-Victorianism?', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8:1, Special Issue: *Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation: Transnational Dissemination of Nineteenth-Century Cultural Texts*, 1-16.
- Rubik, Margarete and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann. 2007. *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Stoneman, Patsy. 1996. *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*. London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Stoneman, Patsy. 2008. 'Jane Eyre's Other: The Emergence of Bertha', in Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells (eds.), *The Brontës in the World of Art*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 197-211.
- Whelehan, Imelda. 2012. 'Neo-Victorian Adaptations', in Cartmell, Deborah (ed.), *A Companion to Literature, Film, Adaptation*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 272-291.