

Madness, Monks and Mutiny: Neo-Victorianism in the Work of Victoria Holt

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Abstract:

Despite authoring almost thirty Victorian-set novels between 1960 and 1993, Victoria Holt (a pseudonym of Eleanor Hibbert) has received little critical attention. This article examines four of Holt's novels and reveals key ways in which she 'talks back' to Victorian literature, specifically to *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Moonstone* (1868), *The Woman in White* (1860) and 'The Children's Hour' (1860). In particular, it investigates Holt's neo-Victorian use of the asylum in her second novel, *Kirkland Revels* (1962), which highlights neo-Victorian anxieties about the use of the asylum to control women. In doing so, the article draws attention to the contemporary scandal of consigning unmarried, pregnant, yet sane women to Victorian-built asylums, exploring these socio-political anxieties in the context of the Victorian Lunacy Acts, the 1957 Percy Report and the 1959 Mental Health Act. Holt wrote for the mass market and, in examining her work, this article intervenes in the debate about what should, and should not, be included in the neo-Victorian 'canon'.

Keywords: asylum, Indian Mutiny, *Kirkland Revels*, madness, *Mistress of Mellyn*, sensation fiction, *The India Fan*, *The Shivering Sands*, transgressive children, Victoria Holt.

Eleanor Hibbert (1906-1993) wrote thirty-three novels between 1960 and 1993 under the name of Victoria Holt, most of which are set in the Victorian period. This article argues that she merits consideration as a neo-Victorian author and investigates the issues impeding her inclusion in neo-Victorian criticism. Hibbert was born into a working-class family in West Ham and left school at sixteen, as it was necessary for her to earn a living (Burgess 2004: n.p.). However, at an early age she "determined [...] to be a writer" (Walter 1993: 2). In the 1930s, she started writing long, serious novels which she described as "[p]sychological, hopefully significant studies of contemporary life" (Lord 1974: 70). These proved too long for the market and were not published. Over the next two decades she adapted as a writer, developing a variety of pseudonyms for a range of published novels. Of

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these, the historical novels written under the name of Jean Plaidy were the most successful, until her agent suggested she should write a new series of novels under the name of Victoria Holt.¹ Their first-person female narrations, together with their Victorian settings, were designed to capitalise on the continuing popularity of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Although the concept was driven by market considerations, it nevertheless resonated with Holt's interests. In an interview, she revealed: "Dickens, Zola and particularly the Brontës and nearly all the Victorians influenced my writing" (Holt qtd. in Harris 1981: n.p.). The Holt novels, published between 1960 and 1993, were phenomenally successful worldwide. By the end of Holt's life, her agent estimated sales at 75 million, with translations into over twenty languages. Holt's novels, often described as "Gothic romances" (Punter 2004: 279), were influential as well as successful. Diana Wallace, who has turned serious critical attention to Holt as a historical and Gothic author rather than a neo-Victorian writer, credits her with developing "the modern Gothic novel" (Wallace 2005: 133), while *The New York Times* calls her a "pioneer in the romantic suspense or Gothic genre" (Lambert 1993: D25). Marion Harris remarks that "[i]n 1960, no one was writing or publishing novels of romantic suspense", but by the time Holt's fourth novel was published, "the phrase 'romantic suspense' had become part of the language and an important category in book shops" (Harris 1981: n.p.). The scale of the modern Gothic phenomenon was so great that, in 1974, "five paperback publishers ran off approximately 23 million copies of almost 175 gothic titles by 100 authors" (Ewing 1975: BR3). The popularity of Holt's novels continued after her death in 1993, and eight of her novels are still in print.

Despite being regarded as an author of Gothic romance or romantic suspense, Holt herself described her work in distinctly feminist terms. She stressed that her books were about "women of integrity and strong character" who were "struggling for liberation, fighting for their own survival" (Holt qtd. in Lambert 1993: D25). The use of the word "liberation" is particularly significant: feminism was known as the Women's Liberation Movement in the mid-twentieth century, particularly between the 1960s and the 1980s. The link between the modern Gothic and feminism is recognised by Wallace, who argues persuasively that "[t]he image of the captive woman and the language of the Gothic are central to the development of pre-feminist thought and language in the early 1960s"

(Wallace 2005: 133). As also demonstrated by Holt's later work, much of which features imperilled or imprisoned heroines, this convergence of feminism and Gothic continued into the later twentieth century also and, indeed, into the twenty-first century.

By reviving the Gothic novel, Holt broke away from the trend for contemporary realism. Maurice Weaver, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, noted the Gothic's innovations with approval: "It clears the brain of all that kitchen-sink realism. A period setting, a drab house heavy with foreboding, a wisp of creeping mist ... I find it all most refreshing" (Weaver qtd. in Dalby 1993: n.p., original ellipsis). Holt's novels rendered the Victorian age highly visible from 1960 onwards, with displays in book shops and reviews in national newspapers and magazines. This made the Victorian era a part of the *zeitgeist* in the decade that subsequently saw the publication of two of the most discussed neo-Victorian texts, often regarded as 'founding' neo-Victorianism: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

Referring particularly to *Mistress of Mellyn* (1960),² *Kirkland Revels* (1962), *The Shivering Sands* (1969) and *The India Fan* (1988), I argue that Holt's novels "talk back" to Victorian fiction (Davies 2012: 1), and, indeed, to nineteenth-century discourses and ideologies. I further argue that Holt's texts display clear neo-Victorian tendencies in that they "(co)-articulate" socio-political concerns in neo-Victorian fashion (Boehm-Schnitker 2014b: 5). In doing so, this article intervenes in the debate about what should, and should not, be included in the neo-Victorian 'canon'.

1. Talking back to *Jane Eyre* in *Mistress of Mellyn*

Cora Kaplan has identified a desire "to memorialise and renew for the modern reader – the melodramatic excess of nineteenth-century fiction" (Kaplan 2007: 15) as an element of what she terms 'Victoriana'. Holt's novels can be interpreted as part of this Victoriana as they "renew" *Jane Eyre* for the modern reader. This is made explicit in the suggestion from Holt's agent that she should write a "*Jane Eyre*-type-novel" (Walter 1993: n.p.). It is also evident in criticism, with Wallace describing Holt's collective novels as "a rewriting of *Jane Eyre*" (Wallace 2005: 133). Wallace goes on to note the "unashamed intertextual debts to the Brontës" more generally, rather than just to Charlotte (Wallace 2013: 132). Similarly, Joanna Russ focuses on Holt's first-person female narrators, describing

them as “latter-day Jane Eyre[s]” (Russ 1973: 668). However, Holt’s novels go beyond a simple rewriting of *Jane Eyre* or Victorian melodrama. They show “a palpable desire to respond to the Victorians in some way, to answer back to the society and culture of this era” (Davies 2012: 1). It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed analysis of Holt’s work as a whole. Instead, it will examine four of her novels to reveal key ways in which she talks back to Victorian literature and society, and it will investigate how this talking back changes over time.

Holt’s first novel, *Mistress of Mellyn*, was published in 1960. Talking back to *Jane Eyre* and Victorian society, *Mistress of Mellyn* takes the theme of madness from Brontë’s novel and rewrites it as a reaction to the limited opportunities open to women. These limitations are foregrounded in the novel’s first sentence: “There are two courses open to a gentlewoman when she finds herself in penurious circumstances [...]. One is to marry, and the other to find a post in keeping with her gentility” (Holt 2008: 1). The narrator, Martha Leigh, has no chance of marrying and so she takes the latter option, travelling to an isolated Cornish manor house in order to become a governess to Connan TreMellyn’s daughter. In contrast, Celestine Nansellock hopes to take the first option by marrying Connan, who is a widower. When Celestine sees that Connan is attracted to Martha, she feels threatened by her perceived rival for his affections. Celestine’s obsessive need to fulfil the expected role of a Victorian woman, that of wife and mother, leads her directly into madness, the full extent of which is only revealed at the end of the novel, when she tries to murder Martha by trapping her in a priest’s hole located in an isolated part of the house. Finding herself locked in, Martha discovers that she is not alone: the skeleton of Celestine’s previous victim, Connan’s first wife, is also there. The murder of Connan’s wife had gone undetected, because it was presumed she had run off with her lover and had been killed together with him in a train crash. Fortunately, however, Martha is rescued because Celestine was seen, by chance, entering the chapel with Martha and leaving without her.

Martha, Celestine and Connan’s wife are all examples of trapped women. Martha is trapped physically in the priest’s hole, while Celestine is trapped psychologically by both society’s expectations that she will marry, and by her own desire to fulfil them. Similarly, Connan’s dead wife was trapped by family expectations and social conventions: she had entered into an arranged marriage with Connan although she was in love with, and

pregnant by, another man. Holt's use of female entrapment is a continuing feature of her novels. In this she anticipates later neo-Victorian Gothic novels, such as those of Sarah Waters, whose fiction "suggests that all its women are in prison, either physically or psychologically" (Hughes-Edwards 2016: 134). The same could be said of Holt's novels. Arguably, in the case of both writers, female confinement becomes quasi 'code' for the still limited progress achieved in female emancipation and equality at the respective times of the texts' production.

Martha escapes her physical trap and enters into a marriage with Connan of her own free will; that is to say, without responding to either societal or familial pressure. The conservative nature of the ending is given more depth when the epilogue shows that the novel is set in two time periods. It is revealed that Martha has been narrating the story of her life to her great-grandchildren. This both mimics and extends *Jane Eyre*, in which, at the end of the novel, Jane reveals that she is narrating events from a distance of ten years (Brontë 2006: 519). The greater length of time that has elapsed in *Mistress of Mellyn* between the narrated events and the time of narration suggests that Martha is telling the story from the vantage point of the twentieth century. Although no specific date is given in *Mistress of Mellyn*, it is even possible that Martha is narrating events in the year of the novel's first publication, 1960, and reflecting on her youth at the end of the Victorian period. If she had been born in 1875, for example, she could have met Connan in the 1890s and gone on to recite her history in 1960. She would then have been eighty-five, a plausible age for a great grandmother.

Martha's survival therefore shows the continuing presence of the Victorians in the twentieth century, which is a recurring theme in neo-Victorian fiction. Both Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940) and Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1953), for instance, use dual time periods. In *Fanny by Gaslight*, the elderly Fanny narrates the story of her early life to a man she meets by chance in a hotel. In Laski's Gothic novel, the central female character falls asleep on a Victorian chaise-longue, bought in a junk shop, and wakes up to find herself trapped in the body of a Victorian woman. Later texts which employ the same device include brief sections of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). The use of dual time periods in these novels suggest that these diverse authors are all, in different ways, reflecting on the complex interaction between the Victorian era and the

contemporary present, and its sometimes insidious survival, especially in terms of gender politics, into the mid and late twentieth century.

In *Mistress of Mellyn*, the continuity between the two eras draws attention to the continuity of the problem highlighted in the novel's first sentence; that is, the limited opportunities or lack thereof open to women. This was a major concern for the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and found expression at their first national conference in Oxford in 1970. Two of the activists' first demands were for equal pay and for equal educational and job opportunities. Tapping into contemporary concerns in this way suggests that the extraordinary success of Holt's novels is due to their contemporary relevance as well as their entertaining narratives.

2. Talking Back to Sensation Fiction in *Kirkland Revels*

Whilst Holt's novels were set in motion by a desire to rewrite *Jane Eyre*, they were also influenced by later Victorian sensation fiction. Holt claimed that her novels were "the sort of book[s] that I loved to write, because I had read so much of Brontë's, over and over again, and Wilkie Collins, and all that sort of thing" (Holt qtd. in Bennett 1991: 3). Her second novel, *Kirkland Revels* (1962), shows the influence of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), which is evoked in its setting on the Yorkshire moors and the name of its narrator, Catherine. Arguably, however, *Kirkland Revels* is impacted to an even greater extent by the sensation genre. The narrative includes "murder, [...] illegitimacy, impersonation, eavesdropping, multiple secrets [...] and] amateur [...] detectives", plot elements that Winifred Hughes identifies as the "familiar devices" of sensation fiction (Hughes 1980: 173). In particular, it shows the influence of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-1860): in both novels, the asylum is a threatening place where women can be unjustly incarcerated.

Kirkland Revels' use of the asylum continues the themes of female madness and entrapment first voiced in *Mistress of Mellyn*. It also extends them, particularly by talking back to Victorian sensation fiction's trope of the asylum. The novel follows its first-person narrator, Catherine Corder (later Rockwell) as she goes to live in her husband's manor house, Kirkland Revels, where he apparently commits suicide by jumping from a balcony. Catherine is not convinced that his death is suicide and sets out to prove that he was murdered. Her investigations uncover a range of family secrets. She discovers that her mother is not dead, as she supposed, but confined in a

private asylum. As she delves deeper, she discovers that the woman in the asylum is not her biological mother but rather her adoptive mother and also her aunt. Catherine's parentage is not the only family secret to be revealed. The local doctor, Deveril Smith, believes himself to be the unacknowledged, illegitimate son of Catherine's wealthy father-in-law. Deveril feels that he should be the heir of Kirkland Revels, but is prevented from inheriting by his illegitimacy. His social aspirations lead him to murder Catherine's husband, the legitimate heir, so that his own daughter may marry the next heir, Luke Grantley, thereby ensuring her social advancement. Through his daughter he too will then gain social advancement and an ownership – by proxy – of Kirkland Revels.

In this novel, Holt, like Collins before her, links the Gothic and sensational forms to show the prevalence and continuity of abusive patriarchal power as it passes from religious authorities into the hand of the medical profession. This is made clear when Deveril, the doctor, disguises himself as a monk, with the two forms of patriarchal control therefore becoming embodied in one and the same person. Disguised as a monk, he appears only to Catherine, often at night and in secluded places in the hope of convincing her that she is imagining things, so that she will fear she is going mad and enter his asylum voluntarily. In this situation, where religious power creates a vulnerability in women, they turn to the new form of patriarchal power, that is medical power, for protection. This image of protection, however, is a sham. The novel suggests that once Deveril has Catherine in his power, he can ensure that her child, if it is a boy and therefore eligible to inherit, will not survive.

Catherine, however, mounts a resistance to this patriarchal control. She refuses to believe that the monk is imaginary and relies on her own skills and rational judgement to uncover the mystery. In effect, she becomes a detective, in a manner reminiscent of *The Woman in White*'s Marian Halcombe, and unmasks the monk to reveal the 'mad doctor'. This symbolises the passing of institutionalised, patriarchal power from the church to the medical profession. Whilst the authority of the church waned in the twentieth century, the medical profession remained a source of power not only in Victorian society but also in Holt's contemporary society, so that the novel becomes an implicit critique of unequal gendered power relations persisting in her own time.

In writing *Kirkland Revels*, Holt was giving voice to one of the most important political debates of her day. Issues surrounding mental health were to the fore in the period immediately preceding the publication of *Kirkland Revels*, after a long period in abeyance. They had been a prominent matter of concern in the Victorian era, leading to the Lunacy Acts of 1845, 1853 and 1890 but, after 1890, political attention waned. It did not revive in any significant degree until the Percy Report of 1957, which highlighted concerns around four main areas: Victorian buildings; Victorian legislation which allowed compulsory and wrongful detainment; the blurring of boundaries between asylums and prisons; and the vulnerability of women in the face of patriarchal medical and legal power (particularly in matters concerned with pregnancy and childbirth). The latter three also feature prominently in Holt's novel. When the Report was published, it resulted in "a number of broadcasts and television programmes and [...] serious articles in the Press" which reawakened public interest (Robinson qtd. in UK Parliament 1957a: Column 71 n.p.). Arguably, *Kirkland Revels* drew on these articles in much the same way that sensation novelists used the headlines from their contemporary newspapers: to create sensational plots of contemporary relevance and to suggest that similar incidents, no matter how far-fetched, could actually (still) happen. Because of the widespread publicity surrounding the debate, Holt's original readers were likely to be aware that the novel was expressing political concerns in literary form.

Whilst the Victorian setting suggests that Holt's novels are a form of historical fiction, I argue that they are instead an early self-conscious expression of neo-Victorianism. When the neo-sensation form started to be recognised in the 1990s, Kelly Marsh noted that neo-sensation novels "are not historical novels. They are actually concerned with the present, and the influence of the past upon that present" (Marsh 1995: 102). *Kirkland Revels* highlights the influence of the past on the present in its multi-generational narrative. In addition, it foregrounds that same influence in relation to concerns about the role, function, and fitness for purpose of the asylum in modern society. Many of the asylums still in use in the 1960s were built in the nineteenth century. They were, by that time, out of date and starting to decay. The location of the asylum in *Kirkland Revels* suggests it was modelled on the real-life High Royds Hospital, as both were near Keighley in Yorkshire. Built in 1888, High Royds was still in use as an asylum in 1962, not closing until 2003. Contributing to their forbidding appearance

was the fact that, architecturally, many Victorian-built asylums looked like Victorian-built prisons. Both were designed to keep people in and were surrounded by high walls to prohibit escape. Showalter notes the “sense that the asylum was a prison masquerading as a retreat becomes prominent in the sensation fiction of the 1860s” (Showalter 1987: 102), and this is clearly mirrored by Holt in *Kirkland Revels*. Jenny Taylor explains that this theme reflects widespread social concerns in the 1860s, when sensation novelists achieved the effects they desired by “merging the fears elicited by the image of the [...] madhouse with the particular debates on the nature of confinement and insanity in the late 1850s and early 1860s” (Taylor qtd. in Marsh 1995: 108-109). Nineteenth-century scandals, such as the unjust declaration of Rosina Bulwar Lytton as mad upon her husband’s instigation, her false imprisonment in an asylum, and her subsequent release upon protests by her supporters, contributed to public fears, since no woman seemed exempt from such a potential fate.

Kirkland Revels reflects the concerns of the 1960s by talking back to Victorian sensation fiction’s interrogation of the blurred boundaries between asylums and prisons. In *Kirkland Revels*, Catherine wonders “if there was a plot afoot to make me a prisoner” in the asylum, likening it to “a prison” and expressing her fears of becoming a “prisoner” again (Holt 1964: 236, 237, 249, 309). In *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright wonders if he has “[a]ssisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape” (Collins 1999: 31). He later comes to believe that Anne Catherick’s “mother was guiltless of imprisoning her in the Asylum”, emphasising the fact that power was in male hands by adding, “A man had shut her up” (Collins 1999: 105). Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) also connects the prison and the asylum, with Lady Audley remarking on “the life-long imprisonment of a lunatic asylum” (Braddon 2012: 296), and forced by the male protagonist, Robert Audley, to atone for her crimes of bigamy and attempted murder by confinement to a private French ‘maison de santé’ rather than a public trial and jail sentence.

Holt self-consciously uses the gendered terrors of *Kirkland Revels* arising from this blurring of boundaries to reflect contemporary political concerns at the time of the novel’s production. In the 1957 parliamentary debate, Mr Norman Dodds, Member for Erith and Crayford, spoke about the conflation of asylum and prison, with particular regard to Rampton Mental Hospital: “It is called Rampton Hospital. To me it is a prison” (Dodds qtd.

in UK Parliament 1957b: Column 721 n.p.). He pointed out that its staff were members of the Prison Officers' Association and, although he acknowledged that some of the inmates at Rampton were criminally insane, he stated that it also housed "hundreds of non-criminal types" (Dodds qtd. in UK Parliament 1957b: Column 720 n.p.). The shifting boundaries between asylums and prisons were a matter of social as well as political concern; as Geraldine Bedell recalls: "For those of us who grew up in the Sixties and Seventies [...] [t]he local asylum loomed in the imagination, as it loomed in reality: a forbidding institution behind big gates [...] with people] locked up" behind them (Bedell 2002: n.p.). Of particular concern was the fact that the evidence needed to rob someone of their liberty by confining them to an asylum was much lower than the evidence needed to rob them of their liberty by putting them in prison. In the latter case, there was a legal process involving police investigations and court proceedings but, in the former case, the opinion of two doctors was considered sufficient, as had been the case in the Victorian era.

The scale of the problem of wrongful detainment was difficult to determine. However, Mr R. W. Sorensen, Member for Leyton, pointed out: "a well-known and respected publicist declared that 10,000 or 20,000 people were in mental hospitals who should not be there" (Sorensen qtd. in UK Parliament 1957a: Column 88 n.p.). This figure was challenged but not disproved. Women were particularly vulnerable. The Victorian-built asylums were geared to masculine ideas of women's place in the world, and masculine ideas of 'normal' female behaviour. This is exemplified by the already cited case of Rosina Bulwar Lytton, who was confined to the asylum on the diagnosis of two prominent Victorian doctors, John Connolly and L. Forbes Winslow, acting on behalf of her husband. It was only when Rosina's friends set up an outcry that Connolly and Forbes Winslow were forced to admit that she was not insane, resulting in her release. Forbes Winslow had originally been a reformer but, by 1859, he advocated confining women who were "sullen, wayward, malicious, defying all domestic control; or who want that restraint over the passions without which the female character is lost" (Winslow qtd. in Scull 2014: 76). His words reflected Victorian views on gender, which promoted the ideal of women's submissiveness.

Whilst women had gained the vote and some political power by the time *Kirkland Revels* was published, they were still vulnerable in the face of

male professional power. In the July 1957 parliamentary debate, Dr Edith Summerskill, Member for Warrington, emphasised this gendered precarity. Drawing attention to the fact that the Percy Report still allowed for the compulsory detainments of psychopaths, she pointed out that it did not include a definition of a psychopath. She spoke on the dangers of this omission, contending that diagnosis of this condition thus remained subjective rather than objective. She noted the particular dangers to women, stressing that a psychiatrist could claim that a suffragette who fought with the police and endured force feeding was subnormal if he “himself, perhaps, had certain emotions and certain views on feminism” (Summerskill qtd. in UK Parliament 1957a: Column 49 n.p.). Accordingly, she argued that safeguards should be introduced. Dr Donald Johnson, Member for Carlisle, agreed, but emphasised the need to learn from past mistakes and ensure that the inadequacies of the Victorian legislation were not repeated. He remarked: “We must not allow them [the safeguards] to degenerate into the mere paper protections, of which there is no better object lesson than the 1890 Act” (Johnson qts, in UK Parliament 1957b: Column 86 n.p.). The 1890 Act he was referring to was the 1890 Lunacy Act, which was then still in use. It was not repealed until the 1959 Mental Health Act, which did not come into force until November 1960.

In *Kirkland Revels*, Holt reflects political concerns about the dangers of an unequal power balance between the genders by highlighting the details of Catherine’s situation. Catherine is persecuted by Deveril Smith when it becomes clear she is pregnant. Her pregnancy is therefore a direct cause of danger to her. By using a typically female situation as a source of danger, *Kirkland Revels* highlights the gendered nature of the asylum’s threat to women. It also, specifically, reveals the contemporary anxiety surrounding the imprisonment of unmarried, ‘immoral’ women in the asylum (and/or other carceral institutions, such as the Catholic Magdalen Laundries – or Magdalen ‘asylums’ – in Ireland) because they were pregnant rather than insane. Gendered notions of acceptable female behaviour were still prevalent, relics of the Victorian age with its idea of woman as ‘the Angel in the House’ and of the Victorian sexual double standard. As Marsh points out, “the laws of the [Victorian] period governing treatments of the mentally ill [...] allowed for the attribution of madness to constitute a form of social control” (Marsh 1995: 109).

This issue of social control was still the case in the twentieth century. Pregnancy outside the institution of marriage was considered shameful. Since ‘moral defect’ was one of the legal reasons for compulsory detention, some doctors used it as a reason to confine pregnant but unmarried women. The 1959 Mental Health Act recognised that this rule had been abused, and to guard against this danger it added a clause excluding detention “by reason only of promiscuity or other immoral conduct” (Mental Health Act 1959: Part 1 Section 4 Paragraph 5). However, the 1959 Mental Health Act did not solve the problems at once, as women who had already been detained were not immediately released. The process of re-evaluation took many years and “unmarried mothers [were still] discovered in mental asylums in the 1970s, having been incarcerated there for decades” (Paton 2016 n.p.), making this an ongoing concern throughout the early decades of *Kirkland Revels*’ popularity.

Social control of women’s sexuality was not limited to incarceration. *Kirkland Revels* highlights further social anxieties when Catherine is warned that, if she finds herself in the asylum, her baby could be taken away from her “if the doctor said so” (Holt 1964: 211). This tapped into fears in Holt’s contemporary society, where women could also find themselves forced to give up their babies as a result of (male) medical power. Their “morally inexcusable” behaviour was given as evidence of a “pathological personality” and that they were “emotionally unstable”, which led to them becoming “discredited” persons so that compulsory or coercive adoption was justified (Howe 1992: 12, 14, 19, 75). Indeed, pregnancy and childbirth proved particularly vulnerable times for women. *Kirkland Revels* highlights this precariousness by revealing details of the incarceration of Catherine’s mother, who became ‘mad’ after her own baby died. She adopted Catherine, but her condition did not improve, which led to her being confined in the asylum. This too reflected Holt’s contemporary reality, where women could find themselves committed to an asylum for what would now be regarded as grief or post-natal depression.

When Deveril pretends to be on Catherine’s side, offering her safety and protection within his asylum, she is almost seduced by his apparently caring attitude. Her own father is cold and distant, and she finds herself isolated within her dead husband’s household. She thinks: “Dr Smith was offering his sympathy, and with it that particular brand of paternal devotion for which I had longed” (Holt 1964: 223). However, she rejects his

paternalism and privileges her own judgement when he tells her she is imagining things, saying: “I know someone is determined to harm me and my child” (Holt 1964: 226). She resists his assertions that she is mentally disturbed and, in a decisively feminist act, she determines to rely on her own independent strength rather than male judgment and authority. Reflecting the fact that women faced a constant struggle in the face of patriarchy, she asserts, “It was a lifetime habit of mine to fight for what I wanted” (Holt 1964: 226). The use of the word “lifetime” here reveals that life for women in a patriarchy is a continuous contest to assert themselves and their own desires. This recalls Holt’s earlier cited view that her novels were about women who were “struggling for liberation, fighting for their own survival”.

In spite of her many ordeals, luck favours Catherine, and she does not have to endure decades in the asylum after her abduction. Like Rosina, she is rescued with the help of her friends. Oppressive and coercive patriarchal power is finally routed when Deveril commits suicide, reflecting the political routing of the patriarchal power of the asylum in Holt’s own era. The 1959 Mental Health Act made provision for the closing of antiquated asylums, and for care in the community to become the predominant method of caring for the mentally ill. *Kirkland Revels* is therefore more than an entertaining read. It engages with serious matters of concern in the mid-twentieth century debate about mental health, situating the roots of the problems in the Victorian era. In particular, the novel gives literary representation to fears about the ways in which the nineteenth-century continued to haunt the contemporary committal procedures, patient assessments, and particularly gendered doctor-patient relations. In doing so, Holt’s fiction clearly aligns with neo-Victorian discourse, in which most novels make “claims for political relevance” rather than simply affording their readers “entertaining escapism” only (Kohlke 2012: 3). Holt’s novel confronts its audience with their own present as much as the past.

3. Talking Back to ‘The Children’s Hour’ in *The Shivering Sands*

Kelly Marsh remarks that “the neo-sensation novel and its Victorian ancestor [...] share an agenda: both use the formal conventions of the sensation novel to challenge popular philosophical stances in their very different historical periods” (Marsh 1995: 108). Whilst *Kirkland Revels* challenges Victorian and twentieth-century positions on women and mental health, *The Shivering Sands* challenges prevailing notions of the inherent

goodness of children. Therefore it enlarges the domestic concerns of Holt's early novels to include anxieties surrounding the family. In particular, *The Shivering Sands* talks back to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem 'The Children's Hour', interrogating the poem's equation of childhood with innocence, especially in the aftermath of the Mary Bell murder case.

'The Children's Hour' was not alone in presenting an image of childhood as innately innocent. Marah Gubar comments that "a host of critics agree" that Victorian writers constructed "childhood itself as a golden age" (Gubar 2009: 4). However, this construct ignored darker aspects of childhood in the period, and, in typically neo-Victorian fashion, it is these darker aspects that *The Shivering Sands* explores. Longfellow's poem is foregrounded when one of the protagonists in *The Shivering Sands*, "twelve or thirteen" year old Alice recites two of the stanzas (Holt 2013a: 36), focusing on the poem's idealised children pleasantly surprising their father by running into his study. Caroline Verlaine, the novel's narrator, is charmed by Alice's recital. She asks indulgently, "are you planning to take someone by surprise?" (Holt 2013a: 58). Following the benign atmosphere of the poem, the word "surprise" conjures up something pleasant and child-like, but Alice's reply is disturbing and hints at darker undercurrents. She "smiled her quiet little smile" and said "with undoubted gravity: 'I expect all of us surprise each other at some time, Mrs Verlaine'" (Holt 2013a: 58). The chilling nature of Alice's intended surprise is made explicit at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that she has murdered Caroline's missing sister by luring her onto a patch of shivering sands. The child's *appearance* of innocence thus masks a diabolical evil.³

In using the shivering sands as both title and important setting, Holt's novel also talks back to Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, which features shivering sands as one of its notable locations. The reference to Collins is emphasised when Alice says she likes Collins, whose work makes her "shiver" (Holt 2013a: 219). Both novels have unsettling echoes of real-life crimes from their own eras, which involve children who commit murder. The link between *The Moonstone* and the case of Constance Kent has been explored by Andrew Maunder and Graham Law (see Maunder and Law 2008: 96), as well as others. In 1860, sixteen-year-old Constance Kent was suspected of murdering her three-year-old half-brother. She was arrested but was released without trial, in part because the idea of a

respectable adolescent girl committing murder was deemed impossible. Elements of the case were adapted by Collins in *The Moonstone*.

Holt certainly knew of the Constance Kent murder scandal: in 1953, she published a fictionalised account of the case under another of her pseudonyms, Elbur Ford, called *Such Bitter Business* (known in the US as *Evil in the House*). In 1968, a year before the first publication of *The Shivering Sands*, a similar, real-life, modern case aroused public attention: Mary Bell murdered two young children, one when she was ten years old and the other when she was eleven. After the first murder she broke into a nursery school and left notes that claimed responsibility, but the police dismissed the notes, because they were obviously written by a child. In a key scene in *The Shivering Sands*, Caroline is blinded by the notion of childhood innocence and fails to investigate an argument between Alice and three other teenage girls, even though one of the girls, Edith, speaks in a voice which is “raised and distressed” (Holt 2013a: 104). Thinking the argument must be unimportant Caroline recounts: “I hesitated, uncertain what to do [...]. These girls all of them seemed little more than children to me [...]. My excuse is that I thought of them as children” (Holt 2013a: 104). Alice is therefore free to continue her murderous spree by killing Edith, just as Mary Bell was free to murder again. Alice’s guilt is not discovered until she attempts, and fails, to murder Caroline. The novel resolves with Alice’s presumed suicide. Caroline, having solved the mystery of her missing sister and recovered from her ordeal, is free to marry Napier, the novel’s hero. Despite this apparently satisfying ending, the novel resists closure. No one witnesses Alice’s death, which is only deduced from her disappearance and the finding of a handkerchief with her initial on it next to the shivering sands (Holt 2013a: 319). This leaves open the unsettling possibility that Alice, and the transgressive children she represents, will return to wreak more havoc and suffering.

Several of the comments made by characters at the end of the novel are remarkable in the way they explicitly voice neo-Victorian concerns, emphasising the continuing existence of things thought dead and gone. Extending this idea to literature, Napier says to Caroline: “You like everything to be neatly rounded off with Finis written at the end”, but goes on to remind her that “[n]othing is ever finished [...] what happened a hundred years ago is still having its effect on today [...]. We are caught in the shivering sands of the past. We shall never escape” (Holt 2013a: 168,

169). Implicitly, he is not only referring to events of the past, but also to literature of the past for Holt's readers: Victorian novels commonly had 'The End' printed on the final page. By reviving elements of sensation fiction, *The Shivering Sands* shows that Victorian literature is still not 'finished', and that the literature of a hundred years ago is still having its effect on contemporary literature. Since *The Shivering Sands* was published in the 1960s, "a hundred years ago" can be seen as the 1860s, which was a particularly important decade for sensation fiction, seeing the publication of the genre's three foundational texts: *The Woman in White*, Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Holt's revival of the form, and the subsequent proliferation of neo-Victorian sensation fiction, testifies to the fact that "what happened a hundred years ago [in the 1860s] is still having its effect on today".

4. Talking Back to the Indian Mutiny in *The India Fan*

Holt's later novels show a broadening of both settings and socio-political concerns. Collins remains an important influence and *The Moonstone* remains an important hypotext, presciently echoing Sally Shuttleworth's remark that in "neo-Victorian fiction, the presiding genius seems less George Eliot and more Wilkie Collins" (Shuttleworth 2014: 182). The title of *The India Fan* reveals that the novel is talking back to Collins's *The Moonstone*, and there are many similarities between the two novels. The titular India fan and the moonstone are both cursed Indian objects; both novels feature a female narrator with the unusual name Drusilla, as well as hallucinogenic drugs; and both novels are set in motion by crimes that take place in India a generation before the main events in the context of the crisis of colonialism known as the Indian Mutiny.

The India Fan is unusual (although not unique) in Holt's work, as it has a specific historical background, rather than just a general Victorian one. The novel devotes most of its second section, 'India', to the Indian Mutiny, dealing with the events leading up to it, as well as depicting the crisis itself and its aftermath. Holt imitates the triple decker novel by dividing *The India Fan* into three parts: Part One 'England and France'; Part Two 'India', and Part Three 'England'. This movement from England to India and back again inverts the movement of *The Moonstone*, which travels from India to England and back again. The inversion also reflects an inversion of the role of the outsider: in *The Moonstone*, the Indians are outsiders in England, but

in *The India Fan*, in line with neo-Victorianism's typically postcolonial inflections, the British characters are presented as outsiders in India.

The Mutiny began in Meerut in May 1857 when the Sepoys, Indian troops in the service of the British East India Company, revolted. Violence quickly spread, becoming a full-scale and very bloody revolt against the British. The Victorian response was brutal. Charles Dickens wrote in a letter that, if he were Commander-in-Chief in India, he "should do [his] utmost to exterminate the Race upon which the stain of the late cruelties rested [...] to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the earth" (Dickens qtd. in Ackroyd 1990: 799). Garrett Ziegler notes that "Dickens [...] was by no means exceptional in espousing such views" (Ziegler 2011: 150), which were shared by many of his countrymen and women. Yet *The Moonstone* resists this indiscriminate brutality and "represents a shift away from [...] an unambiguous celebration of British empire" (Munjal 2007: n.p.), thus inviting neo-Victorian writers like Holt to revisit the events via Collins and expand on his novel's complication of the discourse of imperialism.

The India Fan takes its British characters to India through their connections to the East India Company. Lady Harriet's colonial view, that "the natives are so grateful to us. And so they should be" (Holt 2013b: 199), is presented as utterly naïve: Lady Harriet never ventures beyond England and knows nothing of the true situation in India. Tom Keeping, an employee of the East India Company, who has spent a great deal of time in India, aptly remarks, "we bring trade and a better style of living. But intruders are never popular [...]. Many of them [the Indians] consider themselves to be more civilised than we are and they resent the intrusion of our foreign ways" (Holt 2013b: 240). The repetition of the notion of intrusion emphasises that the British are the outsiders and interlopers, and that they are the foreigners in India seeking to illicitly appropriate the subcontinent. Holt thus uses Keeping as a quasi mouthpiece of postcolonial revisions of the 'Mutiny' – now re-categorised by Indian historians as 'India's First war of Independence' – and critique Victorian racist supremacism.

In an act of ironic foreshadowing, two of the characters argue extensively about the English Civil War and Oliver Cromwell's place in history. Cromwell, of course, challenged the authority of the ruling classes, in the person of Charles I, during the English Civil War (1642-1649), which led to the execution of the King and a period of Commonwealth for England. The narrator, Drusilla Delany, asserts that "[i]t is difficult to

understand whether he was right or not. Some historians agree, others take the completely opposite view. [...] But your opinion on Cromwell must be your own” (Holt 2013b: 135). Holt’s deliberate placing of this discussion *before* the point in the text at which the characters become caught up in the Mutiny suggests that the crisis can be considered as a type of civil war: a civil war, not of kingdom, but of Empire. This critiques the dominant Victorian viewpoint, which saw the event as a revolt against rightful British authority by using terms such as ‘mutiny’ or ‘rebellion’. By suggesting a parallel to the English Civil War, the novel implicitly places the Indian adversaries on an equal footing in terms of authority, with neither side being depicted as automatically right. Further, it implies that views on the Mutiny, like views on the English Civil War, are inherently subjective, and that national history cannot provide an authoritative version of, or answer to, past events. This “prompts authors, readers and critics to confront the problem of historical recollection” (Mitchell 2010: 3), which almost inevitably produces different versions according to who does the remembering and what ideological purposes the recollection is meant to serve.

This notion of multiple viewpoints and differing historical recollections is picked up later in the novel, when the Mutiny is not simply represented as an act *against* the British but as an act *for* the Indians: “India was now for the Indians” (Holt 2013b: 340); “the sepoys were well trained and they were brave soldiers; and they did not fight the less boldly and skilfully because they were fighting for India” (Holt 2013b: 342). The novel does not ignore the other point of view either, showing the “bloodied bodies [of] Europeans” left lying in the streets (Holt 2013b: 336). Ultimately, however, *The India Fan* suggests there is hope for the future by developing a friendship between the narrator, Drusilla, and the ayah, who is the nursemaid to the children of Drusilla’s friend, the Countess of Tenleigh. The ayah takes Drusilla and the children to her brother’s house when the Mutiny draws near, where they remain concealed throughout the local atrocities. As a result they survive the violence. In talking back to *The Moonstone*, Holt continues to build on Collins’ movement away from the virulent Victorian condemnation of the indigene rebellion. At the same time, she critiques *The Moonstone*’s adherence to the basic precept of benevolent British rule, by recreating the colonial British as illegitimate intruders instead of the representing the Indians as malcontents without any genuine cause. *The*

India Fan therefore has claims to be read as a post-colonial text, and, more specifically, merits consideration as an early example of “neo-Victorian Mutiny fiction” (Kohlke 2010: 371).

5. Talking Back to Neo-Victorian Criticism

Given that Holt wrote so many Victorian-set novels between 1960 and 1993, it is surprising that her novels have not attracted more neo-Victorian academic attention. I want to propose that Holt’s work can be used to talk back not only to Victorian literature and society, but also to neo-Victorian criticism. Holt’s novels lend themselves to current debates about what should, and should not, be included in the category of ‘the neo-Victorian’, and about the crucial role that ‘popular’ as well as literary fiction played and continues to play in the growth of this cultural phenomenon. Admittedly, Holt’s novels vary, and not all of them are set in the Victorian period or self-consciously use the past to reflect on twentieth-century culture. Nevertheless, as demonstrated, some of her texts clearly merit further consideration for inclusion in the emergent neo-Victorian canon. They are “*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4), and they talk back to Victorian literature and society in a manner that (co)-articulates both past and present socio-political concerns.

Arguably, one of the reasons for the lack of critical attention accorded Holt’s work is what might be termed her ‘previousness’. Her novels were not regarded as neo-Victorian when they were first published, as there was no neo-Victorian discourse for which they could be claimed. Her intertextual use of Victorian sensation fiction was not regarded as innovative or relevant, since it predates the serious critical interest in sensation fiction, begun with Elaine Showalter’s influential work in *A Literature Of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1982). Similarly, Holt’s revival and adaptation of the sensation form did not attract attention, because it was only much later, with Kelly Marsh’s ‘The Neo-Sensation Novel: A Contemporary Genre in the Victorian Tradition’ (1995), that the neo-sensation novel was recognised, while today’s adaptation studies, focusing on intertextuality – what Thomas Leitch calls “Adaptation Studies 2.0” (Leitch 2017: 3) – did not emerge until the mid-1990s, following Holt’s death in 1993.

Another possible reason for Holt’s exclusion from neo-Victorian critical discourse is her popularity. Popularity has long been a site of dispute

when judging literary worth. In the Victorian era, Henry Mansel spoke scathingly about the “marketable stamp” of sensation fiction, asserting that “[t]he public want novels, and novels must be made – so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season” (Mansel 1863: 483). However, Marsh rightly cautions that “[t]o write off the sensation novel as conservative because it was popular would be to ignore some radical aspects central to the novels” (Marsh 1995: 110). By extension, this also applies to neo-sensation novels, and it is particularly pertinent to Holt. Her subjects identify and develop some of the most frequent tropes and subjects that have come to be regarded as distinctly neo-Victorian. For instance, the limited roles available to women featured in *Mistress of Mellyn* anticipate the same theme in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*; the use of the asylum to control women addressed in *Kirkland Revels* anticipates this trope in Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002) and John Harwood’s *The Asylum* (2013); the murderous child in *The Shivering Sands* anticipates the murderous child in John Harding’s *Florence and Giles* (2010); and the focus on the protective figure of the indigene in *The India Fan* anticipates Julian Rathbone’s similar use of the ayah in *The Mutiny* (2007). Meanwhile Holt’s Queen Victoria series (1972-74), encompassing four novels, pre-empts the current proliferation in neo-Victorian biofiction on page and screen, most recently ITV’s *Victoria* series (2016-2019), so far stretching to three series.⁴

Gender is also a traditional site of discrimination when discussing the quality of literature, and I would argue that it has also played a role in the reception of Holt’s novels. When examining *Jane Eyre* alongside Holt’s *Kirkland Revels* and Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), Caesarea Abartis remarks that these works “for women, about women and by women” are “subliterary” (Abartis 1979: 258). Abartis goes on to interpret the Gothic house as “a glorified domestic dwelling – that which will make the little woman of the house into the lady; it is a middle-class housewife’s dream” (Abartis 1979: 260-261). Deriding women’s literary endeavours is nothing new. Lyn Pykett points out that in 1869, Alfred Austin already declared that “there can be no question that, in the region of Art, their [women’s] influence has been unmitigatedly mischievous” (Austin qtd. in Pykett 1992: 9), and in 1904, W. L. Courtney traced the decline in art to novels written “by women for women” (Courtney qtd. in Pykett 1992: 9). Sarah Waters also highlights the role of gender in critical responses to

popular genres, proposing that “one of the reasons why the historical novel has received such poor and patchy critical attention” is that it has been “a genre dominated by women” (Waters 1996: 176). Whilst I argue that Holt’s novels are neo-Victorian rather than just historical, their Victorian setting gives Waters’s comment some relevance.

Moving into the twenty-first century, Marie-Luise Kohlke argues persuasively that some of the reasons for silencing disparate voices include “discrimination on the basis of genre, subject matter, writing style, and/or target audience”, all of which raise the “spectre of the highbrow / lowbrow divide”, which means that “mass market historical fictions [...] are dismissed *a priori* as not making the grade” (Kohlke 2014: 29). I contend that, in a discourse that valorises diversity, it is particularly necessary that diverse authorial voices should be allowed to speak – and be listened to. Currently, however, this is not yet the case, and more critical work is also needed on other popular forms, such as neo-Victorian romance novels and detective series.

As Holt’s novels appear to have been dismissed from the neo-Victorian discourse *a priori*, Kohlke’s remarks bear closer examination. Genre and subject matter are closely related, as subject matter is often the defining element of a genre. Holt’s novels are often described as a composite, including romance, such as Gothic romance or romantic suspense, and this is possibly a reason for her exclusion from neo-Victorian criticism. However, as Kohlke points out, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* and Waters’s neo-Victorian novels are all romances (Kohlke in Boehm-Schnitker 2014a: 29). Like these works, Holt’s novels are not *just* romances. They combine a much wider variety of elements, including crime (usually murder) and detection, mystery, social commentary, and historical critique. They demonstrate that genre fiction can address serious subjects in the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century, akin to the way that Victorian sensation fiction (which was also genre fiction) addressed serious subjects in the nineteenth century. Hence genre fiction should not be judged, *a priori*, as having nothing worthwhile to say.

Writing style and target audience are also areas of dispute in which Holt intervenes. She does not write in a literary style but rather employs a modern equivalent of the sensation novelists’ style, providing a compelling, page-turning read for her twentieth-century readers, just as Victorian

sensation fiction excited and absorbed its nineteenth century audience. However, I would argue that writing style is only one element of any work and that *what* is said, *when* it is said, and *why* it is said are as important as *how* it is said. In Holt's novels, the *what* constitutes a critique of Victorian fiction and society; the *when* highlights relevant sociopolitical junctures; and the *why* shows the deleterious effect of the lingering Victorian influence on contemporary mores and ideologies. Arguably, Holt's style does not outweigh these considerations. Hence her writing style should not be the sole determining factor in deciding what is, and is not, suitable for inclusion in the neo-Victorian canon.

Target readership proves an equally complex area. Holt's novels are explicitly aimed at readers familiar with *Jane Eyre*, but they are also explicitly aimed at the mass market. If target readership is to be grounds for including in or excluding certain authors from the neo-Victorian category, then Holt would be simultaneously included (for targeting at readers familiar with *Jane Eyre*) and excluded (for targeting the mass market). Heilmann and Llewellyn treat target readership in a slightly different fashion, distinguishing between readers instead of markets. They make a distinction between the "knowledgeable" and the "ordinary" reader, which they argue is essential, because of the "games-playing of the novels themselves" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 18). The distinction is moot, however: even the knowledgeable reader cannot spot the games-playing in novels that are considered, *a priori*, not to make the grade.

Viewing Holt's novels as mass market fiction has obscured the more literary aspects of her work. Her novels' self-reflexivity, their talking back to the Victorian era in order to (co-)articulate contemporary concerns, their revival of sensation fiction, as well as their anticipation of later neo-Victorian fiction and trends in their major themes, demonstrate that Holt merits serious consideration as a neo-Victorian author. By extension, Holt's novels pose an implicit challenge to neo-Victorian criticism, its selectivity and inadvertent discriminations, not only to take account of her own novels, but also of other excluded texts and authors. Her work demonstrates that diverse authors and texts need to be examined rather than being disregarded *a priori* as potential contenders. Without investigation, it is impossible to know what such texts do, or do not, offer the critical discourse. In order to properly determine their contribution, these voices, particularly Holt's, need to be heard and they require a response.

Notes

1. From here on, I refer to the author as Holt, except where special circumstances dictate the use of a different name.
2. The publication dates given are US first publication dates. UK first publication dates are typically several months later.
3. Much sensation fiction relies on this seeming vs. being opposition, as in the case of Braddon's childlike Helen Graham / Lady Audley.
4. Holt's Queen Victoria series is written under the name of Jean Plaidy. It comprises *The Captive of Kensington Palace* (1973), *The Queen and Lord M* (1973), *The Queen's Husband* (1973) and *The Widow of Windsor* (1974). They are all still in print, with the most recent editions being 2008.

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