

Introduction: Neo-Victorianism and Feminism

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In 1972, Adrienne Rich wrote that re-vision is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 1972: 18). More importantly, she claimed that this act, when viewed in retrospect, would present itself as more than just another moment in cultural history, but would distinguish itself rather as an act of survival for women. Most readers of *Neo-Victorian Studies* will be familiar with Rich’s pronouncement, which also contained a call to “understand the assumptions in which we are drenched” and which prevent us from knowing ourselves (Rich 1972: 18). Here again, it is not without significance that, for women, this drive to self-knowledge is necessarily more “than a search for identity: it is part of [women’s] refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Rich 1972: 18). These are certainly no small claims, and in the same breath Rich went on to demand that feminist writers, editors, publishers, and academics look differently at the past and recognise that literature, in particular, should be a cornerstone of this cultural revolution. Looking back, she argued, would help feminists of the 1970s to move forward.

It is perhaps no coincidence that a similar impulse can be found in the neo-Victorian fiction of that period. Quite famously, in fact, the oft-cited ur-texts of neo-Victorianism, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), both explore Victorian women’s limited roles “with fresh eyes”. Likewise, Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), in which Atwood adopts the voice of Moodie, a real-life writer and Victorian immigrant to Canada, is another example from this period of re-visionary work that seeks to re-evaluate women’s roles in the nineteenth century. Neo-Victorianism and feminism, then, have always been related endeavours in a variety of historically determined ways. One example is the neo-Victorian project of giving “historical non-subjects a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to

cultural memory” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 31), a gesture that is clearly related to second-wave feminist goals as articulated by Rich and others in the 1960s and 1970s. Referring to this historical period, Rich confessed that it was “exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful” (Rich 1972: 18). The articles contained in this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* all, in some way, tackle the relationship between the neo-Victorian aesthetic impulse and the inherent confusion, disorientation, and sometimes pain involved in re-thinking Victorian gender roles and relations against the background of various feminisms.

In this regard, many feminist critics and writers in 2013 might well yearn for Rich’s sense of exhilaration and her feeling of collective awakening. In *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, published in 2009, Stéphanie Genz admits to a

sense of intellectual fatigue and exhaustion as we seem to have run out of steam debating the state of women in twenty-first-century culture and society. Are we past the ‘post’ and/or riding a new feminist wave? Have we arrived in a brave new world or are we doomed to repeat the patterns of the last century? (Genz 2009: 2)

Yet as Genz herself shows, and as the authors in this special issue all in some way argue, the topic of contemporary feminism(s) and the state of women in society remains far from exhausted, and is all the more urgent in the present postfeminist period. Furthermore, Genz’s question – are we witnessing a new ‘wave’ or repeating past histories? – suggests that engagements with the historical past can and do continue to inform feminist thought today.

More specifically, then, this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* asks, what is the role of neo-Victorianism in contemporary feminist politics? Is the desire to return to the Victorian period “an act of survival” in Rich’s terms (Rich 1972: 18), and if so, in what sense? As many of the articles included here argue, for contemporary feminist writers, artists, musicians, performers, and academics, the Victorian period remains an important site of historical re-vision. In part, the sustained interest in the Victorian era as a locus of continued contest and revision hinges on received notions

concerning the period's strict sexual codes and restrictive female roles, such as the 'Angel in the House', that persistent female personage imagined by Coventry Patmore in 1854. More importantly, however, continued interest in the period is spurred on by the tension between such received notions and emerging Victorian institutions like the National Society for Women's Suffrage and the figure of the New Woman. In this way, the contradictory qualities of the Victorian era – best represented, perhaps, by a Queen who did not advocate suffrage – seem strikingly similar to those that shape and inform our own moment, fraught with conflicting versions of womanhood, feminism, and gender performance all of which add up to very complex and often perplexing (sexual) politics. This special issue grew out of *Neo-Victorian Networks: Epistemologies, Aesthetics and Ethics*, a two-day conference held at the University of Amsterdam in June 2012. As two of the organisers of that conference, the editors' attention was repeatedly drawn to a number of persistent issues, one of the most pressing of which was the feminist potential of neo-Victorian literature, including graphic novels, as well as the same potential of other media such as television, pop music, and on-line fan production.

The articles in this issue thus seek to explore a range of responses to neo-Victorianism and feminism through examinations of novels, young adult fiction, manga, burlesque performances, music, television, film, and art from painting to installations. As such, this issue provides a broad perspective on how the politics of gender, as well as the performance and representation of gender, are manifested in a variety of neo-Victorian media. Many of the articles read these media through the lens of postfeminism, acknowledging the ways in which this term remains highly contested. For example, in the Western world, the term postfeminism expresses a number of varying and even conflicting points of view, such as the notion that feminism is no longer socially relevant or even required. In this view the 'post' would refer to a generalised impression that we are somehow living in a time after feminism. A number of the authors published here, however, seek to problematise the 'post' in postfeminism by relating it to similar ideological issues in the 'neo' of neo-Victorianism, and thus challenging temporal boundaries and categorisations. That is to say, one of the collective goals of this issue is to examine the fissures in postfeminism and to analyse how and why feminist texts continue to seek the Victorian in the present.

Most of the contributors to this issue reject the notion that this postfeminist period most usefully refers to a time after feminism. Indeed, as they acknowledge, there are other views and stand-points in circulation on the issue of postfeminisms. For example, Genz takes a different approach, proposing a sort of middle ground by arguing that it is futile to attach a single meaning to the notion of postfeminism. Instead, she finds that the term's ambivalence, and ultimately the multiple meanings it affords, "is indicative of the diversity of contemporary feminisms and the changes in feminist thinking, activism and politics over the last 40 years" (Genz 2009: 22). And further complicating these issues, there are those critics who remain sceptical about the very notion of postfeminism, and equate it with a "free market feminism" that co-opts ideas of choice and empowerment and sells women a fantasy narrative of unachieved progress (Whelehan 2000: 100). This view of postfeminism, as a thoroughly financialised version of gender politics, is often linked to various pop girl groups, films, and television series such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or *Mad Men* (2007-on-going). In this context postfeminism is understood as being deployed through an individualistic, populist, consumerist discourse that Angela McRobbie, in her 2009 study *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, sees as superficial feminism or "as a kind of substitute for feminism" (McRobbie 2009: 1). The opening to McRobbie's critique of gender, culture, and social change typifies the strong reactions that postfeminism often provokes, reading like a call to arms. Here, she insists that feminist potential must be "reawakened and realised" through an understanding of the government bodies and media working insidiously to maintain established power and gender hierarchies (McRobbie 2009: 2).

It is also worth noting that both neo-Victorianism and third-wave feminism, and subsequently certain forms of postfeminism, analyse the "constructive relationships between women's pasts and their presents" (Muller 2009/2010: 131). As Nadine Muller argues, these movements insist on acknowledging the influence of the past, because it may lead to redefining "established customs and politics" in the present (Muller 2009/2010: 131). In light of these contentious and continuous debates over whether feminism – and/or society – has moved forward or backward, and how hierarchies are preserved by those in power, it is perhaps unsurprising that the exploration of feminist concerns through the nineteenth-century past are still very much alive today. Hence, in an attempt to shed new light on

this complex intersection of urgent concerns, this issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* explores the ways in which contemporary neo-Victorian texts, objects, and media engage with feminism and postfeminism, and in what ways this engagement is productive, problematic, or both simultaneously.

One area of particular concern is the on-going impulse to re-write the story of the fallen woman or madwoman that many twenty-first-century neo-Victorian texts have taken up, following the examples of Rhys and Fowles. One of our interests as editors of this special issue was to ask whether this impulse to redress the ignored histories of nineteenth-century women still had currency in the twenty-first century, or if “certain neo-Victorian perspectives – the nineteenth-century fallen woman, medium, or homosexual, for instance – have become rather over-used, tired, and hackneyed” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 23). Indeed, the repeated characterisation of these now-standard figures risks turning them into clichés that reinforce unproductive stereotypes, rather than giving voice to women as distinctive subjects. Given the general fatigue surrounding these now stock characters, many contemporary neo-Victorian writers, artists, and performers have become hyper-aware of the persistence of these tired tropes. In fact, referring to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s well-known definition of neo-Victorianism as “*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), many of the articles in this volume investigate neo-Victorian cultural production through the extent of such works’ self-consciousness, self-critique, and self-reflexivity or, conversely, the absence of these qualities. In other words, is neo-Victorianism self-serving, self-satisfying, and/or self-eroticising, or does it still wield political potential? Furthermore, in the context of this special issue, we must ask what wave(s) of feminism or postfeminism now frame the possible answers to these questions.

The contributors to this issue present various responses to such questions and ask thought-provoking questions of their own. What these essays show is that neo-Victorian feminist media are diverse in both their methods and their aims. On the one hand, we find an ethical, even educational, impulse in many of the narratives discussed here. On the other hand, many neo-Victorian narratives and their treatment in various media tread a treacherous line between sexual and political critique and voyeuristic impulses, often resulting in what Marie-Luise Kohlke has termed neo-

Victorian “sexsation” or “the new Orientalism” (Kohlke 2008: 349, 352). Importantly, moreover, aesthetic production that falls into this latter category places the feminist pedagogical aims of neo-Victorianism in question.

In her 2012 review of the emerging field of neo-Victorian studies, Margaret D. Stetz remarked that it seems no coincidence that many of the most influential critics in the field initially began researching New Women fiction. These critics, Stetz surmised, had likely learned the importance of labelling new political and aesthetic categories such as “New Woman fiction” or “neo-Victorianism” from history (Stetz 2012: 341). Yet the relationship between New Women writing and neo-Victorianism does not end there. Indeed, as Stetz’s article in the present issue shows, many neo-Victorian narratives have political and even didactic impulses. Borrowing from the New Women’s ‘novel with a purpose’ philosophy might enable contemporary writers and artists to utilise postmodern play and self-reflexivity while also tapping into the New Woman’s social and ethical agenda. In so doing, neo-Victorian cultural production could offer readers and audience members the kind of reawakening imagined by Rich and McRobbie. In fact, the definition of the New Woman novel as offered by Ann Ardis also works to describe feminist neo-Victorian fiction that employs this kind of political engagement:

Insofar as they make frequent reference to extratextual circumstances, they resist a reader’s efforts to extricate the literary artifact from history, and thereby from politics. Because their authors choose *not* to view art as a sphere of cultural activity separate from the realm of politics and history, these narratives refuse to be discrete. (Ardis 1990: 4)

Yet to what extent might interacting with neo-Victorian fiction, film, or art, lead to (feminist) political education and advocacy on the part of the reader, viewer and/or consumer?

Like New Women fiction, much neo-Victorian fiction narrates the female protagonist’s awakening to feminist consciousness and her own self-worth. Notably however, this protagonist is typically what Cora Kaplan has called “an elusive, exceptional woman” (Kaplan 2007: 109). As much a staple of neo-Victorianism as the madwoman and the fallen woman, the

solitary extraordinary woman is often redeemed through work of some kind, and is treated with sympathy by her author or narrator (Kaplan 2007: 109). Yet, given the existence of the early suffragette movement and the rise of the New Woman in the late-Victorian period, it is striking that neo-Victorian narratives typically contain little in the way of feminist collectives and communities.¹

Here again, however, the issue is more complicated than it may appear at first glance, for it is the very absence of functioning feminist communities that may in fact offer social commentary in many neo-Victorian media. So while narrating the heroine's awakening may encourage such a corresponding awakening in the reader her/himself, these texts are more often interested in showcasing the ills of Victorian society – and implicitly our own – rather than demonstrating the gains made by feminists in the Victorian period. While this makes these fictional text less interesting as historical documents of feminist success than they might have been, the absence of such early feminist communities nonetheless demonstrates a continued and renewed need for feminist conversation and action in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, what is striking about the exceptional woman is that, in many ways, she figures as a kind of time-travelling figure, an anachronistic modern woman thrown back into the nineteenth century, with hyper-awareness of gender codes and even of feminist theory. As Dora Damage admits in Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006), she and her associates make up “a veritable atelier of transgression” and therefore hopefully provide a productive critique of the period (Starling 2006: 380). In this way, the exceptional woman becomes the reader, who ends up fantastically trapped in the Victorian era. Yet this realisation on the part of the reader is perhaps somewhat unsurprising, given that, by Victorian standards, we are all fallen and transgressive. It is here, where political advocacy meets sexual transgression, that the ethics and politics of these neo-Victorian narratives become truly murky.

Indeed, these neo-Victorian texts do not always perform in the ways that critics want them to, and neo-Victorian media are not consistently as self-reflexive or radically feminist as academics might hope. Hence, as Elizabeth Ho argues in the present issue, we must be “sensitive to the audibility of feminist activism articulated in the return to the Victorian as it goes global” (this volume: p. 58), rather than riding rough-shod over neo-Victorian production with our own notions of what constitutes self-

reflexivity or radical interventions into traditional thinking. Moreover, while it is certainly productive to be critical of individualistic consumerist language disguised as feminist discourse, neo-Victorian feminist media can also show us surprising ways in which first-, second-, third-wave, and even postfeminisms overlap or engage with one another. That same mindfulness can also alert us to the importance of non-Western feminisms within global responses to the Victorians. Judith Kegan Gardiner claims that feminism “is a utopian discourse of an ideal future, never yet attained” (Gardiner 2002: 10); however, neo-Victorian media demonstrate the utility and creativity involved in the exercise of looking back as well as forward, not least because our present once was the Victorians’ future. Exploring these issues in the present collection, then, Eckart Voigts and Elizabeth Ho discuss complex feminist politics and their visual representation in neo-Victorian performance and manga, Claire O’Callaghan and Antonija Primorac examine postfeminist discourses and connections between the Victorians and contemporary culture, and Caterina Novák, Margaret D. Stetz, and Kimberly Rhodes offer new ways of understanding neo-Victorian feminist work in the context of parody, pedagogy, and artistic practice.

In the first essay contained here, Eckart Voigts discusses the complexities inherent in analysing the supposedly feminist burlesque re-enactments of neo-Victorian femininity in the work of American performer Emilie Autumn. A highly prolific artist, Emilie Autumn has written poetry as well as the novel *An Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls* (2009), produced three music albums, toured the USA and Europe, manages a website, and produces commercial items such as T-shirts. In light of the problematics surrounding consumerism and ‘free market feminism’ as noted above, Voigts refers to this artist’s production as a prime example of “transmedia marketing” (this volume: p. 16) and of how content flows between platforms. As he argues, what perhaps saves Autumn’s production from being completely over-determined as facile is how she stages neo-Victorian femininity through her own psychological problems that meet in her seductive yet ‘alternative’ body as a punk/Gothic Lolita. Ultimately, the question Voigts addresses throughout the essay is the political potential or otherwise of Autumn’s impressive creative output. He queries whether or not it falls more squarely under the heading of the nostalgic fetishisation of Victorian taboos that yield yet more hedonistic, over-sexed versions of the past for contemporary consumption, or if it can be read as a Gothic

challenge to the long-established focus on literary and heritage neo-Victorianism.

Elizabeth Ho also addresses the gendered complexities and political potential of neo-Victorian media in her wide-ranging analysis of Kaoru Mori's manga *Emma: A Victorian Romance* (2002-6). Emma, a maid who successfully marries up the social ladder, offers only a muted feminism despite the transgressive potential embodied in the figure of the Victorian maid in texts such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) or Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999). As Ho argues, the manga imagines the possibility that Japanese women (past and present) could benefit from paid labour and achieve a degree of independence without radically challenging patriarchal norms; yet *Emma* ultimately seems to endorse Japan's so-called 'housewife feminism'. Nonetheless, through evident connections with the proliferation of 'maid cafés' in contemporary Japanese culture and the relationship between the exploitation of the Victorian maid and the contemporary female manga artist, Ho shows that this text potently engages with Japan's feminist politics, politics that continue to be influenced by gender ideologies from the Meiji-era past. Ho's reading of the manga and its maid culture context raises important questions about the (feminist) possibilities offered to Japanese women in the present and the complexities involved in accessing a global memory of the Victorian, and of Victorian womanhood in particular.

Claire O'Callaghan similarly places feminist politics of the Victorian period alongside contemporary culture, in this case contemporary American and British culture. O'Callaghan reads Emma Donoghue's neo-Victorian novel *The Sealed Letter* (2008) in the context of current issues such as gay marriage, contemporary political scandals, maternal stereotypes like the 'yummy mummy' and the Chav Mum, and the effects of so-called 'raunch culture', all of which reveal ways in which women continue to be judged by a stricter, more limiting double standard. *The Sealed Letter* is based on the Codrington vs. Codrington divorce trial of 1864, to which O'Callaghan's novel makes explicit reference. In this trial Vice-Admiral Harry Codrington requested legal separation from his wife, Helen, on the grounds of her long-term marital infidelities. The case holds an important place in feminist history as it was considered a test case for the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, and it pointedly brought debates about women's social, sexual, and maternal roles into the public sphere. Following this reasoning, O'Callaghan argues that the novel's self-reflexive critique of Victorian gender and sexual

norms reveals striking parallels with instances of sexism and misogyny in contemporary culture. Donoghue's depiction of the backlash against Helen and Emily 'Fido' Faithfull, a family friend entangled in the trial, in fact echoes recent socio-cultural backlashes against feminist and queer social movements, reminding us, as O'Callaghan notes, that seemingly 'Victorian' problems of sexism still exist.

Antonija Primorac's contribution explores recent versions or 'afterings' of Irene Adler, the female protagonist of Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes short story 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891), in literary and screen productions. Primorac's argument moves from an exploration of the Adler character in the BBC TV series *Sherlock* (2012, season two), to her appearances in Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), finally to an examination of the character's reappearance in Carole Nelson Douglas's neo-Victorian mystery *Goodnight, Mr Holmes* (1990). Primorac's goal is to address how feminist politics seem to cluster around, or are expressed through, Irene Adler, the only female character to ever outwit the ur-sleuth. At stake is the isolation and analysis of a significant diminishment of female agency which, according to Primorac, appears to be on par with her increasingly overt sexualisation in the screen versions. And while Primorac reads these televisual and cinematic afterings of Adler as part and parcel of seemingly unwavering postfeminist and neo-conservative trends currently present in mainstream, big budget adaptations, she also provides a counter example in Douglas' novel. For Primorac, this text manages to salvage Doyle's Adler along with her characterisation "as a self-reliant, independent, and resourceful *prima donna*, rather than as a criminal or sex worker" as she has been portrayed in the more recent TV and film versions of the story (this volume: p. 96). The result is a novel that, unlike other recent appropriations of Doyle's Adler, does not introduce nudity or neo-Victorian eroticism, but rather maintains a focus on Irene Adler's resourcefulness and intelligence.

Providing yet another counter example, Caterina Novák argues that Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006), a novel packed with depictions of pornography, rape, child abuse, homosexuality, and the sexual 'liberation' of women, can be read as a self-conscious parody of neo-Victorian feminist politics. Novák suggests that, on the surface, the novel is a feminist critique of Victorian patriarchal, economic, and racial practices that we have become accustomed to seeing in this genre. Yet through its

overt deployment of Victorian stereotypes and its explicitly anachronistic female narrator – who can cite second-wave feminist beliefs à la Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray – the novel is also a parodic feminist neo-Victorian text. Specifically, Novák reveals how the narrative confronts the pitfalls of politically engaged neo-Victorianism, which is inevitably torn between (feminist) political aims, claims to historical authenticity, and commercial marketability. Novák finds that parody does not necessarily equate to the feminist's enemy, as such self-aware work can actually critique assumptions of our supposed superiority over the Victorians, serving as a reminder of the contradictions within the neo-Victorian project more generally.

In contrast, Margaret D. Stetz focuses on what we might consider a neo-Victorian counter-tradition that explicitly engages in political education and advocacy. She locates this in novels for young adult readers, specifically in Scholastic's 'My Story' series, marketed to girls. Stetz shows how these novels are structured as consciousness-raising tools, which is to say that, by narrating the heroine's frustrated feminist sentiments, contemporary young women cannot help but sympathise with their Victorian precursors. These novels can thus create solidarity between fictional characters from the past and readers in the present, and encourage political awareness on the part of their young readership. Furthermore, Stetz shows how these novels are not alone in the history of didactic feminist neo-Victorian fictions and that, in fact, Virginia Woolf's 1933 novel *Flush*, which tells the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning during the period of her marriage and subsequent flight to Italy from the perspective of her dog, is an important earlier example of this same didactic impulse. By borrowing from the educational aims of Victorian authors, a mode not foreign to children's literature, Stetz shows how present-day writers of young adult fiction work to instil feminist principles, via first-person neo-Victorian narratives, into the next generation of women.

Finally, Kimberly Rhodes's article offers a look at a number of 1970s artists whose representational and conceptual pieces engage with Victorian womanhood, as well as with issues that were and continue to be central to gender politics. Indeed, her contribution is of special interest because it addresses two important historical moments in relation to feminist criticism and politics. First, Rhodes sketches a history of the Fresno Feminist Art Program (1970) and the work of a decade of North American

artists, such as Betye Saar, Miriam Schapiro, and Eleanor Antin, who were associated with the project. At the same time, Rhodes's article devotes particular attention to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), an installation which received a great deal of critical acclaim several decades ago and which continues to be significant for contemporary audiences, although it has lost its focal position in debates on feminism of late. As Rhodes points out, while belonging to a moment in the past that has currently fallen out of focus, Chicago and the other 1970s North American feminist artists she discusses produced a corpus of visual culture that can be characterised as neo-Victorian, but which has yet to be analysed as such. The second historical moment in Rhodes's article takes the form of a recontextualisation of this body of work in the present, addressing its relevance to many of the contemporary political issues that neo-Victorian aesthetics likewise bring to the fore.

All of the articles contained here make a significant contribution to our understanding of the peculiarities and specificities of feminism and gender politics in the context of neo-Victorian aesthetic production. We therefore hope that the current special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* will provide researchers, students, and teachers with new insights into the topic of feminism as it engages with and is read through this emergent genre of contemporary literature, as well as through film, television, performance, and representational art. It is equally the editors' hope that this issue will expand neo-Victorian studies fruitfully while adding greater depth to the field through the new material that this volume will help bring to light. These texts emphasise the relevance of neo-Victorian feminist politics in a globalised world, as well as the inter-generational urgency and significance of feminist politics, in all of their 'spreadability' across media.² We would like to conclude by returning to Adrienne Rich's insight regarding the importance of "looking back" for feminism, and indeed for gender studies more generally as a discipline. This is to say that the essays published here all somehow look back at and point to how 'Victorian' – that is, patriarchal – discourses surrounding gender relations continue to be, given that we still consistently begin from a binary gendered position in order to critique, and hopefully deconstruct, precisely that male/female binary. We wish to close, then, by stressing how "looking back" to the period of the New Woman may be a productively nostalgic move with which to counter accusations that the postfeminist age has forgotten what feminism is.

Notes

1. A notable exception is Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), which depicts a community of women involved in socialist and women's rights activism.
2. For this usage of the notion of media as being "spreadable" we are indebted to Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013.

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