

The Other's Other: Neo-Victorian Depictions of Constance Lloyd Wilde Holland

Bonnie J. Robinson

(North Georgia College & State University, Georgia, USA)

Abstract:

This essay discusses a selectiveness bordering on (re-)discrimination in neo-Victorian texts' reclamation of relativised and marginalised women and wives of the nineteenth century, especially the 'helpmeets' of the men whose works helped shape our understanding of it. It argues that such biofictive texts as Brandreth's Oscar Wilde mystery series (2008-ongoing), Stefan Rudnicki's *Wilde* (1998), Clare Elfman's *The Case of the Pederast's Wife* (2000), and Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1998), texts that revivify Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd Wilde Holland, reinscribe Constance's marginality in order to recover Oscar Wilde from the victimisation he endured in his era.

Keywords: abuse, aestheticism, biofiction, gender, Constance Lloyd Wilde Holland, performativity, re-marginalisation, sexual transgressiveness, trauma, Oscar Wilde

Neo-Victorian texts often resist or contradict their apparent – possibly even intrinsic – conservative/nostalgic projects by rescuing from historical neglect what Victorian society repressed, subjugated, and denied. To this tendency, comparable to strategies of historically suppressed voices' retrospective un-silencing in postcolonial writing, we owe the reclamation of the relativised and marginalised women and wives of that era, especially the 'helpmeets' of the men whose works have helped shape our understanding of it, including such famous literary figures as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, Robert Browning, and Oscar Wilde, all of whom have been commemorated in neo-Victorian novels and biofiction.¹ Rather than being universally applied, however, the neo-Victorian strategy of recovering historically sidelined subjects and silenced voices can itself prove highly selective – even to the extent of constituting a form of (re)discrimination. Their depiction may do little *for* or *with* these wives beyond reiterating their position as one of culture's internally colonised 'Others'. Indeed, some depictions may quite deliberately maintain or resist qualifying a gender hegemony that accepted the woman/wife as subordinate

to her husband and – via the legal notion of coverture – effectively subsumed into his identity, functioning as a quasi mirror reflecting his artistic glory.²

In particular, Giles Brandreth's Oscar Wilde mystery series (2008 - ongoing), Stefan Rudnicki's *Wilde* (1998), Clare Elfman's *The Case of the Pederast's Wife* (2000), and Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1998), all texts that revivify Oscar and Constance Lloyd Wilde Holland, seem to me to reinscribe Constance's marginality for their own, often unstated, ideological purposes. These purposes may *seem* radical but actually display what Christian Gutleben, in *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*, identifies as the genre's typical politically-correct opportunism, since, as he notes, neo-Victorian texts' "emphasis on the ill-treatment of women, homosexuals or the lower classes is not at all shocking or seditious **today**; on the contrary, it is precisely what the general public wants to read" (Gutleben 2001: 11, original emphasis). Yet such political correctness on the part of writers like Brandreth, Rudnicki, Elfman, and Kilroy seems largely focused on *Oscar* as a victim of Victorian prejudice, unjust persecution, and eventual social exile. Their works ultimately – and despite what they themselves at times seem to assert – reclaim not Constance, a marginalised and relativised figure on account of belonging to the 'second sex', but rather Oscar, her (in)famous husband, marginalised on account of his active homosexuality.³ Indeed, Shelton Waldrep describes Oscar as "that rare exception: a well known marginalized person; a star famous for his exclusion" (Waldrep 2000: 50). His very fame, which underscored his dramatic nineteenth-century fall from grace, makes Oscar's present-day reclamation relatively straightforward and, in Gutleben's terms, opportunistic. Like David Lodge's and Colm Tóibín's more oblique evocation of Henry James' repressed homosexuality in *Author, Author: A Novel* (2004) and *The Master* (2004) respectively, the recognition, celebration, and implicit legitimation of Oscar's sexual transgressiveness is radical only *within the Victorian context* of narrated time, rather than the reader's own temporal situation. This lack of genuinely radical import is echoed in the bland conventionality of many corresponding but hardly equal neo-Victorian reclamations of Constance. Her reclamations tend to diverge from/undercut the prevalent liberatory impetus of the gender and feminist agendas of much neo-Victorian fiction.⁴ They may, therefore, reflect on the possibility of the neo-Victorian's conservative/nostalgic strain

catching up with and undermining feminist impulses in turn, perhaps even (at least on male writers' parts) implicitly mourning the demise of more traditional and seemingly more stable gender roles and gender difference.

Oscar's historical and fictionalised character in neo-Victorian texts – as fiction/*histoire* – often receives respect for, and acceptance of, its complexity, its coherence amidst change, its aesthetic integrity along with its contradictions: he is presented as both the selfish giant and the self-sacrificing genius, for instance in Rudnicki's *Wilde*, a novelisation of the motion picture of the same title. Such characterisation reflects not only the actuality of Oscar's existence but also the depth, roundness, and careful verisimilitude these neo-Victorian writers allow him, resisting both historical and contemporary stereotypes of the man and the myth. They also reflect what Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-first Century, 1999-2009*, term the “aesthetic and ethical questions about the appropriation of ‘real’ Victorian lives into creative texts, and the nature of authenticity in this process” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 19). But these “ethical questions” and quests for nuanced “authenticity” become much more problematic in depictions of Constance's life.

1. Over-Writing the Real-Life Constance

Rather than striving for authenticity in depicting Constance, neo-Victorian writers actively, and problematically, suppress known facts about her actual, historical life, editing out or altering details that do not serve their aesthetic strategies, particularly of employing her as an uncomplicated pole of traditional female domesticity to throw into relief Oscar's unconventionality, erudition, and intellectual brilliance – which may help explain why she is recreated as not a wholly fictional but biofictional character who both keeps her name and overt/explicit identity as Oscar's spouse. Her biofictive ‘identity’ highlights what Cora Kaplan describes as “the tension between biography and fiction, as well as marking the overlap between them” in the hybrid form of biofiction (Kaplan 2007: 65). For the “false notes” in the identity constructed for Constance often serve to increase the verisimilitude, or “authenticity”, of that constructed for Oscar (Kaplan 2007: 65). Long before meeting Oscar, for instance, Constance loved Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic art and literature, a passion inspired especially by her friendship with Lady Mount Temple whose home at

Babbacombe Cliffe provided a “veritable wonderland of Pre-Raphaelite art” (Bentley 1983: 23). She entered her marriage with Oscar already a cultured woman, who read Italian and French classics in their original languages, played the piano, and studied the works of William Shakespeare and John Keats.

Early in her marriage, Constance expressed her radical desire to use her education and talents for practical ends, in case of monetary need, considering possible careers as actress, reporter, or novelist. While never performing on stage, Constance did give public lectures, particularly in support of Dress Reform. On 6 November 1888, for example, she gave the first of several lectures for the Rational Dress Society, a talk entitled ‘Clothed in Our Right Minds’, in which she repudiated the idea of indecency in the wearing of divided skirts by women, demonstrating her point by herself modeling the clothes she advocated. Also, while never writing as a hired reporter, Constance wrote for several magazines, such as *Today*, *World*, *Ladies’ Pictorial*, and *Woman’s World*, the magazine that Oscar edited. She also edited The Rational Dress Society’s *Gazette* from 1888 to 1889. Joyce Bentley notes Constance’s “light and humorous” writing style, which she deems a particular “asset in [contrast to] all the ponderous prose of the day” (Bentley 1983: 56). Furthermore, although not a novelist herself, Constance, like her husband, wrote collections of children’s stories and poems, namely *There Was Once* (1888) and *A Long Time Ago* (1892), and in 1895 she compiled quotes from Oscar’s work in a book entitled *Oscariana*. Yet these independent and reformist activities on Constance’s part find scant reflection in neo-Victorian novels such as Brandreth’s mystery series and Rudnicki’s *Wilde*, where she is shown instead fulfilling womanly roles of wife, mother, and hostess. In Brandreth’s *A Game Called Murder*, the narrator Robert Sherard spends an afternoon at Tite Street keeping Constance company while Oscar is away at Eastbourne. Sherard reads to Vyvyan and Cyril Wilde one of Constance’s fairy tales to send them to their afternoon rest. He emphasises the domestic purpose of these stories when he thinks, “That afternoon in Tite Street gave me something that none of my three marriages had afforded me – a taste of domestic contentment” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 26, loc. 4476-82, par. 3). Rudnicki similarly marshals Constance’s literary prowess in service of Oscar and the home. After first meeting Constance, Ada Levenson notes Constance’s skill at “preparing [...] dinners” then, as a related thought,

wonders aloud to Oscar what Constance “will contribute to [Oscar’s] literature and lectures”. He responds that “she [Constance] will correct the proofs of my articles” (Rudnicki 1998: 17-18). Significantly, none of these neo-Victorian works depict Constance in the act of writing, other than letters to friends and family, although they do depict her in the act of reading. In *A Game Called Murder*, Sherard ‘catches’ Constance reading her own book, *A Long Time Ago* (1892), a fact that she admits to with a ‘suitably’ modest blush: “[I am reading m]y own book, I am ashamed to say!’ She broke from me and, laughing, covered her face with her hands” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 26, loc. 4441-47, par. 1).

Throughout her marriage, Constance continued strongly to advocate Dress Reform. Her 1888 article for *Woman’s World*, ‘Children’s Dress in this Century’, suggests that young girls as well as adult women should wear divided skirts, in this case, Turkish trousers. She ends by stating: “The Rational Dress should be adopted by all mothers who wish their girls to grow up healthy and happy” (Wilde 1888: 417), implicitly advocating ‘subversive’ reformist activism on women’s part, even in the inner sanctum of the home. This interest in women’s well-being and liberation from artificial restraints also appears in Constance’s membership in the Chelsea Woman’s Liberal Association, a group that lobbied for women’s suffrage and hence political reform. Her other associations, with the Pioneer Club, the Pre-Raphaelite Society, May Morris’s Embroidery Guild, and the theosophical Order of the Golden Dawn, reflect her general support of women’s issues as well as her own eclectic interests and wide-ranging mind. Yet again, however, what might be termed her character’s ‘politicisation’ is largely repressed in neo-Victorian biofiction concerned with her and Oscar’s lives. In Brandreth’s mystery series, Constance’s political engagement appears primarily through her fund-raising activities. In *A Game Called Murder*, for example, Sherard describes the Rational Dress Society as one of Constance’s “favourite charities” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 1, loc. 175-80, par. 4). Similarly, in Rudnicki’s *Wilde*, Oscar comments on Constance’s propagandising for dress reform only as she dresses for dinner. He adjures her to show her “true [radical] colors” when dining at the Leversons by wearing her “cinnamon cashmere trousers [... a]nd – the cape with the ends turned up into sleeves” (Rudnicki 1998: 23).

Constance’s autonomy and sense of self (and self-interest) continued both during and beyond Oscar’s trials and imprisonment, though already in

evidence before then. In *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs. Oscar Wilde*, Franny Moyle claims that Constance's "passionate" friendship with Arthur Humphreys, manager of Hatchards, served to solace Constance in the face of Oscar's continuing affair with Alfred, Lord Douglas (Moyle 2011: 241-243). Moreover, Moyle notes, in a letter from 19 April 1895, addressed to the spiritualist and palm-reader Mrs. Robinson after Oscar's arrest, Constance demanded to know what happiness *she* could expect in her own life: "You told me that after this terrible shock my life was to become easier, but will there be any happiness in it, or is that dead for me?" (Wilde, qtd. Moyle 2011: 272). Neo-Victorian writers, however, seem less concerned with Constance's happiness or otherwise, than with the emotional and psychological state of her husband.

Constance's autonomy and self-interest only tangentially appear in Brandreth's literary mystery series, which so far includes *Oscar Wilde and a Death of No Importance* (2008), *Oscar Wilde and a Game Called Murder* (2008), *Oscar Wilde and the Dead Man's Smile* (2009), and *Oscar Wilde and the Vampire Murders* (2011), with *Oscar Wilde and the Vatican Murders* forthcoming in 2012.⁵ Instead, Constance appears throughout this series as the archetypal Angel in the House, the perfect woman and wife – not just for Oscar but for many men who, like the series' narrator Sherard, fall in love with her, not least exactly for her depicted selfless and uncomplaining devotion to her husband. As Oscar declares to Sherard in *A Game Called Murder*, "constant Constance, innocent Constance, the truest and best wife and mother in the world. You love her as I do, Robert. All who know her love her" (Brandreth 2008: ch. 13, loc. 2239-44, par. 1). Similarly, in *A Death of No Importance*, Sherard notes that "whenever Constance appeared – long-suffering Constance – she seemed to me to have an angelic smile on her gentle face and in her hands a tray of Christmas cheer" (Brandreth 2008: ch. 13, loc. 2076-82, par. 1). In the same book, Oscar speaks of Constance without irony as his angel, as his harbor of refuge in the stormy sea of life, as if she herself has no role or function whatever outside the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, in *A Game Called Murder*, Sherard stresses how Constance's maternal traits dominate even when she speaks of Oscar as

a mother might of an adored child. He was perfection: he could do no wrong in her eyes. She simply marveled at his genius and counted herself 'so blessed' that he was there, the

father of her children, the centre of her universe. (Brandreth 2008: ch. 7, loc. 1118-23, par. 1)

In this quote, Constance relates to Oscar in terms that she can ‘understand’ and, from that perspective, paradoxically does not denigrate, critique, or infantilise Oscar (as such a description would likely appear to do if applied to a grown female character); rather, she ennobles him as being unquestioningly deserving of such devotedness, bordering on idolatry.

While Oscar’s character grows in the course of this series, for instance, to comprehend the literary and respectable as well as the criminal worlds of London, Constance remains perpetually tied to the House Beautiful, existing as Oscar’s static object of desire, effectively herself a beautiful work of art that has gained his admiration and, for a time, his love. In *The Dead Man’s Smile*, Oscar declares that Constance is

as pretty as a picture – and the artist is Botticelli. She has the colour and bearing of his Madonna of the Magnificat in the Uffizi in Florence. She has an intelligent eye, an amiable disposition, a graceful figure, and a name that promises much. (Brandreth 2009: ch. 12, loc. 2131-38, par. 1)

As an art object rather than the connoisseur of art she actually was in real life, the fictional Constance retains, from this first Brandreth book to the latest, her ‘feminine’ traits of tenderness, purity, innocence, gentleness, patience, sensitivity, motherliness, and respectability. Unlike her husband, she serves as the embodiment of tradition rather than as an advocate of change and social reform.

Brandreth’s series does refer to Constance’s more radical qualities, though his handling of them is illustrative of the re-marginalising tendency I have been describing. In *The Vampire Murders*, for example, Constance sends Jane, Lady Wilde, a copy of her own published “book of fairy stories [that she] promised to send [...] weeks ago” (Brandreth 2011: ch. 43, loc. 1978-86, par. 1). Here, Constance subordinates her writing to her wifely responsibilities, thus highlighting Oscar’s implicitly more important activities, for, as she explains in the letter accompanying the belatedly sent book, “so much has been happening here, that, I confess, I clean forgot [it]” (Brandreth 2011: Ch. 43, location 1978-86, par. 1). The series also refers to

Constance's support of the Rational Dress Society, but significantly this support occurs not in the form of her actual public lectures, but only of fund-raising parties held at her home – her parties, not Oscar's – the guests of which are all “alarmingly respectable” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 1, loc. 172-78, par. 3). Rather than allowing Constance direct discourse on Dress Reform, the narrative notes how Constance “spoke poignantly of the plight of so many women [...] who were either maimed or burned to death when their voluminous skirts [...] caught on a candle or brushed by a hearth and were set alight” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 1, loc. 179-85, par. 1). This reference gives depth to Oscar's rather than Constance's character, for, as Sherard learns, Oscar's half sisters Mary and Emily both burned alive at a ball where Emily danced “too near the fire [and] her dress caught light. Mary rushed to save her sister and the flames engulfed them both” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 6, loc. 994-99, par. 2). Their deaths cause Oscar “to believe so passionately in the work of the Rational Dress Society and encourage [his] darling Constance in her endeavours in that regard” (Brandreth 2008: ch. 6, loc. 1000-06, par. 2). Hence it is made to seem as though Constance's public engagement was less her own than an extension of Oscar's reformist tendencies, her passionate commitment paling in comparison to her husband's strength of feeling founded in personal suffering. Implicitly, her activities can thus be viewed as a wifely attempt to minister to Oscar's ‘wounds’ rather than support the cause of women in their own right.

For most of Brandreth's readers, the real-life activist Constance remains a barely perceived, veritable mystery, unless they are already acquainted with her actual biography from other sources. As Heilmann and Llewellyn note, “[m]uch neo-Victorianism locates itself and [is] particularly suited [to] detection” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 16). Neo-Victorian texts, like Brandreth's mystery series, appeal to contemporary readers because

[t]he association between detection and historical fiction *per se* rests in the similarities in the gathering of evidence and the search for the new (and hopefully correct) interpretation of that material. It also allows the narrative to stray into deeper and darker recesses of Victorian society. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 16, original emphasis)

Yet there seems little sense on Brandreth's part of anything genuinely *worth* investigating and exposing about the set piece that is Constance in his re-imagining of Oscar, and if he is never tempted "to stray into [the] deeper and darker recesses" of Constance's complex mind, as well as those of her husband and his criminal adversaries, Brandreth's series exploits the latter opportunities, while deploying Constance's characterisation as the Victorian feminine ideal to throw into relief the grotesque and lurid events in which her husband becomes embroiled. In *A Game Called Murder*, Constance arrives at a hotel to find a brutally murdered pet parrot, all bloody and mangled. She is named as a potential victim in a game called murder, a fact of which Oscar keeps her safely ignorant because his "darling wife is a sensitive creature, and I would not want to distress her for the world" (Brandreth 2008; ch. 4, loc. 751-57, par.2). Similarly, Oscar attempts to shield her from the knowledge of her own family's scandalous history, in particular, of her father's notoriety "for exposing himself to young women in Temple Gardens" (Brandreth 2008; ch. 8, loc. 1475-80, par. 1). In *The Dead Man's Smile*, Constance receives an apparent present in a cardboard box, which turns out to be a man's severed head. Upon seeing "the horror within, the blood instantly drained from her [Constance's] face and she let out what seemed at the time to be a never-ending scream" (Brandreth 2008: ch. 13, loc. 2145-48, par. 1). Unable to cope with this crisis, Constance pushes the box so forcefully away that the head topples out of the box, for all to see. Meanwhile in *The Vampire Murders*, Bram Stoker, who introduces Oscar to the Vampire Club and associates Oscar's proclivities with a "nest of vipers", deems it essential that Constance once again be kept "in the dark", this time not about her father's actions but Oscar's "true nature" (Brandreth 2008: ch. 77, loc. 4273-30, par. 2 and 1). Brandreth conforms to Victorian stereotypes that fix women in determined roles, since he views women as complex enough to be serial killers, as is the case in *A Death of No Importance*, but not to participate in the investigation itself or to be cognisant of 'dark' secrets.

Constance's consequent 'natural' distress and horror at such events contrast with and emphasise Oscar's conventional 'masculinity', as he comforts and protects her, keeps his wits about him in the face of shocking danger, and uses his intelligence to maintain perspective: "To comprehend cruelty", he comforts Constance in *A Game Called Murder*, "[i]s almost as difficult as to understand love" (Brandreth 2008: ch. 7, loc. 1264-70, par. 1).

This conventionalisation, not to say (re-)masculinisation of the famous homosexual Oscar, a sexual orientation historically associated with effeminacy, seems intended to make the artist more accessible and appealing to twenty-first century general readers of popular fiction and hence make the series itself as commercially successful as possible. Brandreth suggests this intent in an interview he gave for *The Scotsman*, in which he likens himself to his chosen narrator Sherard: "Sherard was also a bit of a ladies' man, and this helps me in my aim of showing Wilde in the round, not just putting him in the gay icon ghetto" (qtd. Robinson 2007: n.p.). Brandreth achieves this end, however, only by denying Constance a similar roundness of character and maintaining her marginalised status.

2. Constance's Literary History

When other literary 'histories' – or, rather *histories* – acknowledge Constance's multi-dimensionality, they generally do so in order still to use her aesthetically as a foil for Oscar. Like Brandreth, they ask us to forget what we 'know' about gender as an on-going performance, so as to simplify Constance down to a single role. Rudnicki, Elfman, and Kilroy take the 'historical' lives of Oscar and Constance as the subject of their biofictive texts, rather than imagining, as do the Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries, an alternative, supplementary 'profession' for Oscar. Like Brandreth, Rudnicki presents Constance as gentle, shy, deferential, and as Oscar's ever-attentive, self-effacing listener. Unlike Brandreth, Rudnicki depicts her independent female friendships, but he chooses to portray her friend Lady Mount Temple as ultra conservative and condemnatory. She supports the Lord Chamberlain's censoring of Oscar's play *Salome* (1892), for instance, declaring that "there must be censorship. Or people would say what they meant, and then where should we be" (Rudnicki 1998: 68). When Oscar pays a dutiful visit on Lady Queensberry, the mother of his lover Alfred, Lord Douglas, he finds Lady Queensberry joined by Lady Mount Temple. Together, the two women appear to Oscar "as a pair of judges" (Rudnicki 1998: 79), as if plotting his downfall.

Lady Mount Temple contrasts sharply – and effectively – with Oscar's friend Ada Leverson, whose wit and open-mindedness make her worthy of Oscar's admiration and who achieves almost saint-like status by sheltering Oscar between trials. Rudnicki alters historical facts for his own artistic purposes by having Constance ultimately turn away from Lady

Mount Temple in favour of Leveson. After Lady Mount Temple recommends that Constance change her name due to Oscar's imprisonment, Constance says, "Thank you for your advice. [...] I'm sorry our friendship has to end like this" (Rudnicki 1998: 155). Leveson then ushers Lady Mount Temple out of Constance's house. This historically false change in alliance seems less intended to demonstrate Constance's own strength of mind and compassion than to validate Oscar's superior understanding and judgment of character and endorse his large-mindedness, all of which guide Constance's conduct in this scene, with Oscar implicitly acting as her voice of conscience. In one sense, her narrative position is thus further weakened, as she no longer even serves as Oscar's moral compass, but their positions become reversed.

Even those works that seem partisans of Constance, adopting her point of view in 'correcting' history's wrongs in her life, actually end up once again promoting Oscar and condemning the wrongs against *him*. For instance, in Elfman's *The Case of the Pederast's Wife*, Constance rejects "sticky compassion" that fixes her as "poor Constance and dear Constance" (Elfman 2000: 25), by turning to the wholly fictional character/narrator Dr. Martin Frame, an anachronistically early proponent of Freud's talking cure in diagnosing hysteria. At first Frame admires Constance's iron will in remaining loyal to Oscar despite his condemnation and imprisonment. But Frame soon becomes exasperated by what he sees as her willful self-ignorance of her 'repressed' hatred of Oscar's sexual orientation and 'crimes', which induces acute back pain accompanied by paralysis in her legs. Because he views Constance's condition as hysterically induced, Frame attempts to dissuade Constance from receiving dangerous 'corrective' surgical treatment.

Through Frame's proposed alternative treatment – that is, the talking cure – Constance comes to acknowledge her own need for Oscar's talents and fame, the gospel of "light and color" that he preached, the refuge he gave her from her abusive mother in the House Beautiful, and the name he bestowed upon her, Mrs. Oscar Wilde, under which she could publish her own writing (Elfman 2000: 129). Frame causes her to discover her identity as entirely relative to Oscar's. "You weren't a writer," he tells her:

You weren't an actress; you had written one little children's book and you hadn't the courage to publish that under your

own name. But as his wife, you had name, prestige, and all the literati of Europe fighting for your invitations. You had an identity, and perhaps, just perhaps, you were willing to sacrifice for that. (Elfman 2000: 129)

Yet, despite such conventionally expected self-sacrifice and subjugation, Constance unconsciously acknowledges her own individual rights by secretly seething over Oscar's infidelities and neglect. When she acknowledges this repressed anger, Constance momentarily recovers from her crippling back pain, and Frame triumphs – not for her sake but for his own – as he now sees himself, like Oscar before him, as a Pygmalion-like figure: “I knew what I wanted. [...] I was Pygmalion. I wanted Wilde's wife walking happily and briskly beside me, knowing that I was the one who had brought her back to life” (Elfman 2000: 105). By having Frame replace one female archetype with another, that of the Angel of the House with Galatea, Elfman highlights the artistry in neo-Victorian texts' fictionalising of history. She also suggests how science and art joined together in the Victorian era to ‘reshape’ the female body and subject in the image of male prescription and desire.

Yet Elfman's fictive Constance as a type of meta-art, a new Galatea ‘created’ by man rather than divine intervention, resists Frame's self-serving manipulation by asking him likewise to cure Oscar. Frame's refusal reveals both his hypocrisy and the author's shaping hand, disclosing Elfman's interest in presenting Oscar's homosexuality not as generally viewed by the Victorians, namely as aberrant, but instead as something natural, innate, and therefore not open to cure. To achieve this reclamation of Oscar, or re-framing of *his* story, Elfman marginalises Constance's story, both in relation to that of her husband and that of her doctor also: Constance's death constitutes an event in the ‘plot’ of Frame's life, not the end of her own life-story. Because Frame condemns Oscar's homosexuality, he refuses Constance's request; she therefore recoils from him, loses faith in his judgment, and consequently undergoes what he still sees as unnecessary surgery, dying on the operating table. Elfman makes Constance's death into a sacrifice for Frame's sake and ultimate redemption, as it creates such guilt and uncertainty in the doctor that he confesses his failings to Oscar, visiting him at the Hotel d'Alsace in order to determine whether or not the artist could indeed have been ‘cured’. Significantly, Oscar, not Constance, is

accorded the last word on her character, reconfirming her relativised status not only in history but also in her own biofiction's plot. In absolving Frame and rejecting his misguided aims as echoing the false hopes of Constance in envisioning his 'recovery', Oscar condemns his wife, fixing her as a woman who had the chance to rise above herself and the narrow-mindedness of her own time, to live for the more liberated tolerant future, but who – unlike Oscar – failed to do so: “[she] should have stood next to me, equal to me. She could not. [...] She became what she most abhorred, a domestic woman” (Elfman 2000: 168-169).

Rather than the text critiquing Oscar for neglecting his wife or the artist blaming himself, Oscar voices quintessential modern views of gender by deploring Constance's limitations and dependence:

She could have made a varied life of her own, but she was so terribly attached [...] like a sea anemone. If only she could have come to me and said, I understand your need for adventure and experience. Well, I am the same. What would you say if I took a lover? I would have been overjoyed. Life was there for the taking, and in the end she chose to become what she had run from. (Elfman 2000: 169)

Elfman artfully suppresses historical facts about Constance, such as her previously noted friendship with Humphreys, and downplays her intense attachments to women such as Lady Mount Temple, all in order to give modern readers this double view of Oscar, as a man both of his time and ours, an accolade denied to Constance. Indeed, Elfman, like Brandreth, Rudnicki, and Kilroy, reveals her true focus on Oscar, rather than on Constance, by denying her any sexual desire whatsoever. Brandreth surrounds Constance with admirers, such as Edward Heron-Allen and Sherard; she rewards their admiration by occasionally kissing them on the forehead or holding their hands, like a mother would with affection children, but she never returns their regard. Elfman similarly allows Frame to feel attracted to Constance, while she herself remains aloof, an object, rather than an agent, of desire. These authors likewise do not take advantage of the popular neo-Victorian exploration of lesbian desire in their imaginings of Constance, limiting any active search or desire for sexual satisfaction to Oscar.

3. Constance's Constructed Womanly Role

Just as Elfman's text seems at first to reclaim the marginalised Constance, so too does Kilroy's play *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* appear to give Constance voice and centrality, by having her character reject her '(self-) invention' as 'the good woman' and acknowledge instead the 'evil' within her. This evil supposedly motivates her marriage to Oscar, whose homosexual/'criminal' nature she implicitly understands from the start. Oscar's arrest and imprisonment, which he could have avoided and did not, are self-sacrificing acts for the future, acts of exposure that, as Jesse Matz notes, catalyse homosexuality as identity in Foucauldian terms (Matz 2002: 65). Simultaneously, they catalyse Constance's own self-exposure of the evil that prompts her to love two sinners/'criminals': not only Oscar, but also her father.

Kilroy fictionalises Constance's relationship with her father by artfully reframing the confused and confusing history/story that her father Horace exposed himself to young women in Temple Gardens, a story that, as already noted, Brandreth too repeats in *A Game Called Murder*. Bentley references a letter to A.J. Symons Clark, dated 22 May 1937, in which Constance's brother Otho "confirms that it was 'Horatio' his [Horace's] grandfather, who thus erred and strayed, and not 'Horace' [his father]" (Bentley 1983: 13). Constance's actual relationship with her father seems to have been happy and mutually supportive up until his death. Her relationship with her mother Ada, on the other hand, was apparently complicated by anger and even violence, especially after Horace's death. Several biographers describe Ada's temper as carping, irritable, and vindictive, and Moyle writes that "[a]fter the death of her husband Ada Lloyd began to abuse her daughter. [...] Constance found herself taunted, threatened and beaten by a woman who had turned from being uninterested and cold to downright cruel" (Moyle 2011: 19).⁶

Kilroy exploits this factual conflicted history, artfully reshaping and retelling it as a new story altogether. Analogous to Rudnicki's and Elfman's novels, his play displays the inherent moral as well as aesthetic equivocality of neo-Victorian 'histories', to which Heilmann and Llewellyn draw attention:

one aspect of the neo-Victorian [text] is about underlining the historical relativity and quasi-fictiveness of the Victorians to

our period, even as it simultaneously exploits the possibilities that chronological distance provides; in authorially claiming authenticity such textual games at the same time throw into relief their own ethical ambiguity. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 22)

Neo-Victorian authors can exploit the stories about the Victorian age that our age both receives and perpetuates. However, their doing so may have more to do with furthering their own artistic purposes with today's readers than with authenticating or revealing Victorian stories, those that were 'told' as well as those that were repressed. Kilroy identifies Constance's abuser not as her mother but as her father, a questionable falsification of apparent historical facts. His motive for doing so seems much the same as Brandreth's for simplifying Constance's character, namely to appeal to a general audience, as well as increasing sympathy for his protagonist. Today's public may have a more ready understanding of paternal than maternal abuse, while sexual abuse is often perceived as more serious and traumatising than 'mere' physical and emotional abuse. Kilroy desires to reclaim Oscar for a general audience, an ideological project that, again, is both radical – because the target audiences may have quite divided views on homosexuality – and exploitative – because that audience will likely include not only those expecting a modern rather than Victorian depiction of homosexuality, but also those seeking confirmation and reinforcement of conservative, even homophobic, attitudes in the reading of historical fiction. Moreover, Kilroy's play appears in the context of the abuse scandals, both as regards paternal incest and the Catholic Church and the false memory syndrome debate – traumas that Bowler and Cox note when suggesting “an implicit dialogue” between nineteenth century traumas and “contemporary concerns and anxieties, such as child sexual abuse and its deliberate concealment by authority figures” (Bowler and Cox 2009/2010: 11).⁷ It also attests to the incest motif as a prevalent trauma trope in neo-Victorian literature, “the (re)interpretations” of which motif Llewellyn describes as “deeply divided”, including what seems relevant to this play, that is, “the incestuous possibility of transgressive and traumatic desire” (Llewellyn 2010: 135, 151).⁸

As in *The Case of the Pederast's Wife*, the source of Constance's back pain in this play connects with unsuspected 'truths' about Constance's

nature and experiences, particularly those with her father. In this sense, Kilroy's play perhaps comes closest to the bulk of neo-Victorian biofiction, which tends to be concerned with the uncovering of double lives or repressed secrets of its re-visioned historical figures. The first mention of Constance's paralysis from her back injury occurs along with her description of her apparently independent qualities:

Constance: The injury – paralysis is progressive. What a word. Progressive. You used to use that word of me, Oscar. Remember? My wife is progressive! She campaigns for Peace, the dockers, Rational Dress and Lady Sandhurst. A modern woman, my wife. Remarkably broad-minded, I must say. Progressive. Paralysis. (Kilroy 1997: 16)

The ironic tone of this speech connects Constance's physical paralysis with an emotional and spiritual paralysis; thus, Kilroy aestheticises, makes art from, Constance's actual condition and suffering. Moreover, it implies that Constance's real-life political engagement may have been but passing fancies, means of self-invention and perhaps drawing attention to herself, close to the hysteria and shamming that Elfman's narrator 'discloses'.

Further, Constance tells Oscar her loss of mobility is caused by a fall down a flight of stairs. The staircase in this play symbolises both transcendent escape from reality (via ascent) and forcible, unwished for return to reality (via descent), as well as their potential simultaneity via its very structure. Crucially, the stairs are where Kilroy situates Constance's sexual abuse by her father:

Constance: On the stairs. Waiting for Papa to come home. Papa came home early. He gave me gifts. On the landing. (*Girlishly*) What is it, Papa? Me, please! Me, please! Ribbons. Paper, gorgeous paper – show! Love-touch – secret – secret – fall –

She drops to her knees. A great, thumping beat of sound. We watch as OSCAR watches and the attendants bring on gigantic puppet: Victorian gentleman, red cheeks, black moustache, bowler hat, umbrella, frock-coat. Bright paper package dangling from one puppet arm.

The procession reaches CONSTANCE and the puppet is made to squat or kneel before her, it and the attendants blocking her from view. The whole group heaves and humps several times and OSCAR turns away in distress. Then the attendants, very quickly, carry off the puppet, a lifeless thing, and we see CONSTANCE, retching, on her knees. OSCAR tries to reach out to her but she gestures him away. (Kilroy 1997: 66, original italics and emphases)

Although Oscar pleads for her innocence – “You were but a child! An innocent child” (Kilroy 1997:66) – Constance rejects this simplified blameless character projected upon her as ideological confusion. Instead she regards herself as a complex blending of victim and desiring agent, wronged and wrong-doer in one, evincing a self-blaming tendency typical of actual abuse victims manipulated by their victimisers. Yet while she defines herself as apparently psychologically complex and contradictory, she actually remains relativised and dependent with regards to the male. Because she loved the homosexual Oscar, because she loved her incestuous father, she deems herself evil, even if the admission “cuts her in two”: “I have loved evil! I have loved evil!” she declares (Kilroy 1997: 67, 66). Kilroy effectively allies Constance with nineteenth-century rather than twenty-first century sensibilities through this condemnation, which encompasses an implicit judgmental rejection of Oscar also, whose characterisation, in contrast, is once again modern rather than Victorian. Kilroy’s use of puppets here is, in this way, highly suggestive; paradoxically, while a puppet depicts her father, Constance herself is the puppet ventriloquising the conventional attitudes of her times. Further, she becomes a puppet for the playwright to manipulate so as to throw into relief Oscar’s greater humanity. Crucially, Oscar’s homosexual tendencies, publicly condemned as a ‘crime’ against nature as much as society, are differentiated, perhaps even legitimised, by the contrast to the father’s ‘unnatural’ offenses.

Soon after this self-revelation, Constance plans on allowing herself to be cut quite literally in two through back surgery. She writes to her sons about her impending operation:

Constance: I am writing this letter because tomorrow I must go into the clinic at Genoa. Please don’t be frightened. I am –

(Pause, going on with difficulty) They are going to – it's just a matter, really, of taking away Mummy's pain. That's good, isn't it? I wanted to write about your father. All his troubles arose from his own father, from the way his father crushed something within the soul of his own son. But your father is a great man. He had this terrible, strange vision. He sacrificed everything to reach out to that vision – that was very brave, wasn't it? You see what he did was try to release the soul from his body, even when his body was still alive. (Kilroy 1997: 68, original italics).

The playwright's misidentification of her father as the source of Constance's childhood abuse thus further allows Kilroy to draw a parallel between her victimisation and Oscar's purported suffering at the hands of his father, the earth-bound scientist and surgeon Sir William Wilde, conflating very different kinds of abuse so as to artistically highlight and heighten Oscar's suffering. While her husband is "brave", she is merely practical; while he sought to "release the soul", she merely seeks bodily release. Kilroy includes actual words from the historical Constance's final letter to her two sons, mixing them with his own artistic creation and vision – of Oscar as a 'fallen' (criminal or sinful) but transcendent man in contrast to his wife who remains resolutely embodied. For while, in this play, Constance acknowledges Oscar's vision – and the possibility of rising above the 'sins of the father', that is, the shackles of conventional thinking – she turns away from it to be wheeled off on a trolley and cut in half, ultimately dying as a fixed and stunted being. Oscar, on the other hand, at the play's very end,

rises to full height, back to audience, and throws both hands in the air. A piercing sound and light change, high, white spot. At once all the costume, together with the hat and wig, fall off to reveal the naked Androgyne. (Kilroy 1997: 69, original italics)

This text artfully comprehends Oscar's complex, in this case, androgynous, character, through the artistic device of contrast with Constance's self-division and self-limiting 'realism'.

4. Conclusion: Art for Whose Sake?

Neo-Victorian fiction and biofiction can be less concerned with re-visioning historical ‘realities’ and real figures than with the cultural myths constructed/woven around them. Rather than enlivening and revivifying Oscar and Constance or reviewing the historical records of their lives, the neo-Victorian texts discussed effect a ‘new’ biography through the artistic methods of selection, allusion, parallel, and contrast. These techniques highlight the textuality of neo-Victorian literary projects in general, their methods of quotation, citation, appropriation, paralleling, and revising. Yet these techniques also effect neo-Victorian texts’ ideological intents, the full implications of which as regards gender are perhaps not fully conscious to the writers themselves, and highlight the artificiality, the deliberate cultivation and inadvertent renewed discrimination that occurs in the process of achieving their particular re-visions. In proper postmodern fashion, Oscar’s gender identity is performative and therefore, as Judith Butler argues about such constructed identity, “capable of being constituted differently” (Butler 1988: 1). Oscar is free to re-invent himself/to be re-invented in any number of liberating roles, while Constance’s narrative ‘performance’ is conversely limited to the same role over and over again. As Julie Sanders writes,

[t]he discipline of history [...] is in truth a history of textualities, of stories told by particular tellers according to particular ideologies and contexts. [...] In this sense, history provides a ripe source and intertext for fiction, for *histoire*, to appropriate. (Sanders 2006: 146)

In neo-Victorian biofictions, it is not only a matter of whose story is told – Oscar’s or Constance’s – but also in what manner the neo-Victorian tellers choose to re-tell it and which ideological viewpoints (queer, feminist, anti-feminist, or opportunistic) they choose to adopt.⁹

The future-orientated ideologies and tendencies of these works about Oscar and Constance both belie and perpetuate Victorian foundations of defining identity against the so-called Other. For the recuperation of the homosexual and criminalised Oscar as ‘one of us’, so to speak, almost inevitably condemns Constance to the role of his Other. In ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1891), Oscar famously suggests that art surpasses life and that life

imitates art. In these neo-Victorian works, art *limits* life – for art's sake, for one artist's sake, for Oscar's sake, but sadly not for Constance's.

Notes

1. A few examples of such works on writers include Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2007), Melanie Benjamin's *Alice I have Been* (2010), A. S. Byatt's novella 'The Conjugal Angel', in *Angels and Insects* (1994), and Lynn Truss's *Tennyson's Gift* (2010). Neo-Victorian fictions depicting the married lives of characters based on famous artists include A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in the Blue Dress* (2008), fictionalized accounts of Robert Browning and Charles Dickens respectively.
2. A notable exception to this trend is Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose high literary profile probably allows her characterisations to resist such treatment in novels like Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2009) or Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (2007), a biofiction of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's servant.
3. In the spirit of equality, I deliberately refer to Oscar Wilde by his first rather than last name, as is more commonly the case, since throughout the essay I also refer to Constance by her first name.
4. Some examples of this liberatory impetus include Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), and Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998).
5. Some of these books appeared in the UK under different titles. *Oscar Wilde and a Death of No Importance* (2008) appeared as *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* (2008); *Oscar Wilde and a Game Called Murder* (2008) appeared as *Oscar Wilde and the Ring of Death* (2008); and *Oscar Wilde and the Vampire Murders* (2011) appeared as *Oscar Wilde and the Nest of Vipers* (2011).
6. Moyle further quotes Otho's testimony to this emotional and physical abuse that "ranged from 'perpetual snubbing in private and public sarcasm, rudeness and savage scoldings' to physical violence that included threatening with the fire-irons or having one's head thumped against the wall" (Moyle 2011: 19). In a similar vein, Neil McKenna notes how Otho explicitly connects the cause of Constance's early death with this mistreatment, writing that "I [Otho] shall always think that her internal tumor was brought about in the first place by what she went through under her mother" (qtd. McKenna 2005: 26).
7. The prevalence of this abuse trope in neo-Victorian literature appears in the 2009 film adaptation of Oscar's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in which Dorian endures physical abuse by his grandfather who locks Dorian in the

attic where he later hides his portrait. Bowler and Cox interpret this return to the attic as suggestive of “the hidden traumas behind the façade of youth and beauty, but also [as raising] questions over the concept of ‘respectability’ in both periods” (Bowler and Cox 2009/2010: 16).

8. Llewellyn reads this incest trope in Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (2002), a possible reading he acknowledges Marie-Luise Kohlke as suggesting (Kohlke 2004: 161, 165).
9. Neo-Victorian writers might, if they choose, effect a more balanced re-visioning of a marriage between celebrity artist and marginalised wife. One such possibility – that itself suggests more fruitful approaches/directions for further biofictions of Constance – appears in Arnold’s *Girl in the Blue Dress* (2008), in which Dorothea (‘Dodo’) Gibson, the marginalised wife of the character Alfred Gibson, evidently modelled on Charles Dickens, emerges from seclusion when she faces Queen Victoria herself as the symbolic embodiment of the age – a meeting that unlocks a door for Dodo. Consequently, it is the general attitude of men (and women), the laws, and the lack of opportunities in the Victorian era that the text attacks rather than the Dickensian Arnold or his wife.

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