# Reimagining Violence in the Brontë Myth: “Tales of Positive Violence and Crime” in Neo-Victorian Brontë Afterlives

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**Abstract:**
This article argues that narratives of violence are fundamental to both the creation and dismantling of the Brontë myth. Perceptions of violence in the Brontë legacy have undergone a shift. Nineteenth-century responses initially deemed violence a coarse and unfeminine aspect of Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë’s novels, but also one integral to the creation of their fictions and to visions of Haworth. Meanwhile, more recent neo-Victorian reimaginings of the Brontës’ works and lives often seek to reinstate and accentuate violence, partly to offer an apparently more ‘authentic’ depiction of the books and their authors. This essay considers how current narratives of violence connected to the Brontës can be contextualised through a focus on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and early sources central to the Brontë myth, arguing that, rather than demythologising the Brontës, neo-Victorian representations of violence often revert to earlier myths in a process of *re*-romanticisation.

**Keywords:** adaptation, Mike Barker, Brontë myth, the Brontës, cultural legacy, Elizabeth Gaskell, Michael Stewart, romanticisation, violence, Sally Wainwright.

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On 1 June 1853, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell to prepare her for an upcoming visit to the Haworth Parsonage: “Leaving behind your husband, children and civilisation, you must come out to barbarism, loneliness and liberty” (Brontë 2004: 172). The image of Haworth as an ‘uncivilised’ backwater came to characterise the Brontë myth, which cast the sisters as an uneducated and untamed trio living far from so-called civilised existence. Yet Brontë paints a Romantic and romanticised image of West Yorkshire, one that promises freedom from the strictures of familial responsibility and “civilisation”. The vision is imbued with a playful tone, indicating Brontë’s awareness of wider stereotypical perceptions of Yorkshire at the time as “wild, remote, parochial, untouched by the fashionable

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flourishes of the capital's jaded writers" (Spracklen 2016: 8). Gaskell's later depiction of Haworth and its environs in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857),[1] published two years after Charlotte Brontë's death in 1855, fleshes out the tensions articulated – whether flippantly or sincerely – by Brontë in her letter. Rather than emphasising the Romantic image in the *Life*, however, Gaskell chose to elaborate on the "barbarism" of Haworth primarily through "tales of positive violence and crime" (Gaskell 2009: 23). This decision was, in many ways, a form of damage control. Early reviews of Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's novels frequently denounced the seemingly coarse and violent elements of the texts, questioning the sisters' reputations as women if not as writers.[2] Gaskell's *Life* "catapult[ed] the Brontës into the realm of myth" (Miller 2002: 57), and the biography's portrayal of Charlotte "as dutiful Victorian daughter and tragic genius continues to haunt Brontë Studies, and our understanding of what it means to be 'Victorian'" (Liggins 2017: 164). The *Life*'s focus on the apparent violence of the Brontës' early lives and hometown was, for Gaskell, an attempt to bring Charlotte and her sisters back down to earth.[3]

Similar to Gaskell's approach in its commitment to apparent realism and authenticity, more recent neo-Victorian adaptations and reimaginings of the Brontës' works and lives share a tendency to introduce and enhance violence, but this in fact ends up *re*-romanticising the work and lives of Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë. The dual readings of Charlotte Brontë's remark to Gaskell in 1853 – one less desirable and the other more appealing – characterise the ongoing paradoxes of the role of violence in the Brontë myth, shifting from earlier associations with barbarism, coarseness, and unfemininity to late twentieth- to twenty-first-century preoccupations with ideals of faithfulness and recovery.[4] This article argues that violence (primarily physical, but also emotional and structural) is central to the formation, continuation, and, more recently, attempted dismantling of the Brontë myth; and it is by extension fundamental to ongoing explorations and readings of the Brontës' works and lives. The contemporary sources explored in the article – namely Mike Barker's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1996), Sally Wainwright's *To Walk Invisible* (2016), and Michael Stewart's *Ill Will* (2018) – reimagine the legacy of the Brontës through the agent of violence, often in a bid to reconfigure perceptions or to present a more 'authentic' picture of the Brontës' lives and novels.[5] In the process of working to demythologise narratives still lingering around the family, these three texts in


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fact return to earlier narratives, which initially sparked the Brontë myth and which were themselves underpinned by violence, establishing a recurring and often paradoxical narrative of violence that has shaped and continues to shape interpretations of the Brontës' novels and lives.

## 1. The Thrill and Coarseness of Violence

Unlike reimaginings such as Sally Wainwright's *Sparkhouse* (2002) and Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child* (2015), Barker's series, Stewart's novel, and Wainwright's telefilm are all set in the late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century, and only *To Walk Invisible* switches back to the present-day in its final minutes when it returns to the Brontë Parsonage in its current form as a museum, library, and tourist attraction. Such focus on the contemporary period in which the Brontës set and wrote their novels also relates to the three creators all vocalising an investment in returning Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and the Brontës' biographies to an earlier point in time. Rather than seeking to transport Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's novels and lives to a modern-day setting, these three sources are more concerned with revising modern-day readings and perceptions of the novels and lives through the re-emphasis of the violence and coarseness with which those texts and lives were initially associated. In the process, they engage with specific forms of coarseness – used by early reviewers as a "catch-all moralistic term" to refer to the Brontës' "novels' depiction of passion and violence, which were held to challenge the modesty and refinement of normative femininity" (Miller 2002: 18) – and address differing Victorian taboos, from sexual assault in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, to highly graphic physical violence and the British Empire's brutalities in *Ill Will*, to alcoholism and familial abuse in *To Walk Invisible*.

In this article, I focus primarily on the cultural afterlives of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). There are, of course, also numerous adaptations and reimaginings of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) which capture and even enhance its representations of violence. For example, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) grapples with some of the "unexamined and covert axiomatics of imperialism in *Jane Eyre*" by providing Bertha Mason's backstory in Jamaica (Spivak 1985: 257); Sally Cookson's theatrical reimagining of *Jane Eyre* at the Bristol Old Vic in 2014, which then moved


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to the National Theatre in London, reflects some of the frenetic Gothicism of the source text; and Lyndsay Faye's *Jane Steele* (2016) reconceives Jane Eyre as a serial murderer. Such texts can certainly be considered by future studies in relation to violence and the Brontë myth. Yet, film adaptations of *Jane Eyre* continue to "privilege the romantic elements of the text", frequently downplaying or even omitting entirely the text's more Gothic and violent elements with the exception of Bertha Mason (Cox 2021: 4).[6] Charlotte Brontë's legacy is also distinct, or at least positioned as distinct, from her two sisters' legacies. As Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne write, due to her living longer and publishing more, the "archive of material" on Charlotte is "more extensive and more diverse" than that surviving on Anne or Emily (Regis and Wynne 2017b: 3). Regis and Wynne further argue that Charlotte's legacy is "more complex" than that of her sisters, thereby necessitating their edited volume dedicated solely to her legacies and afterlives (Regis and Wynne 2017b: 3). Although I see Charlotte's legacy as entwined with Anne's and Emily's in many ways, there are differences in critical reception that have shaped the afterlives of the two younger sisters, particularly the fact that the works of Anne and Emily were positioned as especially violent in character by contemporaries such as Gaskell and George Henry Lewes. As a result, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* have been subject to more vocal processes of attempted demythologisation through the accentuation by writers and creators of the texts' scenes of violence in their literary or visual reworkings.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* holds a uniquely significant role within the attempted dismantling of the Brontë myth. As Catherine Paula Han notes, the novel "undermines and displaces the conventional courtship plot" because of its doubled storyline of the dissolution of Helen Huntingdon's marriage to Arthur and her developing relationship with Gilbert Markham (Han 2018: 54). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s resistance to a more straightforward romance reading has further led to the emphasis and enhancement of the novel's representations of marital abuse. Unlike her sisters, Anne Brontë was also never mythologised "in Romantic terms" (Han 2017: 53). While this "resistance to Romantic notions of genius means that Anne Brontë has never attained the fame of her sisters" (Han 2017: 54), it also arguably opens her work up to more challenging and daring neo-Victorian reimaginings. The 1996 television series pushes certain boundaries in terms of more visibly representing domestic abuse and emotional violence; yet it also emphasises


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the romantic connection between Helen Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham, dampening some of the novel's radicalism. Meanwhile, the cultural journey of *Wuthering Heights* has tended to enhance the novel's romantic plot, while also mythologising Emily Brontë as a Romantic genius.[7] The reimagining of *Wuthering Heights* in Stewart's novel includes scenes of extreme violence, paralleling the reliance on "spectacular violence" in the "Romantic literary imagination", comprised of "extreme scale" and a "sensational mode of representation" (Haywood 2006: 3-4). In self-consciously intensifying the representation of violence to recapture the novel's initial 'shock factor', Stewart seeks to de-romanticise *Wuthering Heights*'s legacy; yet, in returning to early responses via violence, *Ill Will* arguably also engages in a form of re-romanticisation. Although Anne and Emily's legacies and processes of demythologisation and re-romanticisation differ, initial receptions of their works shared a similar sense of outrage and consternation, even while acknowledging the texts' originality and brilliance. Such responses were primarily levelled at the two authors' representations, which were believed to be of "the most disgusting and revolting species" (Anon. 1999b: 267). As this article shows, the respective adaptations of the two younger sisters' novels converge in their shared attempts to return readers and viewers to these earlier responses, while enhancing violence as a means of demythologising the authors and their works.

From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, the perception of violence in the Brontë legacy has undergone a notable inversion, which this article identifies and explores: from an integral force in the creation of the sisters' fiction, but one which they should be distanced from as women, to an apparently surprising, often overlooked element of their works and lives that must be resurrected in order for modern audiences to more fully appreciate their novels. In exploring this shift, I consider how the current narratives of violence connected to the Brontës' literary works and biographies can be contextualised through a close examination of Gaskell's *Life* and other early sources central to the Brontë myth; and I argue that, rather than modernising or demythologising the Brontës, the recent interest in renewing and repurposing violence in fact returns to many of the early myths in a process of *re*-romanticisation.[8]


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## 2. Violence and the Brontë Myth

Literary scholars have long noted the presence and persistence of violence in the work of all three Brontë sisters.[9] In recent years, particularly in parallel with the Brontë bicentenaries from 2016 to 2020, violence has become an even more central point of concern within Brontë studies. Emma Butcher's work on war in the Brontës' early writings responds to the question: "Why are the men in the Brontë books so awful, so violent?" (Butcher 2020: vii). Meanwhile, Amber Pouliot's exploration of incest narratives in inter-war biographical writings on the Brontës examines the long-standing inclination of authors reimagining the Brontës' lives to envisage "drug use, extreme violence, abuse and sexual encounters", while simultaneously noting current tendencies to recover the image of the Brontës "from the many sentimental and sanitized versions" of their lives and oeuvre (Pouliot 2019: 137-138). Such emphasis on violence in an early twentieth-century context as outlined by Pouliot suggests that the "current obsession with representations of violence displaced onto historical contexts beyond living memory" (Kohlke 2009: 26), particularly in neo-Victorian television series, films, and novels, is neither new nor simply a reflection of twenty-first-century tastes for graphic gore.[10] Within Brontë studies and afterlives, however, what *is* new is the representation and interpretation of violence, specifically its role in an often self-conscious drive towards the recovery of nineteenth-century taboos and return to early receptions of controversial works like the Brontës' novels.

Despite repeated attempts to unravel it, the Brontë myth remains a central means of tracing and appraising the perceptions – and apparent misinterpretations – of Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's work and legacy. As Patsy Stoneman notes, the Brontë myth "is not a simple thing but a matrix of interlocking stories, pictures and emotional atmospheres" (Stoneman 2002: 214). Linda H. Peterson summarises the interwoven images associated with the Brontë myth as one of "genius and martyrdom, of solitude and loneliness, of domesticity and inspiration, of fame and death" (Peterson 2007: 72). Charlotte is often positioned as the instigator of these interlinked myths, since her 'Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*' and 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' in the 1850 reissue of Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* (1847) cast the three sisters as resident "in a remote district where education had made little progress" and where they were "wholly dependent on" themselves (Brontë 1976: 435). Although, as Beth Newman rightly observes, "crediting Charlotte with having


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almost single-handedly determined the critical assessment of her sisters' work seems to give outsized power to two short, obviously non-objective pieces of writing" (Newman 2016: 261), Charlotte's representation of the family's lives in Haworth influenced subsequent biographical works. Harriet Martineau's obituary, published on 6 April 1855 in the *Daily News*, portrayed Charlotte as a "domestic treasure" who lived in "utter seclusion" in the "dreary wilds" of Yorkshire (Martineau qtd. in Barker 1995: 775-776). Gaskell's *Life* was initially commissioned "as a work of demythology – as the authorised life whose purpose was to silence the false prophets who had already begun clamouring to tell the dead woman's story", like Martineau (Miller 2002: 59); yet, ironically, the *Life* ended up fortifying that very myth.

As noted, the Brontë myth emerged partly as a rebuttal to the accusations of coarseness and brutality levelled at the sisters' novels by contemporary reviewers, with Lewes describing Anne and Emily Brontë's books as "coarse even for men, […] the coarseness apparently of violence and uncultivated men" (Lewes 1999b: 292). Gaskell's *Life* accounts for the apparent brutalities and vulgarities depicted by the Brontës through a narrative history of Haworth's violence and the "wild, rough population" of Yorkshire (Gaskell 2009: 15). The opening of the *Life* emphasises the centrality of Haworth to the development and realisation of the Brontës' literary powers and, in turn, their literary violences. For Gaskell, it is

> more necessary in [Charlotte Brontë's] case than in most others, that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed, and from which both her own and her sisters' first impressions of human life must have been received. (Gaskell 2009: 15)

As the biography unfolds, these "peculiar forms" increasingly revolve around what Gaskell calls "tales of positive violence and crime", some of which "were doubtless familiar to the authors of 'Wuthering Heights' and 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall'" (Gaskell 2009: 23). Charlotte Brontë purportedly told Gaskell of a popular "saying round about Haworth" that underlines the vengeful, violent character of the people: "'Keep a stone in thy pocket seven year; turn it, and keep it seven year longer, that it may be ever ready to thine hand when thine enemy draws near'" (Gaskell 2009: 16). Gaskell goes on to


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recount the popularity of "[f]orest customs" until "the middle of the seventeenth century", which "tended to brutalize the population" (Gaskell 2009: 20). These included regular public beheadings, which engendered "a dogged, yet in some cases fine, indifference to human life" (Gaskell 2009: 20). Such indifference is presumed to linger in nineteenth-century Yorkshire, influencing the work of the Brontës and reflecting a more "customary" mentality of violence, which J. Carter Wood defines as "originating in an older social context, legitimating direct physical confrontation, appealing to less restrained notions of propriety and becoming associated with the poor and working-classes [*sic*]" (Wood 2004: 3-4). During the Brontës' own time in Haworth, the public practice of bull baiting reportedly continued in nearby Rochdale. Those "careless enough" to stand too close to the bull were thrown into the river, giving the spectators "the excitement of seeing one or two of their neighbours drowned, as well as of witnessing the bull baited, and the dogs torn and tossed" (Gaskell 2009: 23).

According to Gaskell, society beyond the Brontës' front door was not the only influence on their depictions of violence. Patrick Brontë's reputedly erratic behaviour is emphasised throughout the *Life*, with antics such as his "firing pistols out of the back-door in rapid succession" to work off "his volcanic wrath"; and the Brontë sisters listening out "for the report of a pistol in the dead of the night" when Patrick and their brother, Branwell, shared a bedroom during the latter's declining health (Gaskell 2009: 471, fn. 44; 227). Patrick denied these accusations, writing to George Smith (co-owner of Smith, Elder & Co., which published Charlotte's novels and the *Life*) on 9 June 1857 that he "never was subject to those explosions of passion ascribed to [him]" (P. Brontë qtd. in Barker 1995: 803). Yet, for Gaskell, a retelling of "these instances of eccentricity in the father", which often hinge on his violent temper, is "necessary for a right understanding of the life of the daughter" (Gaskell 2009: 45-46).

Gaskell's *Life* had a major impact on Charlotte Brontë's, and her family's, legacy. As Juliet Barker writes, the *Life* "banished the brutal, coarse and vulgar 'Currer Bell' of contemporary myth for ever" and replaced this persona with the "enduring portrayal of Charlotte Brontë as dutiful daughter, loving sister and happy wife" (Barker 1994: 101-102). Like Gaskell, Charlotte's "defence of her sisters" involved the insistence that "the novels' passion, violence, and bad language were not the product of their creators' imaginations, but were naïve copies from reality" (Miller 2002: 71). Aligning


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the 'coarser' aspects of the sisters' work with local stories of brutality distances their representations of violence from the wider implications for 'civilised' (primarily southern English) society and from their own creativity. The following three neo-Victorian reimaginings of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Wuthering Heights*, and the Brontë family's lives instead use violence as a means of spotlighting the apparent modernity and ongoing resonances of the Brontës' writings. The texts attempt to rewrite the meaning of violence and brutality within the Brontë legacy while simultaneously recalling – and in many ways returning to – the earliest responses to the sisters' works.

## 3. Making Violence Visible in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Mike Barker's three-part television series of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which aired on BBC1 in 1996, reimagines Anne Brontë's novel through the inclusion and enhancement of domestic abuse and marital rape not originally included in the source text.[11] At the time of the series' release, the producer, Suzan Harrison, remarked on the "'enduring appeal'" of the novel, noting that the "'unconventional intensity and passion of The Tenant Of Wildfell Hall [*sic*] shocked the Victorian establishment when it was first published in 1848'" (Harrison qtd. in Anon. 1996: 37). Harrison insinuates here that late-twentieth-century audiences would still be shocked by aspects of the source text, but that what was deemed unconventional by Victorian readers would perhaps be seen in more generous terms by late-twentieth-century viewers. Harrison's comments also point to an interest in retaining and returning to the shocking aspects of Victorian texts. In the case of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as well as other nineteenth-century novels including Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60), this often involves making "visible that which the Victorian novel obscures: the sexual abuse of women in Victorian culture" (Cox 2019: 153). The process of "making visible" aspects of Victorian texts which were only implicitly articulated in novels like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is arguably part of a broader trajectory in neo-Victorianism and in modern British society, one which is also traceable through depictions of physical violence in *Ill Will* and *To Walk Invisible*. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Arthur Huntingdon's emotional abuse of Helen Huntingdon is now frequently positioned by critics and creators as a prescient portrayal of twenty-first-century definitions of marital emotional abuse and coercive controlling behaviour, the latter of which was only criminalised in the UK through the Serious Crime Act in 2015.[12] The following section explores the


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scenes of violence added to the 1996 series alongside the ethical dimensions of such an addition, arguing that, while the series appears to give Helen a voice, its representations of marital assault dramatise violence, edging into the territory of voyeurism and sensationalism.

Episode 1 opens with the escape of Helen (Tara Fitzgerald) and her son (Jackson Leach) from her husband Arthur (Rupert Graves) and follows the early period of their time spent at Wildfell Hall as a refuge. Later, Helen walks through the marketplace with Arthur Jr., overhearing women commenting disapprovingly on her mysterious past and querying her respectability. Arthur Jr. runs to watch a Punch and Judy show and, as Punch beats Judy with a stick, the audience – including Arthur Jr. and several other children – laugh and clap (Barker and Nokes 1996a: Ep. 1, 43:20-43:34). Throughout the Punch and Judy scene, the series' main musical theme, which contains soaring violins and ethereal singing, is playing as the camera focuses on Helen and Arthur Jr.'s faces in turn. For Helen, the performance triggers a flashback to the moment she was almost raped by her husband, which the viewer witnesses incompletely. The music stops abruptly once Helen experiences her flashback, replaced with an ominous noise reminiscent of the beginnings of a warning siren. In the recollection, Huntingdon grasps her by the throat and pushes her against a wall (Barker and Nokes 1996a: Ep. 1, 43:35-43:53). He then throws her to the floor and, as she lies on her stomach, he begins to pull up her skirts. The scene cuts suddenly to Helen lying on her back, showing her partly in shadow and with her eyes closed; her face is expressionless, save for a faint frown, and it is difficult to tell whether she is unconscious or not. In the blurred background, the bottom half of Huntingdon's body – black trousers and shiny black shoes – can be seen leaving the room. If sexual violence has occurred, it remains unseen, residing in the cut between each scene.[13]

The editing is redolent of nineteenth-century literary practices of placing intimate violence on the margins of the text, more hinted at than rendered explicitly. Suzanne Rintoul clarifies that there were

> two contradictory impulses in Victorian print culture: an urgent move to discuss and depict what was understood as a uniquely private form of abuse; and an equally imperative mandate to keep it private and thus outside of public discourse. (Rintoul 2015: 3)


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Brontë's novel encapsulates these paradoxical impulses, particularly in its depiction of physical and emotional abuse in the marriage of Milicent and Ralph Hattersley (see Brontë 1992: 278). The novel never overtly represents sexual violence committed by Arthur against Helen. His abuse is primarily emotional and mental (alongside the structural violence of nineteenth-century coverture), as he torments her with "stories of his former amours"; there are, however, glimpses into their physical relationship, as he then attempts to "kiss and sooth [*sic*]" her, with Helen writing in her diary that "never were his caresses so little welcome as then" (Brontë 1992: 209).

The series continues to play with ideas of Victorian editing outlined by Rintoul. Throughout the first episode and most of the second, it is unclear whether Huntingdon rapes Helen or not. The event is only fully re-enacted in the second episode, this time with more context, as Helen confronts Huntingdon about his affair with Annabella Lowborough (Beatie Edney) and threatens to leave him, illegally taking their son with her.[14] Huntingdon then grabs Helen by the throat and drags her across the room, pinning her to the wall, and says: "With my body, I thee worship" (Barker and Nokes 1996b: Ep. 2, 49:54-50:03). He throws her to the floor, begins to lift her dress, and strokes her leg. The camera moves from Helen's face to Huntingdon's face and then to his caressing of her leg. He abruptly stops, and there is a hint of regret in his expression, as he smoothes down Helen's dress to cover her again. The moment of potential rape stalls as Huntingdon goes no further. Notably, in this longer enactment of the scene, Helen is lying on her front, rather than on her back, with her face more illuminated by light. She tells Huntingdon, in an assertion of agency: "I never want you to touch me again" (Barker and Nokes 1996b: Ep. 2, 50:47-50:51).

The second scene of threatened sexual assault occurs chronologically before the first, while Helen is pregnant. As she lies on the sofa, clearly in physical discomfort and emotional distress, largely induced by her husband's antics and absences, Huntingdon begins to caress her body before lifting her nightdress. He becomes increasingly forceful as she struggles and tells him: "No! No, the baby! Don't! Don't!" (Barker and Nokes 1996b: Ep. 2, 31:05-31:21). Huntingdon abstains from going any further. These scenes of assault are disturbing not only because of their explicit representation of intimate violence and the threat of marital rape, which was not criminalised in England until 1991, but also because Huntingdon ultimately appears to be fully in control of himself and the situation, exposing his manipulative capacity to


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consciously use the threat of violence as a means of wielding power over Helen. She and the audience are reminded that, if he wanted to, Huntingdon could take possession of her body however and whenever he liked, a fact underlined by his sinister recitation of the wedding vows in mid-attack.

The viewer bears visual witness to Helen's experience, leaving no doubt as to the kind of violence to which she is subjected. The adaptation's removal of the narrative frame, in which Gilbert Markham shares Helen's diary with his brother-in-law, heightens and clarifies the nature of the abuse, while also translating the "much more subtle oppressions implicit in nineteenth-century novels" for "audiences unfamiliar with the marriage and property laws of the time into a visual language of sexual violence" (Brosh 2008: 124). In the series, Helen tells her story directly without an intermediary.[15] Due to Gilbert's sharing of Helen's diary with his brother-in-law and referring to its contents as "connected with the most important event of [his] life" (Brontë 1992: 6), his transactional treatment of Helen's narrative has raised questions from scholars: "to what extent is Helen's narrative subsumed, and thus her voice silenced, by that of Gilbert Markham, which frames it?" (Cox 2017: 175). The removal of the narrative frame therefore suggests a return to Helen's own voice and a greater sense of narrative control in the adaptation, underscored by her defiant order to Huntingdon to never touch her again.

Such control may work to enhance perceptions of Helen's agency, yet the switch from literary-symbolic to cinematic visualisation brings with it a risk of voyeurism in the viewing and, in Gilbert's case, reading of Helen's testimony. Writing in the context of depicting rape in Hindi cinema, Jyotika Virdi pinpoints the double-edged nature of representing and not representing rape onscreen:

> As feminists we are caught between a rock and a hard place: the erasure of rape from the narrative bears the marks of a patriarchal discourse on honour and chastity; yet showing rape, some argue, eroticises it for the male gaze and purveys the victim myth. (Virdi 2006: 266)

The 1996 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* series traverses the line between erasure and display by showing what appears to be the aftermath of rape, then later representing the full moment of assault. Shown primarily from Helen's point


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of view, the viewer's gaze follows her sense of violation rather than affording Huntingdon any erotic potential. Yet the gap between the scenes, between the suggestion of rape and its clarification, points to a deliberate intensification and even sensationalisation of violence in line with the wider tendency to enhance narratives of violence in Brontë afterlives, one which is also visible in Stewart's *Ill Will*.

## 4. Re-Romanticising *Wuthering Heights*

The bicentenary of Emily Brontë's birth in 2018 prompted a concerted re-evaluation of Heathcliff as a character, primarily through a review of his dual cultural role as domestic abuser and Romantic heartthrob. Referring to Heathcliff as a "literary bad boy" and "perfect", Samantha Ellis admitted to being a "recovering Heathcliff addict" in *The Telegraph* (Ellis 2018: n.p.). Meanwhile, Louisa Young's contribution to *I Am Heathcliff: Stories Inspired by 'Wuthering Heights'* (2018), commissioned to coincide with Brontë's bicentenary, articulates the disillusionment felt by many readers of the text. 'Heathcliffs I Have Known' explores the nameless narrator's many experiences with abusive men like Heathcliff: "When I read *Wuthering Heights*, I wished afterwards I had taken notes and just added up his crimes. I wanted to draw up his charge sheet. Assault, assault, assault. […] Assault, assault" (Young 2018: 187). Young's protagonist rejects any connection between romance and Heathcliff's abusive behaviour, remarking that he is "a violent controlling drunk, a bully, a narcissist, psychotic, but it's OK because he's in *love*" (Young 2018: 187, original emphasis). In *Emily Brontë Reappraised*, also published during the bicentenary, Claire O'Callaghan refers to the disturbing cultural acceptance of Heathcliff as a "romantic figure", remembering that, upon first reading *Wuthering Heights*, she "felt [that] the level of violence Heathcliff perpetrates was hugely troubling" (O'Callaghan 2018b: 6). Such readings of Heathcliff chime with early reviews of the novel, with the anonymous writer in *The Examiner* observing that "[t]he hardness, selfishness, and cruelty of Heathcliff are in our opinion inconsistent with the romantic love that he is stated to have felt for Catherine Earnshaw" (Anon. 1848: 21). The alignment of certain nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century responses to Heathcliff indicates a returning to earlier narratives within new ones, which Stewart's *Ill Will* reflects through its depiction of graphic violence.


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*Ill Will* provides a fictionalised hypothesis both of Heathcliff's origins and of what happened during his three-year absence from the Heights in Brontë's novel.[16] Stewart imagines this period as one of generational trauma and cathartic vengeance with a spotlight on the violences of the British Empire, as Heathcliff discovers his mother, Lilith, had been claimed as property in the Gambia, then enslaved and raped by numerous men in Liverpool. A few years after Heathcliff was born, Lilith – a name given to her by her British enslavers – died by suicide from starvation.[17] The revelation of his heritage and of his mother's treatment leads Heathcliff to torture and murder the man who enslaved Lilith, Pierce Hardwar. Stewart spares no details. Having heard of how his mother "brought great pleasure to many a lusty gentleman", Heathcliff thrusts a "blade into Hardwar's mouth and out of his cheek" (Stewart 2018: 231-232). Pulling the knife out of his mouth, Heathcliff then uses it to "skewer an eyeball", plucking "the jelly from the end of the blade" and tearing off "his [victim's] breeches" (Stewart 2018: 231). Having extracted further information from Hardwar regarding Jonas Bold, who owned the fleet of ships on which Lilith was transported from the Gambia, Heathcliff then "cut[s] off [Hardwar's] penis and ball sack", stuffing the "bleeding genitals down his throat so that his screaming desisted" (Stewart 2018: 232). Heathcliff's narrative is addressed to Cathy, to whom he confesses that once he had "got started, [he] couldn't stop": he "cut [his victim's] ears off, his nose" and even "cut out his remaining eyelid so that he could get a better view with his one eye" (Stewart 2018: 232). He "slit open his stomach and pulled out the entrails", all while Hardwar was still alive (Stewart 2018: 232). Heathcliff feels "cleansed by the act of butchery, as though [he] was washing something deep inside [his] soul" (Stewart 2018: 233), echoing an earlier instance when he cut off a man's hand and claimed that "the act of violence had felt pure" (Stewart 2018: 66). This previous violence had "released" something within him (Stewart 2018: 66), opening a gateway which enables him to become the vengeful, ruthless Heathcliff so recognisable in Brontë's novel.

Although the graphic nature of Stewart's representations of violence may partly reflect a modern-day propensity for or desensitisation to explicit portrayals of brutality and murder, the scenes of extreme violence serve a purpose for Stewart. In an email exchange with Marta Bernabéu, Stewart explains:


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> As for the use of violence, it was really an attempt to restore the coarseness of the original novel, which has been lost over time […]. Notions of coarseness change over time, and I was trying to find a contemporary way of re-booting the violence that Emily intended. (Stewart qtd. in Bernabéu 2020: 102, fn. 14)

While Emily Brontë's intentions regarding the violence in *Wuthering Heights* are difficult to deduce, considering the relative dearth of extant letters and diary entries written by the author, the "use of violence" in *Wuthering Heights* is certainly less graphic and immediate than in *Ill Will*, as even the most explicit depictions of brutality – such as Heathcliff's "slitting up" of Hindley's wrist with a gun-knife – are mediated through narrative layers, the distance of time, and Lockwood's numerous blunders (Brontë 2003: 178-179). In the *Yorkshire Post*, Stewart ties the restoration of the novel's coarseness to the notion of recapturing the initial response to the novel, echoing Suzan Harrison's comments on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1996: "What shocked the Victorian reader wouldn't necessarily shock the contemporary reader, so it was about finding the equivalent for the modern reader" (Stewart qtd. in Huddleston 2018: n.p.). Neo-Victorian fictions' "blood spattered spectacles of violence" are nothing new, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben attest; and such graphic representations of violence "must be read in part as attempts to re-whet jaded appetites glutted by graphic gore and bodily violations depicted on television and cinema screens" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 27). Yet Stewart's interest in reinstating the 'shock factor' of *Wuthering Heights* for modern audiences is also linked to the process of returning the text to a pre-reception state, in a bid to distance the novel from iconic images such as Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon sat atop a windswept moorland crag in William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939) that so often eclipse the non-romantic elements of the text.[18] Stewart's comments point to a sense of loss in the novel's cultural legacy, as the violence and radicalism of the text have largely been displaced by the idealised romantic love of Heathcliff and Cathy in the popular imagination.

While *Ill Will* does not place emphasis on the romantic relationship, its depiction of violence as a means of recalling the 'shock factor' of Brontë's novel does return the text to early reviews, which tended to romanticise Emily Brontë, her work, and her literary violences. Carol Margaret Davison notes


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that, in *Ill Will*, "violence is shown to be genealogical and cyclical" (Davison 2020: 54). Regarding Emily Brontë's novel, Stevie Davies has also written of the "chain of violence within which [Heathcliff] acts", reflecting the sense that "abuse breeds abuse and hurt generates hate" (Davies 1994: 90). In both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and its 1996 adaptation, there is also the theme of generational violence. In the series, Arthur Jr.'s interest in the Punch and Judy show is pointedly paralleled by his father's abuse of Helen; and there are scenes in which young Arthur is forced to adopt the habits of Huntingdon and his friends, by learning inappropriate rhymes and being made to drink wine (Barker and Nokes 1996c: Ep. 3, 13:03-14:12). Stewart's and Harrison's harkening back to the initial reactions to Anne and Emily Brontë's novels establishes a further sense of the cyclical nature of violence, not only within the fictional worlds of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* but also within critical and creative responses to those worlds and their various legacies. Violence is fundamental to the genealogy of modern adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, comprised of the source texts, their many reimaginings, and their critical corpus. An element that was once deemed abhorrent and coarse by initial reviewers has now become a key ingredient in the apparent demythologisation, and in the actual *re*-romanticisation, of the narratives.

## 5. Reconfiguring Violence in *To Walk Invisible*

Another cyclical articulation of violence can be identified in Sally Wainwright's BBC biopic, *To Walk Invisible*, which reconfigures the role of violence within the Brontë legacy through ideals of authenticity and through the Yorkshire setting. Tracing the three years leading up to the publication of the Brontë sisters' novels in late 1847 and mid-1848, the film ends with Branwell Brontë's death in September 1848. It opens with a heated argument between father and son, following Branwell's dismissal from the Robinson family home where he was a tutor for the children and where Anne also worked as governess. During the argument, Branwell (Adam Nagaitis) repeatedly bangs a chair on the floor and tells his father "to stop asking [him] fucking questions" (Wainwright 2016: 04:26-04:34). Branwell's actions gesture to his explosive capacity for violence, directed both at others and himself, as described in the biopic and in Gaskell's *Life*. Later, Charlotte Brontë (Finn Atkins) takes letters from the carrier, while a letter she wrote to Ellen Nussey on 17 June 1846 is narrated over the scene: "to papa [Branwell]


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allows rest neither day nor night – and […] he is continually screwing money out of him sometimes threatening that he will kill himself if it is withheld from him" (Brontë 1995: 477). While the letter is being narrated in Charlotte's voice, the raised voices of Branwell and Patrick (Jonathan Pryce) can be heard from the study, with the former imploring the latter for money. In the dining room, Charlotte opens the post, which includes two of the favourable reviews of her, Anne, and Emily's 1846 poetry collection (Wainwright 2016: 55:29-56:14). Charlotte rushes to tell Emily (Chloe Pirrie) the news, but they are interrupted by Branwell storming out of the house, emphasising his disruptive effect on their creative plans (Wainwright 2016: 57:05-57:09).

Yet Branwell's violent behaviour is also positioned as generative, acting as a catalyst for the sisters' publishing endeavours, in another mirroring of Gaskell's depiction of the Brontës' work in the *Life*. As he leaves the parsonage, Emily confronts him about his treatment of Patrick. They square up to each other, both on the brink of a violent eruption. Emily tells Branwell: "Yeah, go on, have a go, see what happens" (Wainwright 2016: 57:16-57:18). When physical violence is avoided, due to Branwell's skulking off, Emily and Charlotte retreat to the house in search of their father. As soon as they enter his study, he tells them "it's nothing", as they find him with a bloodied cheek, prompting Emily to ask: "Did he hit you?" (Wainwright 2016: 57:52-57:57). Patrick avoids the question and simply tells her to not "make a fuss" (Wainwright 2016: 58:00-58:02). Crucially, the viewer does not see Branwell strike Patrick; the physical act of violence remains invisible, in an echo of the scene in Barker's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in which Huntingdon's apparent rape of Helen is not initially shown. After leaving their father's study, Emily takes Charlotte aside and confirms her willingness to send their novels to a publisher. In being directly preceded by the discovery of familial abuse, as well as the arrival of critical praise, the framing of this moment is noteworthy. As Hila Shachar writes, Wainwright is invested in demonstrating how the Brontë sisters' creativity "is born out of domestic economic necessity", rather than in "romanticising the creative process as one of individual genius" (Shachar 2019: 89). This focus on the financial impetus behind the Brontës' fictions "works to demythologise the 'Brontë myth' built around the sisters" (Shachar 2019: 90). It is specifically Branwell's violence which confirms his disintegration, shattering any sense of his financial reliability; and it reiterates Patrick's comparative vulnerability. Together with the positive reviews,


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which offer creative validation, Wainwright uses Branwell's violence and erraticism to highlight the economic requirement of publication and financial independence.

In *To Walk Invisible*, violence is still connected to the everyday lives of the Brontës in Haworth, not straying too far from Gaskell's attempts to explain away the 'coarseness' of the sisters' work. Instead of seeing such violence as something shocking, as the nineteenth-century critics did, there is now an attempt to reposition the role of violence within the Brontë legacy as evidence of how 'real' these writers were, in opposition to the ethereal, disconnected myth. This association between violence and recovery stems from a belief that readings and reimaginings of the Brontës in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often missed an apparently crucial aspect of their work, namely the 'shock factor' and coarseness which creators such as Stewart and Harrison highlight in their discussions of their respective adaptations. Wainwright is less explicit in expressing an interest in recovering the violence of the Brontës' lives and works; yet Wainwright does openly seek to present a 'true' retelling stripped of mythology, which relies on depictions of violence in order to puncture the vision of "the lonely woman artist as a heroic genius set apart by aesthetic integrity, intellectual detachment, and physical dis-ease" with which the three Brontë sisters are still so often associated (D'Albertis 1995: 1).

In the Bonus section of the DVD titled 'Sally's Vision', which outlines some of Wainwright's motivations behind the biopic, Faith Penhale, Executive Producer of *To Walk Invisible*, confirms that one of Wainwright's aims was authenticity: "I think from the start, Sally wanted to tell the true story of the Brontë sisters […]. She's never felt the story's been told faithfully, properly before, and she wanted to bust some of those myths around the Brontë sisters" (Penhale in Wainwright 2016: 00:04-00:37). As Wainwright herself remarks in 'Sally's Vision': "As with all my work, I want it to feel real. I wanted people, when they watch it, to really feel that they're transported back in time, that it's not a chocolate boxy world" (Wainwright 2016: 2:53-3:01). Wainwright also admits that she "was worried that there would be a preconception that the Brontë sisters were a little bit like Jane Austen, or a little bit like Louisa M. Alcott, these little ladies who wrote nice novels" (Wainwright 2016: 2:28-2:39). Apart from disclosing a derogatory attitude towards writers like Austen and Alcott, such comments also seek to distance the Brontës from the common perception of their novels as


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"primarily […] love stories" (Stoneman 2002: 231), as well as from the heritage films associated with adaptations of Austen's novels. For Wainwright, equating the Brontës with "little ladies who wrote nice novels" is a misreading of them as authors and, through the biopic, Wainwright wishes to offer a more "real" insight, one that carves the sisters out as different both to other nineteenth-century women writers and to viewers' apparent preconceptions. Violence is central to this vision, partly because it is itself fundamental to what Antonija Primorac describes as a "brutal 'kitchen-sink' realism" and "gritty, psychologically riveting, warts-and-all approach" which has become Wainwright's "trademark" (Primorac 2018: 80).

Yorkshire is also central to the realism of Wainwright's oeuvre, in an inversion of Gaskell's earlier depiction of the North and its associations with violence. In 'Sally's Vision', Wainwright articulates the explicit desire to "reclaim [the Brontë sisters] for the North, make it clear that they were Yorkshire people" (Wainwright 2016: 2:39-2:44). This returns us once again to Gaskell's *Life*, as well as to early responses to the Brontës' novels, which offered disparaging depictions of Yorkshire and its population. In an anonymous review of *Shirley* (1849) from 1850, Lewes advised Charlotte Brontë "to sacrifice a little of her Yorkshire roughness to the demands of good taste" (Lewes 1999a: 165). Another unsigned review of *Shirley* from the *Spectator* echoes Lewes's sentiments:

> the generality of the characters have so strong a dash of the repelling, as well as of a literal provincial coarseness, that the attractive effect is partly marred by the ill-conditioned nature of the persons, whether it be the author's fault or Yorkshire's. (Anon. 1999c: 131)

During the mid-nineteenth century, the North of England was stigmatised as backwards and 'uncivilised', reflected in Gaskell's description of Haworth's "wild, rough population" with their "blunt and harsh" accents, which pandered to southern English perceptions of the North (Gaskell 2009: 15). Unlike these reviews, Wainwright's portrayal of Haworth is far from reductive. Her vision of the village includes the skyline full of mill chimneys, the muddied, bustling Main Street, and the tree-less surroundings of the parsonage, all of which are in keeping with the now accepted reality, rather than the "*Brigadoon*-style fantasy", of Haworth (Barker 1995: 92). Instead of


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blaming Yorkshire for the production of such 'coarse' books, Wainwright seeks to reinstate the Brontës' 'Northern-ness' as positive and generative. In seeking to "bust some of those myths" and to "reclaim" the Brontës for the North, *To Walk Invisible* inverts the initial representation of "Yorkshire roughness" and its associations with violence, but ironically adheres closer to early perceptions of the family than Wainwright's comments suggest.

Gaskell's words are prescient when considered alongside Wainwright's more recent focus on the sisters' home life and their literary achievements leading up to September 1848:

> It is well that the thoughtless critics, who spoke of the sad and gloomy views of life presented by the Brontës in their tales, should know how such words were wrung out of them by the living recollection of the long agony they suffered. It is well, too, that they who have objected to the representation of coarseness and shrank from it with repugnance, as if such conception arose out of the writers should learn that, not from the imagination – not from internal conception – but from the hard cruel facts, pressed down, by external life, upon their very senses, for long months and years together, did they write out what they saw, obeying the stern dictates of their consciences. (Gaskell 2009: 272)

*To Walk Invisible* avoids suggesting that Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's novels emerged only from "what they saw". Yet here Gaskell is figuring coarseness, cruelty, and pain as creative catalysts for the Brontës' texts. In Gaskell's *Life* and the early reviews, as well as in Wainwright's biopic, violence acts as a generative force that sets the Brontës' writing and publishing of their novels in motion.

## 6. Conclusion: Recovering the Brontës?

The difference between Gaskell's and Wainwright's works, as well as Stewart's *Ill Will* and Barker's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is their respective visions. For Gaskell, her conception of coarseness and violence acts as a form of justification, an *apologia*, in line with Charlotte Brontë's own damage control in the 'Preface' and 'Biographical Notice'. For Wainwright in particular, there is no need for any form of apology because she wants, and


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believes, her vision to be the most authentic, the most "real". Echoing Juliet Barker's remarks in the Preface to *The Brontës* (1995) that finally "we can recognise [the Brontës] for who and what they really were" (Barker 1995: xx), Wainwright's approach suggests there is no longer a requirement to frame the Brontë sisters' lives and works in relation to nineteenth-century ideals of purity, feminine domesticity, and demure reputation. Barker, often cited as one of the most influential critics in deconstructing the Brontë myth, continues that, unlike mid-nineteenth-century readers, "we can value their work without being outraged or even surprised by the directness of the language and the brutality of the characters" (Barker 1995: xx). Yet such a position reinscribes what Benjamin Poore and Kelly Jones articulate as a tendency of present-day society to "assert its own superiority" over the Victorians and previous generations (Poore and Jones 2008/2009: 9), who were apparently less able to appreciate and even understand the Brontës. The belief that modern-day audiences are better equipped to value the Brontës' works complicates a parallel attempt to return readers and viewers to the initial shock caused by the first publication of the sisters' novels, as a means of reclaiming the texts and their radical potential. Both approaches hinge on ideas and ideals of recovery, a process aided by the inclusion and enhancement of violence in Brontë afterlives.

The three sources explored throughout this article share an interest in recovering aspects of the Brontës' lives and works from the myths that have accumulated around the sisters since the publication of their first novels, homing in on registers of coarseness. While Barker's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Stewart's *Ill Will*, and Wainwright's *To Walk Invisible* use different media and methods, they all engage in a process of making violence more visible in Brontë afterlives as a means of recapturing the coarseness and 'shock factor' of Anne, Charlotte, and Emily's novels and biographies without the apparent prejudices of the Victorian era. However, as noted above, Gaskell was herself engaged in a similar process of recovery in the *Life*, primarily the recovery of the Brontë sisters' reputations, which also relied on narratives of violence to quash rumours and represent the Brontës' everyday reality. Late twentieth- and twenty-first-century commentators and creators end up far more aligned with initial respondents to the Brontës' works and lives than they may initially acknowledge.

Of course, as Kohlke and Gutleben contend, late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century "readings of re-imagined nineteenth-century violence


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and perversity may be not so much an index of Victorian values as of our own proclivities" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 11, fn. 10). The Brontës are unique, however, in the centrality of violence to readings of their works both in the mid-nineteenth century and today. Wainwright's aspiration for authenticity, Stewart's interest in returning contemporary readers to the sense of shock felt by initial readers of *Wuthering Heights*, and Harrison's comments about the "enduring appeal" of the shocking elements of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* all invoke or use violence as a fundamental force in the Brontës' novels and their legacies. The repeated returns to violence in Brontë biographies, biopics, and adaptations in order to demythologise and de-romanticise unwittingly evoke the early reception of the sisters' writings. Paradoxically, however, in foregrounding similar tropes of the Brontë myth, these neo-Victorian texts end up re-romanticising the writers, gesturing to the possible futility of ever seeing the sisters for who "they really were".

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**Notes**

1. Henceforth Gaskell's text is referred to in abbreviated form as *Life*.
2. In the *Spectator* on 8 July 1848, the anonymous reviewer of Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), wrote that: "There is a coarseness of tone throughout the writing of all these Bells, that puts an offensive subject in its worst point of view, and which generally contrives to dash indifferent things" (Anon. 1999a: 249). For a fuller consideration of coarseness and the Brontës, see O'Callaghan and Franklin 2019.
3. I am indebted to Matthias Bauer's observation that, rather than aiming to romanticise, Gaskell in fact sought to de-romanticise the public image of Charlotte Brontë and therefore to turn her and her sisters into 'realists'.
4. With thanks to Angelika Zirker, who noted the simultaneous positive and negative readings of Brontë's description of Haworth.


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5. The gap of twenty years between the 1996 BBC adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and the subsequent two adaptations is notable. Since Barker's three-part series aired, there have been few major reimaginings of Anne's novels. Sam Baker's novel, *The Woman Who Ran* (2016), is a possible exception, relocating the Regency world to the twenty-first century and turning Helen from an artist into a war photographer; yet, as Baker writes in the 'Acknowledgements', the book "is in no way an attempt to rework that great novel of 1848" (Baker 2016: 388).
6. Cary Fukunaga's adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (2011) was, as Shelley Anne Galpin notes, initially "seen as a rejection of the more traditional 'heritage' style associated with classic literary adaptation" and its promotional material positioned the film as a "more radical new 'take'" which emphasised the novel's Gothic strands (Galpin 2014: 87). Yet, upon release, it was clear that Fukunaga had "sacrifice[d] 'true' fidelity to the source material in favour of a more commercially viable faithfulness to the popular conception of *Jane Eyre* as a love story (rather than a Gothic horror)" (Galpin 2014: 98).
7. For fuller discussions of the cultural dissemination of *Wuthering Heights*, see Stoneman 1996 and Shachar 2012.
8. I refer primarily to the Brontë sisters by their full names throughout this article. Within sections discussing all three sisters, I mainly use their first names. This is not to indicate reductive familiarity, but purely for brevity and to avoid confusion. At times, I use the collective 'the Brontës'. Although, as Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne note, the "tendency to see the sisters as a collective has sometimes blurred their differences", I am specifically interested in exploring the "family's mythic status" and its relation to violence (Regis and Wynne 2017b: 3). My adoption of 'the Brontës' is therefore a deliberate choice reflecting their collective cultural legacy (however mythic that may be) and the importance of violence within that shared perception of their works and lives.
9. Many of these explorations of violence have centred on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. See, e.g., Thompson 1963, Davies 1994, von Sneidern 1995, Berg 1996, Surridge 1999, Pike 2009, Gilbert 2017, and Pyke 2017. For considerations of violence in Anne Brontë's work, see, e.g., Surridge 2005, Stewart 2009, Berg 2010, Doub 2015, O'Callaghan 2018a, and Thierauf 2020. For explorations of violence in Charlotte Brontë's work, see, e.g., Spivak 1985, Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1989, Glen 2003, and J. Cox 2021.
10. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note, "neo-Victorianism is commonly held to expose the metaphorical dark underbelly of nineteenth-century life and society", uncovering and recovering numerous forms of


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violence which were often silenced and deemed taboo in nineteenth-century society (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 6).

11. Such language is reminiscent of the contested discourse of 'fidelity' in adaptation studies, through which adaptations are classified "as more or less faithful to their putative sources" (Leitch 2008: 64). While the following section considers how an adaptation differs from the source in its depictions and use of violence, I do not seek to offer "value judgements" (Leitch 2008: 64) on the adaptation or to question its creative validity, but instead to explore the reasons for and implications of the inclusion and enhancement of scenes of violence, specifically in relation to the cultural legacy of violence within both the Brontës' novels and subsequent adaptations of the source texts. For a full history of fidelity and infidelity in adaptation studies, see Elliott 2020: 16-20.
12. For instance, Claire O'Callaghan argues that the novel "anticipates the nuances of twenty-first-century feminist concerns regarding domestic violence" (O'Callaghan 2018a: 307). Adelle Hay writes that "Anne's characters face many of the same struggles that people do today. The fact that emotional abuse laws are only just starting to come into force are proof of that" (Hay 2020: 209). Doreen Thierauf's (2020) article in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* also explores *Wildfell Hall* from a presentist perspective, considering its articulations of emotional abuse in relation to the #MeToo movement.
13. The fragmented nature of Helen's memory and its sudden insertion into the series reflects a wider neo-Victorian interest in articulations of trauma. For further discussion of trauma and neo-Victorianism, see Kohlke and Gutleben 2010.
14. As Elizabeth Foyster writes: "Until the 1857 Divorce Act, […] for women with violent husbands, a marriage separation was the only formal and legally sanctioned way in which they could end cohabitation. Yet […] even marriage separation brought significant disadvantages for women. Their husbands retained all income from their real estate, could seize their personal property and return to claim their future earnings, and until 1839, had the right to the custody of their children" (Foyster 2005: 18). Although *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published in 1848, it is set during the Regency period and therefore reflects the pre-1839 legal status of children.
15. Regarding nineteenth-century epistolary novels like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Collins's *The Woman in White*, Liora Brosh writes: "women's stories, their voices, are constantly invaded and usurped" (Brosh 2008: 130). For Brosh, the narrative frames of these texts implicate the reader "in what both novels represent as a form of rape, an invasion of a woman's private self" (Brosh 2008:


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130). In the 1996 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* series and in the BBC's 1997 and 2018 adaptations of *The Woman in White*, the apparent symbolic rape of Helen in the former – through the sharing of her diary by her second husband – and of Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick in the latter – through economic and patriarchal oppression – is visually translated into literalised sexual assault.

16. For further critical discussions around the topic of Heathcliff's race and country of birth, as well as explorations of Irish identities and colonialism in the Brontës' works, see, e.g., Michie 1992, Eagleton 1995, von Sneidern 1995, Watson 2001, Thomas 2008, and O'Callaghan and Stewart 2020.
17. Stewart's unambiguous characterisation of Heathcliff as the son of a Gambian woman who was enslaved by a white Englishman reflects what Elizabeth Ho describes as part of neo-Victorianism's interest in "'writing back' to empire – a reinterpretation of canonical Western texts and a critique of entrenched master narratives – as an act of revision" (Ho 2012: 11). Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's novels are all part of this "Western" canon that routinely marginalises or evades the racial politics and white violence underpinning nineteenth-century British society, reflected in Charlotte's colonial metaphor with which this article opens.
18. Stoneman writes: "the picture of Catherine and Heathcliff together [in Wyler's film], as adults, on the hilltop, silhouetted against the sky which represents their mutual aspiration, has become a visual emblem of what the novel 'means'" (Stoneman 1996: 127). For further discussions of the impact of Wyler's imagery, as well as the cultural preoccupation with and impact of the romantic storyline in *Wuthering Heights*, also see Shachar 2012: 39-49.

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