Re-Imagining the Brontë Sisters in Isabel Greenberg's *Glass Town: The Imaginary World of the Brontës* (2020) and Bella Ellis's Brontë Sisters Mystery Series (2019–)

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Abstract:
Reconstructions of the Brontë sisters as exceptional women, worthy of empathy and admiration by twenty-first-century readers, increasingly rely on the entanglements of the sisters' literary ambitions and limiting contemporary gender roles. By relying on visual and topical appeals in the form of graphic novels and detective stories, neo-Victorian adaptations of the Brontës further broaden the dimension of biofiction (and vice versa). As instances of popular literature, Isabel Greenberg's graphic novel *Glass Town* (2020) and Bella Ellis's (aka Rowan Coleman's) Brontë Sisters Mystery Series (2019–) present creative approaches to and engagements with the Brontës, indicating that for a contemporary readership, interest in the authors as protofeminist characters proves to be just as important as interest in their literary oeuvre.

Keywords: adaptation, biofiction, the Brontës, Rowan Coleman, detective fiction, Bella Ellis, feminism, graphic novel, Isabel Greenberg, neo-Victorian.

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In her 1912 biography of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, entitled *The Three Brontës*, May Sinclair states that she has "been calling up ghosts for the mere fun of laying them; and there might be something in it, but that really these ghosts still walk. At any rate many people believe in them, even at this time of day" (Sinclair 1912: 1).[1] More than a hundred years later, Isabel Greenberg calls up these 'ghosts' in her metafictional graphic novel *Glass Town: The Imaginary World of the Brontës* (2020), in which she draws on the Brontës' juvenilia, while *The Vanished Bride* (2019) and *The Diabolical Bones* (2020) by Rowan Coleman (writing under the 'Brontë-esqe' pseudonym Bella Ellis) present the first two instalments of her Brontë Sisters Mystery Series, in which the sisters are re-imagined as amateur detectives. As

Neo-Victorian Studies
15:1 (2023/2024)
pp. 68-99

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10999644

instances of popular literature, graphic novels and detective fiction are genres that are at odds with the literary forms within which the Brontë sisters operated. As such, neo-Victorian adaptations of the Brontës extend the framework and dimension of further erasing genre boundaries for cross/transmedial biofiction. Building on Hila Shachar's work on writers in biopics, I argue that the Brontë sisters in Greenberg's and Ellis's work are refashioned as modernised heroines that radically challenge their contemporary society, highlighting their protofeminist characters (see Shachar 2020: 191). In my understanding, this modern heroine speaks up and speaks her mind, follows her own objectives, and is not deterred by gender expectations; instead, she challenges these expectations, thus continuing feminist campaigns. These texts/authors approach the lives and work of the Brontë sisters not as fixed biographical facts to which they must faithfully adhere, but rather as a set of elements that can be playfully and metatextually reassembled. While the three authors are frequently referred to as the Brontë sisters, in other biofictional works, focus is rarely placed on more than one woman at a time; the Brontë Sisters Mystery Series takes up the sibling moniker and makes it into a central thematic element. Particularly, it is the female collective craving and carving out space for women's creative needs that the two writers' works highlight, both stressing the community the three sister created for themselves.[2]

1. Adapting the Brontës and Neo-Victorian Biofiction

Adaptations of the literary works of the Brontës have abounded since the twentieth century, with the most recent cinematic adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (1847), directed by Cary Fukunaga, released in 2011. While interest in Charlotte and Emily's works has spawned various retellings of and sequels to *Jane Eyre* as well as of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), only recently have biographical engagements with the authors' lives on screen and in graphic and fictional accounts increased in number (see also Lucy Sherman's and Isabelle Roblin's articles in this issue). Scholars and non-scholars alike have always been fascinated by the Brontë sisters, as indicated by the biography of Charlotte Brontë, produced in 1857 by her contemporary Elisabeth Gaskell just two years after Charlotte's death, May Sinclair's 1912 biography, and in more recent years, Juliet Barker's seminal *The Three Brontës* (1994) and Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2001). A parallel may be discerned with the rise of neo-Victorian re-tellings of the lives of (early) feminist icons for a

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10999644
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more adolescent audience, such as Mary Shelley and Ada Lovelace in Jordan Stratford and Kelly Murphy's *The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency* (2015–) (see Tara Moore's contribution to this issue) and Emily Dickinson in Alena Smith's *Dickinson* (2019–) (see Barbara Braid and Anna Gutowska's article in this issue). Equally, the Brontë sisters have seen a creative engagement with their biographies, opening up neo-Victorian biofiction by relying on contemporary trends of visualised media in the form of graphic novels, as well as the highly popular detective fiction. Particularly current biofiction on the Brontës centres on the community created by the sisters.

Recent publications indicate a continuous interest in the Brontë sisters as subjects of study, considering them in various contexts such as feminist studies, adaptation studies, biography/reception studies, and cultural studies (see Burnham Bloom 2016; Dinter 2020; Franklin 2016; Hay 2020; Jansson 2018; John Moorhouse Marr 2017; O'Callaghan 2018; Shachar 2019 and 2020; Stoneman 2002 and 2014; Winnifrith 2012). Patsy Stoneman conceives of "The Brontë Myth" as "a matrix of interlocking stories, pictures and emotional atmospheres" (Stoneman 2002: 214). The editors of the 2014 special issue of *Brontë Studies* on the Brontës' afterlives foreground the writers' multimedia presence, asking "Whose Brontë is it Anyway?" in their introduction (Van Puymbroeck, Malfait and Demooor 2014: 251). The editors thus point towards "the Brontë[s'] represent[ations] at different times, in different contexts and different media" (Van Puymbroeck, Malfait and Demooor 2014: 251) and re-created by different authors. From the viewpoint of the twenty-first century, Sophie Franklin, Claire O'Callaghan, and Adelle Hay each consider one of the sisters' impact; as Franklin notes, the objective is to consider whether the writer, in her case Charlotte Brontë, "still matters" and "whether there are any parallels between how we live now and how she lived then" (Franklin 2016: 3). With surviving letters but no complete diaries, the Brontë myth comprises the ongoing and never-solved story of how the Brontë sisters, without financial or psychological support by their family, emerged from a deserted place in Yorkshire as writers that are still celebrated today.

Unlike cinematic adaptations of authors' lives such as *Becoming Jane* (2007) or *Miss Austen Regrets* (2007), in Sally Wainwright's biopic *To Walk Invisible* (2016), the focus remains predominantly on the relationships between the sisters and little attention is given to romance, detaching the women writers from any romantic motivation for their literary output (see

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Primorac 2018: 80). Whereas Victorian patriarchal norms dictated that all financial means and property would usually be tied to a male figure, father, brother, or husband, the sisters' successes are only tied to them and not a male counterpart. Likewise, discussing Wainwright's biopic, Shachar argues that "the three sisters form[…] a communal language of female creativity – […] the 'female chorus'" (Shachar 2019: 92).[3] Focussing on Wainwright's cinematic version of Emily, Shachar suggests that "as we move through the twenty-first century, perhaps we are inching towards a radical Emily Brontë who speaks to us through her characters about power and powerlessness, rather than about romance alone" (Shachar 2020: 191), a notion which, I argue, can be transferred to my own case studies in this article.

Despite this modern interpretation, Shachar suggests that Wainwright's movie "does not […] completely avoid[…] myth – she simply refashions a new, more complex and contradictory one for our own complex and contradictory age", by "merg[ing] Emily with her sisters as a collective muse for our modern times" (Shachar 2020: 191). I want to build on Shachar's work and suggest that both Greenberg's and Ellis's narratives work towards a re-visioning and challenging of nineteenth-century gender economies by merging the characters with readers' own desire to refashion the past and, as such, offer "a new, more contemporary way of approaching the author's role and status within culture that demands contradiction and plurality rather than unified discourses" (Shachar 2019: 91). I would argue that both Greenberg and Ellis's use of the Brontës coincides with contemporary society's urging of a union of women's voices to change and improve society in the face of a continued social hierarchy and patriarchal abuse of power made public in the #MeToo protests/reveal. Indeed, Nadine Muller's explanation of neo-Victorianism including "a great many neo-Victorian texts [that] thematise the constructive relationships between women's pasts and presents which have become so characteristic of contemporary feminisms" (Muller 2009/2010: 131), draws a particularly apt connection between feminist waves and the neo-Victorian cultural phenomenon. These waves start with the first feminist wave in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that urged society to strengthen women's role and allow them the vote, was continued by the second feminist movement in the 1960s to further these changes and allow for full independence in society, such as being allowed to have a profession, was closely followed by third-wave feminism in the 1990s that started women's empowerment campaigns, and culminated in an ongoing and

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evolving fourth-wave feminism that focusses on body politics and bodily autonomy that started around 2010. Instead of representing examples of postfeminism, which by and large denotes an 'end' of feminism, the texts I analyse here are very much aware of ongoing discussions of gender disparities as they centre on their female characters' arduous fights for autonomy in a patriarchal society.

To explore these new approaches to representations of the Brontës for a modern audience, I draw on Lucasta Miller's notion of "afterlife study", which she defines as "a form of critical enquiry which can interrogate the intersection between real lives and their cultural construction, both within the lifetime of the subject and posthumously" (Miller 2014: 263), particularly apt when considering the unfixed Brontë myth of the three sisters. Miller goes on to argue that "afterlife study […] looks beyond and beneath the inherently fascinating qualities of iconic lives", accounting for the latter's "grip on the popular imagination in terms of the historical contingencies through which the narrative of those lives entered the public arena" (Miller 2014: 263), thus underlining our continuous interest in certain people's lives. This idea of revisiting and revising of real-life people from the past seems to be a feature of neo-Victorian works as well, as Antonija Primorac observes that '"aftering' [is] a key element of the neo-Victorian phenomenon: a product of the desire to have more, and still more, of the cherished Victorian heritage today" (Primorac 2013: 90). However, she notes that it is "a version of heritage shaped and produced along the lines of contemporary needs and expectations" (Primorac 2013: 90), pointing towards the adaptation process inherent to these works of fiction that focus on real-life people. I would argue that authors of these kinds of fiction seek to re-insert historical people into our *zeitgeist* and make them live by our contemporary norms to reflect continuous issues in society, particularly as regards gender expectations.

As literature based on real-life people and events, biofiction, has been a constant vehicle for the renegotiation of past and present, a mediator of reality entangled with creative license. Indeed, as Caitríona Ní Dhúill notes, biofiction "dispenses with the claim to factual reliability or historical accuracy, permitting a fictional and speculative recreation of the subject's inner life" (Ní Dhúill 2012: 286). In similar fashion, Michael Lackey argues that "[t]he biographical novel is, first and foremost, fiction" (Lackey 2016: 5). As such,

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> [w]hat we get in a biographical novel, then, is the novelist's vision of life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person's life. Put differently, biographical novelists differ from biographers because, while authors of traditional and fictional biographies seek to represent the life (or a dimension of a life) of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists forgo the desire to get the biographical subject's life 'right' and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of life and the world. (Lackey 2016: 7)

Arguing along the lines of Lackey, this article is thus interested in how Greenberg and Ellis engage with the Brontë sisters as representing feminist icons, used to point to contemporary feminist campaigns. Following Stephen Spender, although characters might be inspired by real people, "[t]hey are also invented—that is new—characters, living in the scene of life that is [the] novel, independent of the material of real observation from which they came" (Spender 1980: 117). Perhaps most strikingly, in her analysis of biofictions of Virginia Woolf, Monica Latham has suggested that "[t]he most successful fictitious biographies are those which combine a savvy amalgamation of documentary evidence and poetic license, plausibility, and imagination" (Latham 2012: 355). Instead of simply foregoing questions of authenticity, Greenberg's and Ellis's works demonstrate a renegotiation of the Brontë sisters as radical protofeminists opposed to their own society.

This article offers two case studies, belonging to genres that are at odds with the Brontë sisters' own creative output, as a means of illustrating the transgressive and protofeminist lives of the three sisters. My work expands on what Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben argue

> is the process of remembering and reliving in 'fictional flesh' actual personal experiences which are not the writer's own, or even necessarily of the writer's own time, supplemented with experiences invented by the writer in the present. (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 18)[4]

The article further builds on Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell's *Drawing on the Victorians* (2017a), in which they suggest that "the Victorians

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10999644
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understood themselves in relation to (and as) layered image-textual productions" (Jones and Mitchell 2017b: 8), pointing towards the Victorians' understanding of images as directly reflecting (on) contemporary society. Kate Flint's afterword to their collection directs attention to the significance of graphic texts for neo-Victorian studies since "for an author/artist to employ images as well as words is a further form of palimpsest, writing over an intermedial dialogue that Victorians themselves had put into place" (Flint 2017: 331).[5] *Drawing on the Victorians*, however, discusses no *biofictional* graphic novels. Hence this article fills said critical gap by considering the Brontës as subjects of Greenberg's "contemporary image-text", to borrow Jones and Mitchell's term (Jones and Mitchell 2017b: 5), echoing the Victorian's reliance on visual media for its narratives.

Evidently, the ghosts May Sinclair called upon in 1912 are still haunting twenty-first-century readers and writers. In contrast to Greenberg's graphic novel, Ellis's detective fiction takes more liberties in its revisioning of the Brontës as new and more adventurous characters who nonetheless remain embedded in a similar biographical framework. As these neo-Victorian texts are "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), they bring forward their authors' subjective visions of the Brontë sisters. The re-imagined stories of the Brontës present as "self-conscious appropriations of prior nineteenth-century sources/discourses", which often include such "standard tropes as the fallen woman" (Kohlke 2014: 24, 25). In neo-Victorian fiction, Kohlke suggests, this recycled trope can signal "social and sexual liberation" and "empowerment by the socially marginalised", with oppressive discourse transformed into "carnivalesque spaces of self-fashioning" (Kohlke 2014: 25). As much can be seen in Greenberg's and Ellis's works that allude to the danger of becoming a fallen woman, in effect repurposing oppressive sociocultural discourses as backdrops for feminist interpretations of the Brontës as a women's community that promoted women's success against all odds.

Appropriation, Julie Sanders notes,"effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text" – in this case, the Brontës' biographies and creative works as well as the cultural discourses of their times – "into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 2016: 35). Hence Greenberg's appropriations of the Brontë sisters in *Glass Town* are neither fully realistic

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nor adhere largely to biographical facts, with the graphic novel predominantly relating Charlotte's unknown or 'lost' memories and the illustrator's visual interpretation of these. Likewise, in Ellis's detective series, the Brontës become ghosts of the past that inspire the contemporary twenty-first-century writer to revise their lives and stories; but 'literal' ghosts also present plot points in the stories, as past crimes continue to haunt the present. At once perpetuating and dismantling the Brontë myth of the three sisters as larger-than-life characters, the two writers' neo-Victorian works illustrate the broad spectrum of neo-Victorian biofiction on the Brontë sisters. Yet above all, in their engagement with the Victorian women writers' lives, Greenberg and Ellis explore the women behind the words, attempting to make them tangible and, simultaneously, more feminist.

2. Graphic Novels and Neo-Victorian Biofiction: *Glass Town* (2020)

While the Brontës' status as cultural icons is manifested by the continuous adaptations and appropriations of their biography, only in recent years have graphic novels started to centre on the sisters.[6] A watershed moment for neo-Victorian studies, Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1989-1998) collapsed boundaries between biographical studies and comic adaptations (see Pietrzak-Franger 2009/2010). Since then, numerous historiographical accounts have been adapted into graphic novels, giving attention to public personae, writers, and artists.[7] However, extant studies on the graphic memoir and biographical graphic novels do not account for a connection with the more popular, and as of yet understudied, subgenre of biofiction in which a real person becomes a character of a new or re-imagined narrative.[8] Monika Pietrzak-Franger refers to Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven who have argued that a graphic work "usefully challenge[s] the transparency of realism in integrating prose and drawing, rendering the question of verisimilitude productively unstable" (Chute and DeKoven qtd. in Pietrzak-Franger 2009/2010: 176). Instead of clinging to biographical or historical facts, graphic works thrive on a subjective vision of a story in terms of content as well as style.

I briefly want to mention Glynnis Fawkes's graphic novel *Charlotte Brontë Before Jane Eyre* (2019), published a year before Greenberg's text, and which was one of the first graphic novels explicitly covering the Brontës and incorporating biographical background information into their designs and structures. Both graphic novelists' visual approaches facilitate a closer engagement with the celebrated Victorian authors in which the author-

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illustrator proposes their "own vision of life and the world" (Lackey 2016: 7). The biofictional graphic novel, I suggest, productively foregoes questions of authenticity. At the same time, I argue, Greenberg's novel relies on nineteenth-century history to re-purpose and propose her revisions of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne as early feminists.

Fawkes's *Charlotte Brontë Before Jane Eyre* focusses on Charlotte, relying on Juliet Barker's biography to visualise the author's path towards celebrity as indicated in the acknowledgements (see Fawkes 2019: 105). As such, the graphic novel aligns with biofiction's regular "disclaimer" that the author took creative liberties and does not offer a biographical document (Novak 2017: 12). Although Fawkes's text includes only two pages of visualisations of Glass Town, the fictional realm of the Brontës' juvenilia, it portrays the three sisters as creative from their childhood onwards. While it bears similarities with Greenberg's work, Fawkes's graphic novel is exclusively illustrated in blue-tinted black and white: the sketch-like illustrations render the characters into schematic figures that resist the notion of a finite interpretation. Greenberg's *Glass Town* takes a considerably more metatextual step in not only portraying Charlotte Brontë's psyche, but also the siblings' juvenilia. Contrary to Fawkes's re-visioning, Greenberg's work does not end at the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 but illustrates Charlotte Brontë's internal reflections on the aftermath of her siblings' deaths. Indeed, echoing biofictional narratives, "graphic narrative", Chute and DeKoven note, "does the work of narration at least in part through drawing—making the question of style legible—so it is a form that also always refuses a problematic transparency, through an explicit awareness of its own surfaces" (Chute and DeKoven 2006: 767). And owing to "this foregrounding of the work of the hand", they go on, "graphic narrative is an autographic form in which the mark of handwriting is an important part of the rich extra-semantic information a reader receives" (Chute and DeKoven 2006: 767). In fact, applied to biofiction studies, the visual approach of re-visioning real people's lives makes it even more accessible for people to follow internal thought processes, as well as external actions. Neither graphic novel seeks to offer an accurate biographical account, instead positioning the Brontës as characters in their respective narratives, with each artist taking a considerably different approach in terms of content and style in order to tell their own story of the Brontë sisters. This speaks to Heilmann and Llewellyn's question: "what are we adapting: the Victorians/Victorian text or the mediation they/it have

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already undergone in popular culture?" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 212). Taking into account the various "intertexts and interplays between different adaptations" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 212) of the Brontës' lives and works, a certain consensus on the siblings' backstory seems to have been established. Tellingly, particular tropes appear in both narratives, such as the vast and bleak landscape surrounding the Brontës' parsonage, which already – at least in art – replicates Gaskell's vision rather than reality (see Miller 2020: 58).

Seemingly attuned to the tensions between biography and fiction, Greenberg's *Glass Town* is promoted as "a graphic-not-quite-biography of the Brontës, and their Juvenilia" on the author's website (Greenberg N.d.: n.p.). In Greenberg's illustrations, the Brontës are made "fictional flesh" on the pages, to borrow Kohlke and Gutleben's earlier cited term (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 18). Yet the graphic novel also attempts to illustrate in a double sense the interior world of the three writers: *Glass Town* is certainly not only about Charlotte Brontë, but it centres on the depiction of her grief and sorrow and her struggles as to how to carry on without her sisters. Particularly, *Glass Town* zooms in on Charlotte's relationship to her siblings' creations Angria and Gondal as well as the fictional characters that roam this universe she becomes engaged with, with the story being told from her point of view. Whenever Charlotte muses on her mental state and environments, these reflections are depicted taking place within the context of the fictional realms, harkening back to childhood escapism rather than reality. As such, Greenberg's graphic novel subscribes to and extends Sally Shuttleworth's definition of neo-Victorian texts as "[p]lots and preoccupations [that] focus more on the slippery nature of identity than crises of conscience" (Shuttleworth 2014: 182), since the novel illustrates Charlotte's search for herself after the loss of her siblings (although these traumas could also be said to have led to a "cris[is] of conscience" seeing that Charlotte Brontë lost all of her siblings in a span of eight months, with her being the only surviving sibling). The fictional characters become material in Charlotte's imagination as they interact with her. Taking this one step further, the fictional universe of Angria and Gondal in *Glass Town* serves as a metaphor for Charlotte's grief and psychological reflections on her siblings' legacies. As biofiction allows for re-evaluations of histories as they have been recounted so far (see Lackey 2017: 344), the graphic novel enables Greenberg to not only bring the fictional universe of Angria and Gondal to life, thus visualising the juvenilia

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of the Brontë siblings, but also to connect it to Charlotte Brontë's physical and mental situation. This echoes Latham's observation that biofictions offer a "greater potential" to writers than do biographies, since allowing the author to "delve into [their subject's] imaginary inner life, construct[ing] an 'as if,' and bring the reader into [the subject's] psyche" (Latham 2012: 356). Jared Gardner's description of readers "fill[ing] in the gaps, to make connections between issues", with "the serial gap inherent to comic production, mirroring and complicating the gaps between the frames themselves" (Gardner 2006: 800), can also be adapted to the depiction of real life people – authors and artists seek to fill the absence of information with their own narrative version, while usually claiming no authority or authenticity. The visualisation of this place of introspection for the author is rendered more accessible to readers as they are quite literally taken into Charlotte's mind. The graphic novel becomes a space of creative engagement with the author's life, where Greenberg envisions a psychological working through of Charlotte's grief, 'filling in the gaps' in Charlotte's biography.

Figure 1: Glass Town in *Glass Town* (Greenberg 2020: 50-51).
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Greenberg's Glass Town is thus shown as a creative and introspective outlet, whereas Haworth is portrayed as a vast grey and red landscape, mirroring the Brontë siblings' creativity as antithesis to their real-life environment. In Greenberg's graphic novel, the Brontës' creation of Angria and Gondal is rendered into colourful artistic interpretations in stark contrast to the biographical storyline that is held in red and white (to indicate past memories), and black, blue, grey and white colours (to represent the present), hinting at the various life stories that are interwoven in Charlotte's biography (see **Figure 1**). Haworth becomes a space in which the imaginative and creative Brontë siblings are exceptions, drops of colour, that spill over the pages in an attempt to liberate themselves from restrictive gender roles. As their family home, Haworth serves as a refuge from society before and after the siblings' publications. But it is also a domestic space that endorses typical nineteenth-century gender norms, as when Patrick Brontë informs his daughter Charlotte that the sisters would have to get married, although the sisters all remain in their family home until their death (with Greenberg excluding Charlotte's actual marriage, perhaps to stress unity between the siblings). Hence, Greenberg roots her revisioning in a historical context, suggesting that, having functioned as a creative outlet for the young Brontë siblings, the fictional world of Glass Town as an escapist world transforms into another kind of sanctuary or remembrance for the grieving adult Charlotte.

Greenberg's juxtaposition of multiple storylines – the chronological narrative of the biographies of the Brontës, and the grieving Charlotte after the loss of all of her siblings – creates a dual narrative in which the fictional worlds of their youth present a link between the two. Charlotte Brontë's involvement with characters in the fictional realm begins at her stay at Roe Head School where she works as a teacher. Here she imagines losing herself in the fictional worlds of Angria and Gondal, while unable to write in the real one. Frequently, her narration of the story fluctuates between past and present, recounting how she "catch[es] glimpses of Zamorna", Angria's king, "at the edge of [her] vision" (Greenberg 2020: 118). The repression of Charlotte's creative potential and desire to write thus becomes visual in the escape into the fictional realms of her youth, recalling a productive phase of literary endeavour. Eventually, Charles, her imagined narrator (see **Figure 2**), urges her to return to the real world, arguing with Zamorna that it is "enough" and asking why he "brought her here" (Greenberg 2020: 147). Imagining herself

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to become the love interest of her favourite character Zamorna, Charlotte not only reveals her desire for sexual fulfilment in a romantic relationship, but even more so the increasing repression she feels in the real world during that period of her life.

Figure 2: Charlotte and her fictional narrator Charles converse in Glass Town (Greenberg 2020: 13). © Isabel Greenberg. Reprinted with kind permission from the author.

Structurally, *Glass Town* frames its story as a retelling of the Brontës' biography that Charlotte recounts to Charles, a fictional character from the siblings' juvenilia that she helped create. Abiding by Lackey's definition of biofiction, "the goal is not to do biography. Rather, it is to use history and biography in order to construct a narrative" (Lackey 2016: 7). Fittingly, the graphic novel immediately introduces not only the Brontë family members but also the fictional characters from Angria and Gondal as dramatis personae, foreshadowing the metafictional narrative. In the first few panels, the adult Charlotte is seen sitting down on the grounds next to her home in Haworth asking of an as yet invisible figure, "Who's there…? […] Is it you? After all this time?" (Greenberg 2020: 7, un-bracketed ellipses in the original). Charles then appears and informs her of the state of the fictional realm, claiming that "Glass Town remains" (Greenberg 2020: 10). Initially, Charlotte seems to deny any knowledge of Glass Town, giving Charles a rather condemning sideways glance and crossing her arms, but then she asks rather reluctantly, "[i]t does…?" (Greenberg 2020: 11, original ellipses). Charles offers to take her back to her fictional world, but Charlotte remains

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unsure, even though she wants to remember "[m]ore than anything" (Greenberg 2020: 12). Instead, she recalls the events that led to this moment of isolation, as "none of this would have happened if six hadn't become four", and concludes that, as "[t]his story ends with funerals", "[i]t should begin with them too" (Greenberg 2020: 14). In fact, however, the graphic novel begins and ends with Charles and Charlotte, creating the illusion that Charles might be her "cynical alter ego" rather than just her fictional creation (Miller 2020: 4), a projection of what she truly desires. Ultimately, Charlotte refuses to accompany Charles to Glass Town but decides to live her life in Haworth, emphasising that she is now "a published author" and "actually rather famous" (Greenberg 2020: 199).

In a way, it is thus Charlotte who calls up the ghosts; Charles becomes an extended metaphor of her childhood memories when all the Brontë sisters were creating the fictional worlds that Charles and other characters inhabit. Greenberg further introduces a meta-level of adaptation into her work in which the the author's creation interacts with the author: as the narrator of Angria, Charles "interject[s]" the narrative to introduce "our cast", which Charlotte counters with "excuse me, Charles, but who is the narrator here?" (Greenberg 2020: 54, 57). The five principal characters and their implications in the story that Charlotte created in her youth are then woven into the dual biographical narrative of past and present. But Greenberg also hints at the metafictional self-reflexivity of the fictional worlds of Glass Town by spinning the story further than the events in the original juvenilia. On the last few pages, Charles relates to Charlotte what has happened since the last time she visited her fictional world – as if the memories of her youth had not been static and immobile but developed just as much as she has. Charles tells Charlotte that because of the events that took place, only Glass Town remains, the city that the four Brontë siblings created together, but that Angria and Gondal have been destroyed – mirroring and echoing the death of Charlotte's siblings who created these fictional cities and lands with her. As Charles puts it, "some things cannot be made alive again" (Greenberg 2020: 209). Yet, even though Glass Town will "crumble" if Charlotte does not return, the memory lives on; her characters are "immortal" (Greenberg 2020: 209, 210), existing independently of the fictional world, just as the legacy of her siblings remains alive in Charlotte – a legacy and burden alike.

Greenberg creates a fictional account of her interpretation of what the Brontës' juvenilia and lives could have looked like, but also of how Charlotte

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could have remembered her siblings. Indeed, *Glass Town's* creative engagement with the siblings' juvenilia further reflects on the women writers' historical sociocultural context: women were not expected to publish works of fiction to secure financial independence instead of finding happiness in marriage. Albeit not necessarily a lucrative avenue at the time of their writing, Greenberg's graphic novel suggests that the Brontë sisters picked up the pen not just *despite* their roles as women, created for them by patriarchal society, but also *because* of the socioeconomic situation they are put in (also see Shachar 2019: 89). Echoing Shachar's observation on cinematic renditions of the siblings, Greenberg's graphic novel re-fashions the Brontë sisters as early feminist heroines who perseveringly seek to make a name and provide for themselves (see Shachar 2020: 191). The patriarchal system of Victorian society, which expected a woman to rely on a man to provide for her, limited the three sisters but also motivated them to succeed despite these expectations. Rather than a pure escapism into fiction, the sisters, particularly Charlotte, display a desire in Greenberg's work to share and publish their works. Charlotte's loss of her sisters reflects a loss of her support network or the lack of such and again could be said to stand in for a metaphorical sisterhood against patriarchal oppression or limitations. These interpretations are embedded in the fabric of nineteenth-century culture, controverting the boundaries between historical fact and fiction but also reflecting contemporary twenty-first-century feminist ideology.

The graphic novel illustrates the female network which the three sisters created for themselves, through which they supported, challenged, and pushed each other to literary greatness. Emily and Anne continue their work on Gondal, positioning themselves against Charlotte and Branwell's Angria in their childhood. Later, it is Anne who convinces Emily to publish her works. *Glass Town* demonstrates how each of the three women craves artistic engagement with and within their environment, despite and because of their situation as middle-class women with few options in life. At different points, the three sisters voice their dissatisfaction with this situation, and Emily in particular demonstrates her wish for an alternative life, one of independence. The fictional worlds of the three sisters are thus escapist realms to distract themselves from their fairly uneventful lives at Haworth, and also a way of liberating themselves from the patriarchal grip that they find themselves in by virtue of their gender. As Anne suggests, their novels and literary creations are still haunted by the ghosts of their juvenile escapist world full of "Glass

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Towners, [and] the Gondolians", which Charlotte denies, merely agreeing to "[a] passing resemblance at most" of Mr Rochester and Zamorna (Greenberg 2020: 194). Yet, immediately afterwards, only Charlotte sees Charles standing outside in front of the window, controverting her claim. Perhaps this is a way of signifying that while Charlotte Brontë was the most determined to have her work published, she was also the most ambitious to receive feedback, and in Greenberg's graphic work she seems to show the strongest ties to the fictional realm. Further, it is her connection to the fictional realm that sets the story into motion, with Greenberg having Charlotte, as the predominant point of view, create the myth. When the three sisters leave, Charles stands next to the desk with the books from which their respective first lines appear to rise in mist-like speech bubbles (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: The three sisters are leaving, as their books burst with the first lines of their respective debut novels in *Glass Town* (Greenberg 2020: 195).
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Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* is the only work to spawn two such bubbles, one with the novel's opening line. Thus, just as Charles promises, the Glass Towners "will sneak into [her] stories" (Greenberg 2020: 210). Greenberg's graphic narrative thus directs attention to the lasting impact of the sisters' juvenilia on their later publications as well as the entanglements of fact and fiction in Charlotte's life, playing with the 'Brontë myth' to stress the subjective interpretation of the Victorian writers' lives and their present-day significance as early feminists. Greenberg's metatextual graphic novel plays with the boundaries of fact and fiction to offer a new narrative surrounding the three sisters, with its visualisation harkening back to the Victorians' own relationship and fascination with the visual medium.

3. Neo-Victorian Detectives in The Brontë Sisters Mystery Series

Detective fiction such as James Tully's *The Crimes of Charlotte Brontë* (1999), as well as Laura Joh Rowland's The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë series (2008-2010), supposedly based on and inspired by true events in the author's life, has likewise appropriated the Brontë myth. Similarly, Emily and Charlotte have been made the protagonists of Michaela McColl's *Always Emily* (2014), a Young Adult novel that deals with the sisters' hometown as a scene of criminal activities. In this second case study, I want to focus on Bella Ellis's Brontë Sisters Mystery Series to stress the ongoing trend of neo-Victorian detective fiction for biofiction studies, particularly in highlighting the Brontë sisters' early feminist characters.

The genre of crime fiction has proven popular for neo-Victorian novels, as it centres around topics that were in fashion in nineteenth-century literature as well: secrecy and scandal, but also "trauma, archaeology and history, and inheritance" (Cox 2019: 4).[9] As Jessica Cox argues, "the characteristics of detective fiction provide a useful metaphor for the relationship between past and present, as authors, historians, and readers seek to uncover, to detect and solve the mysteries of the past" (Cox 2019: 75). Ellis's use of similar tropes and storylines echoes and confirms Cox's notion of neo-Victorian fiction, but also complicates it. Indeed, the re-visioning of the Brontë sisters as the detectives opposes scholarly attempts to deconstruct the Brontë myth as Ellis plays with the sisters' larger-than-life personalities whose biographies themselves remain, in part, a mystery.

In fact, Ellis's premise follows not only nineteenth-century mysteries that put women sleuths at the centre of the story but also echoes current neo-

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Victorian trends. Obviously, Ellis's series alludes to both iconic nineteenth-century male detective figures or professional detectives in texts such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60) and *The Moonstone* (1868) and the female detective in his later *The Law and the Lady* (1875), but also to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories (1887-1927). However, it should be noted that Victorian women detectives already appeared in nineteenth-century literature by women authors, such as Mary E. Wilkins's 'The Long Arm' (1895).[10] Likewise, female detectives featured in male-authored texts, such as Andrew Forrester's *The Female Detective* (1864) and William Stephens Hayward's *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864).[11] Women detectives have become a prominent feature of neo-Victorian fiction, such as in Nancy Springer's Enola Holmes Series (2006–), which has spawned two *Netflix* adaptations.[12] While not a novelty, then, Ellis's series extends these stories, by inserting an explicitly female community into the story, with each sister supporting and challenging the other, and also convincing each other to partake in the investigations. Strikingly, the first two instalments in Ellis's mystery series not only feature women detectives, but also female perpetrators, with other women characters variously colluding with malefactors and helping the protagonists in the course of the narratives. Thus, the series aligns with Cox's observation that "[t]here are fewer damsels in distress and rather more damsels *causing* distress in the sensation novel compared to its Gothic predecessors" and, as such, "[i]n their roles as (amateur) detectives, the transgressive heroines of sensation fiction become the instigators, rather than the subjects of surveillance" (Cox 2019: 42, 79, original emphasis). The same, of course, also holds true for neo-Victorian sensation fiction, which Cox discusses in relation to detection. The "female chorus" (Shachar 2019: 92) of the Brontës is further explored by Ellis in her depiction of the Brontës engaged in a cluster of female activities, as when the three sisters visit a female doctor, female witnesses, or a female medium.

Rowan Coleman, publishing under the Brontë-esque pseudonym of Bella Ellis, released the first instalment of the Brontë Sisters Mystery Series, *The Vanished Bride* in 2019, followed by *The Diabolical Bones* (2020), *The Red Monarch* (2021), and *A Gift of Poison* (2023). While Ellis appropriates the pseudonym to create closeness and a metaphorical sisterhood with the Brontës, her novels do not rely on the same genre as her literary ancestors and inspirations. Instead, Ellis uses the Brontës as protagonists in her detective stories, and as such echoes Latham's claim that "as historical figures become

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characters in a fictitious work, poetic license allows [authors of biofiction] to go off the beaten track and give the reader a different image of the subject from the one contained in the standard biographies" (Latham 2012: 356). In the first two instalments discussed in this article, Ellis confronts the Brontë siblings with two distinct cases which they put themselves in charge of solving. In their first case, set in 1845, a young mother mysteriously disappears and her cruel husband becomes the sisters' prime suspect. In their second case, events take place one year later. Inside the chimney of one of the larger estates in Yorkshire, bones have been discovered, with the ominous Cliffton Bradshaw the most probable suspect for the sisters. In both cases, young women seem to have been failed by their husbands, casting aspersions towards the patriarchally steeped Victorian society in which women were under their father's control or subsumed under their husband's identity. The three Brontë sisters emerge as explicitly feminist characters who want to solve the mystery not just because of their interest in their community, boredom, and excitement, but, most importantly, because they feel for their fellow women.

As the sisters pretend to work "on behalf of the firm of solicitors Bell Brothers and Company" (Ellis 2019: 85), Ellis relies on the actual pseudonym of the Brontë sisters, acknowledged as a way to move in Victorian society without putting their reputations at immediate risk. The three sisters are portrayed as exceptionally smart women, who are not only incredibly successful at manipulating their witnesses and suspects into helping them solve mysteries but are also avid sleuths able to use techniques of forensic criminology when they recover bones. The series strays into the supernatural and mythological realm in the second instalment when the local "visionary" helps the amateur detectives to further their investigations in discovering the identities of the human remains and the perpetrator and predicts that Anne, Emily, and Branwell "shall all die unmarried" (Ellis 2020: 211). As Sanders notes of neo-Victorian fiction,

> [t]he reader is acting as a detective of sorts when encountering this kind of layered fiction, deciphering clues and recognizing the parallels, but also registering the significant differences between the rendition of the nineteenth century achieved in the novels and the current context of the interpretation. (Sanders 2016: 159)

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Ellis's series both includes biographical references and textual allusions to challenge the reader to search for clues. In this case, the reader would have to know that Anne, Emily, and Branwell indeed all passed away without having been married. Throughout the novels, Ellis incorporates intertextual references and allusions to the Brontës' later works, such as Emily's fascination with moors (as in *Wuthering Heights*), and a violent husband (as featured in Anne's 1848 *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*), who locks his first wife in the attic, only for her to eventually kill herself (as in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*). Evidently, however, whether such intertextual references in neo-Victorian detective novels are perceived as such "depends entirely on the reader being able to respond to these different narratives in a particular way" (Cox 2019: 9). Ellis's foreshadowing and anticipation of the Brontës' literary output seems inspired by the sisters' break with class and gender boundaries in their collective adventures as detectives. The murder and mystery cases provide direct inspiration for the sisters' publications, also coinciding with the rise of literacy and Victorian innovations in printing technologies, which made books more affordable, thus promoting the rise of popular fiction, such as penny dreadfuls and sensation novels, for the masses.

Invoking a similar yearning and contemplation as Greenberg's graphic novel, *The Vanished Bride* starts with a prologue set in 1851, in which Charlotte reminisces about her and her siblings' past. Charlotte thus reflects on "how very little of the truth those people knew. How very little of what she and her sisters truly were" (Ellis 2019: 4), referring to their early biographers and critics. Ellis thus seems to point towards biographers and perhaps also historians who deem the Brontës to have one, almost fixed, collective biography. As Charlotte "meticulously burn[s]" the records and evidence of their detective work, she refers to "[t]hose […] secrets that would never be told, but, oh, what wonderful secrets they were" (Ellis 2019: 4, 5). Ellis thus assumes the role of fictive biographer, using the idea of the Brontë sisters as exceptionally adept women to tell a different story of their lives – one in which they not only dared to question concepts of marriage and women's role in society in their literary output but also reflected the same critique of gender expectations in their crime-solving adventures. Indeed, Charlotte herself creates the myth of the Brontë sisters by burning all evidence of their investigations.

Thereafter, the novel introduces the case at hand, the disappearance of Elizabeth Chester of Chester Grange in 1845, in effect disclosing those very

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"secrets" to the reader in confidence. *The Diabolical Bones* starts with a similar sentiment, again comparable with Greenberg's metaphorical visualisation of isolation, as Charlotte in 1852 complains that "[i]t was as if her loneliness were whittling away a little bit of her, day by day" (Ellis 2020: 1). While the story is framed as stemming from Charlotte's memory, as the siblings try to solve the mystery of the appearance of a set of bones at a nearby estate, the following chapters' points of view rotate among the three sisters (as they do in all instalments). The novels thus position themselves as filling in gaps in the Brontës' buried past, posing as the Brontës' lost memories, with the events happening shortly before and later in parallel to their publication efforts. In her "own vision" (Lackey 2016: 7) of their lives, Ellis depicts the Brontë sisters as breaking contemporary gender boundaries, once more ringing true to Shachar's observation that recent neo-Victorian adaptations refashion the sisters as modern heroines (Shachar 2020: 191), as young and unmarried women roaming the moors, most often unaccompanied, and without informing their father about their whereabouts. The fact that the sisters need to keep these adventures a secret from their father and often lie to the people they encounter in the course of their detection, all in order to retain their respectability, highlights the sisters' break with gender ideals. With her crime fiction, Ellis takes inspiration from the women writers' own early feminist works and heroines (such as Jane Eyre, Shirley Keeldar, Lucy Snowe, Catherine Earnshaw, Agnes Grey, and Helen Graham), and challenges the image of chaste and meek Victorian women. The Brontë sisters' portrayal instead provokes the reader to re-evaluate longstanding ideas of nineteenth-century women's submission and supposed cultural inferiority as promoted by patriarchal ideology, in which they were not necessarily expected to use their own minds, particularly not to solve murder cases.

In Ellis's novels, the three sisters challenge nineteenth-century expectations of femininity in their investigations of horrific and morbid crimes, echoing sensation fiction of the time. In effect, Ellis imagines that the three women could have been detectives in their own right, directly going against Victorian ideals of femininity. Particularly the fact that the three sisters, all unmarried and still living at home, keep their criminal adventures a secret from their conservative father stresses that they are aware of their transgression against the patriarchal system. These negotiations of

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respectability and rebellion feature frequently in the novel series. Emily, as the courageous one, argues that

> it is our vocation as writers to peer into [the crime], to stare and stare until our eyes adjust to the murk, and discern every detail that we may and drag it into the light, so that those less courageous than us will see what must be seen. That is how the world is improved, sisters. That is how progress is brought about. I'm not afraid to look into the dark. The question is, now that we have come to a crucial part of this enterprise, Anne, Charlotte…are you? (Ellis 2019: 97, original ellipses)

Here Ellis at once challenges and perpetuates the Brontë myth, on the one hand pointing to the sisters' awareness of their socioeconomic position, and on the other, portraying the sisters' exceptional analytical abilities and courage to face unpalatable subjects.

Most prominently, it is Charlotte, the oldest sister, who reminds her younger sisters to remain, at least overtly, within the bounds of prescribed gender roles. Nevertheless, she breaks with these boundaries herself when she suggests solving a case. As Charlotte points out in *The Diabolical Bones*,

> we must also think of our real work, our purpose. […] I simply want my life to move forward, […] I want to have the time and freedom to write every day, simply because I cannot help do otherwise. Detecting delays that moment from being realised. (Ellis 2020: 47)

Anne does not fall short of curiosity and a spirit of adventure either. While Anne, sensing the pressure to produce exceptional works, fears for a lack of "any literary merit" in her writing, Emily argues that the sisters "don't write for accolades […]. We write because our souls demand it of us, and that is enough" (Ellis 2020: 78, 79). Ellis thus imagines and suggests a female collective of women writers creating space for their creative needs, both within and outside of their father's parsonage. Connecting the trope of the female detective to the neo-sensation novel, Cox argues that "[t]he criminal-detective echoes the Victorian sensation novel in hinting at the confused lines between criminality and respectability", pointing towards the porous

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boundary between maintaining and risking one's reputation, "as well as the dual role played by the detective, whose attempts to solve a crime and deliver justice may also reveal domestic secrets which the family would rather conceal" (Cox 2019: 87). In fact, Ellis' plot opens a double secret: keeping their activities a secret directly mirrors the sisters' concealed plans of publication as well – both as detectives and authors, they present themselves as the Bell brothers, using a male pseudonym to go about their business. Aware of their break with their own contemporary norms, they single-mindedly try to find a way to pursue their dreams, even if it means lying to their father and pretending to be brothers. Ellis's series might not be original in its casting of the three women as female detectives, what is striking is her use of the sisters' publication history, before and after their first publication efforts, to create this dual narrative and its biofictional textual layers.

Ellis's depiction of the three sisters' different mindsets toward femininity and their publication plans reflects on the broad discussion of nineteenth-century women's roles in and contributions to society. While Charlotte seems to be holding onto conventional ideals of femininity, she nonetheless craves for validation and independence, particularly in the financial sense, echoing Victorian but also neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency. Emily is the rogue sister who only desires to follow her free will, untying herself from patriarchal expectations in terms of her conduct towards men and others, as well as her appearance, prefiguring the New Woman. Anne is perhaps the closest to the image of the stereotypical compliant Victorian woman, but she too pursues contemporary feminist ideals of following her own dreams in life. With novel-writing not necessarily affording a lucrative or revered source of income, the Brontë sisters' decision to publish their works, just like their decision to roam the moors unaccompanied to solve crimes, is seen as a risky decision. Writing, Ellis suggests, becomes a necessity for the Brontë sisters. Indeed, detecting becomes a supporting side business, lucrative enough to save money to publish their own works. By doing so, Ellis further controverts Victorian patriarchal ideals of femininity and a myth surrounding the sisters. Rather, the three women are portrayed as pragmatic intellectuals taking matters into their own hands, presenting strikingly modern heroines.

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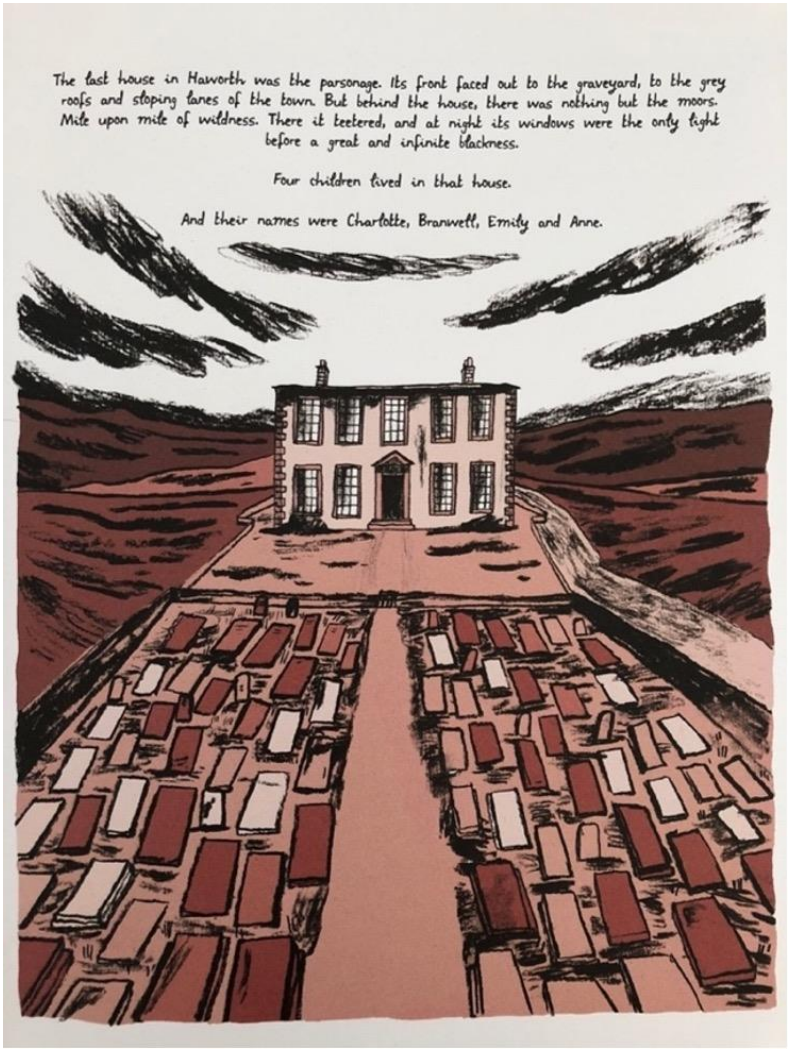

Figure 4: The Brontë Parsonage in Haworth in *Glass Town* (Greenberg 2020: 19). © Isabel Greenberg. Reprinted with kind permission from the author.

4. Conclusion: Neo-Victorian Women Empowering Women

What these biofictional accounts thus share is a desire to explore the writers behind the words of the literary works. Greenberg and Ellis imagine and re-imagine how these three women became the authors we remember them to be today. Their works echo Latham's observation that "biofiction goes beyond the constraints of traditional life writing to provide an engrossing afterlife or

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a riveting reconstruction of the larger-than-life historical figure" (Latham 2012: 369). Just as Latham argues that this genre of narrative "amounts to a continuous renaissance and reassessment of [the subject's] life and work" (Latham 2012: 369), Greenberg's and Ellis's texts support and promote a continuous interest in the Victorian authors. In fact, Latham suggests that "[t]hanks to these biofictions, the figure of the author is constantly updated to adapt to new readers and reading practices. The biographized becomes the reflection of the writers-biographers, their epoch, and their readers" (Latham 2012: 369). Ellis and Greenberg position the Brontë sisters as early feminist characters via their revisions that are at odds with the writers' own literary outputs and highlight their model of women's community.

The ghosts of the Brontë sisters, representing women's collective desire or yearning for authorship, become revived once more in *Glass Town* and the Brontë Sisters Mystery Series. Greenberg and Ellis stress women's union and community in their writings, using the Brontë sisters as harbingers of contemporary feminism to underline their project. The nineteenth-century writers signify prevalent contemporary feminist trends that urge women to unionise for their objectives and to end continuous patriarchal suppression. As Julia Novak notes, "[l]ike factual biographies, biographical fictions enact the commemorative and exemplary functions of life writing, and contribute to a historical person's 'afterlife'" (Novak 2016: 85). To that extent, two questions prevail: "the first tending to the question of what these fictions do *to* [the woman writer]—how they contribute to and shape [the] posthumous reputation as a woman writer—and the second to the question of what they do *with* the [woman writer]" (Novak 2016: 101, emphasis in original). Instead of regarding their biographies as fixed facts, Greenberg creates a metatextual narrative in which fictional and factual-turned-fictional stories intertwine, highlighting the Brontë sisters' profound connection with their juvenile creations. Meanwhile Ellis uses the neo-Victorian/neo-sensation trope of the female detective to direct attention to the Brontë sisters' independent minds but stresses their female community as an important factor in their success.

Indeed, Greenberg's and Ellis's works attempt to create a new myth surrounding the three sisters: one of female authorship rooted in an economic, but still more a creative desire and necessity. Both works stress the Brontë sisters' self-reliance, almost comparing their successes to neoliberal contemporary society's main measure for success, but also to Victorian ideology of a union of both economic and mental self-reliance à la Samuel

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Smiles's 1859 S*elf-Help*. Most importantly, the interpretations envision the three women as – if not oblivious to male advances and courtship – not particularly interested in romantic relationships, echoing both the late nineteenth-century New Woman's abstinence as well as second-wave feminism's critique of sexual monogamy. That these revisions emphasise the sisters' passionate desire for their literary ambitions, rather than linking them to male characters and adding romance as a means of appealing to a twenty-first-century audience, honours the Brontës' wish to be judged as authors in their own right not by their gender. The "ghosts" of the Brontës' past "still walk" (Sinclair 1912: 1) among us and within our literary engagement with the nineteenth century. As such, the works considered here affirm Heilmann and Llewellyn's claim of neo-Victorian biofiction that "[a]ppropriating the dead writers of the nineteenth century in ways that imply they are only figments of a shared cultural imagination opens up new possibilities but also additional dimensions and tensions in relation to the authentic as presented in the neo-Victorian text" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 20), foregrounding the productive engagement with the writers' biographies for neo-Victorian writers. Despite choosing different genres and storylines, what resonates with Greenberg and Ellis is the desire to portray the Brontë sisters as deeply reflexive human beings, who did not shy away from making hard decisions and taking their lives into their own hands. As women and members of the middle class, the three authors were restrained in their options in life by patriarchal dictate, but despite these limitations the three sisters published their works and realised their desire for authorship, reminiscent of Victorian and neoliberal ideology of perseverance and determination.

The texts thus also fall in line with a recent feminist trend in neo-Victorianism: namely the production of "re-visionary work that seeks to re-evaluate women's roles in the nineteenth century" (MacDonald and Goggin 2013: 1). As Tara MacDonald and Joyce Goggin argue,

> the contradictory qualities of the Victorian era – best represented, perhaps, by a Queen who did not advocate suffrage – seem strikingly similar to those that shape and inform our own moment, fraught with conflicting versions of womanhood, feminism, and gender performance all of which add up to very complex and often perplexing (sexual) politics. (MacDonald and Goggin 2013: 3)

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MacDonald and Goggin thus point towards a Victorian society that was full of tensions in regard to gender dynamics and roles. Interestingly, they point to "the very absence of functioning feminist communities that may in fact offer social commentary in many neo-Victorian media" (MacDonald and Goggin 2013: 7), noting a lack of female communities in neo-Victorian representations. In stark contrast, the works by Greenberg and Ellis discussed in this article stress the female collective of the Brontë sisters, and their representations of the sisters offer new ways of approaching nineteenth-century communities of women as a positive force in neo-Victorian literature.

Twenty-first-century neo-Victorian biofiction is thus a testament to May Sinclair's thesis that "many people believe in [ghosts], even at this time of day" (Sinclair 1912: 1). Even one hundred years later, readers and creators alike are fascinated and inspired by the 'exceptional' Brontës. Historically removed from knowing for a fact what the sisters' lives looked like, Greenwood and Ellis offer one way of answering Latham's implicit question about what purpose these nineteenth-century writers serve in the present. Echoing Latham, "biofiction constitutes our modern myths: the myth-making process depends on the extraordinary stories of the historical figures and the writer-biographer's ability to combine fact and fiction" (Latham 2012: 370). While Greenberg focuses on the conjunctions of grief and memory against the backdrop of the Brontë's juvenilia, Ellis envisions a whole new world within the same historical universe for the three women, emphasising their transgressive nature as women detectives. At odds with the literary forms that the Brontë sisters operated within, neo-Victorian adaptations of the Brontës collapse genre boundaries for cross/transmedial biofiction, refashioning the sisters as modern feminist heroines.

Notes

1. An early account of biofiction is perhaps given by May Sinclair herself in her 1913 novel *The Three Sisters*, which offers an early modernist story inspired by the three women writers (see Bowler 2020: 36-52).
2. This is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928/29) in which the twentieth-century writer argued that women needed a space for themselves to engage creatively.

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3. Discussing the recent trend of (biofictional) narrativisations of the Brontës, Dinter notes that "despite the rise of Brontëana in popular culture since the 1990s, it took an astonishing thirty-seven years for another biopic to appear after André Téchiné's *Les Soeurs Brontë* from 1979" (Dinter 2020: 961).
4. As such, the article expands on Sonia Villegas-López's critical work on Brontë biofiction that does not mention graphic novels (see Villegas-López 2020: 294-321).
5. In particular, Flint considers the significance of the then innovative medium of photography and how neo-Victorian works have taken inspiration from the Victorian era. Furthermore, Flint suggests that the "collapsing of present and past, of live human with imaginary character" (Flint 2017: 332) becomes evident in examples such as Yinka Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998). The Nigerian British creative's work transposes William Hogarth's eighteenth-century *A Rake's* Progress (1732-34) to nineteenth-century upper-class society, conducting a reckoning with the past by contrasting his own perspective of Victorian colonial times with his relation to the era as a Black man living in modern-day Britain (see Flint 2017: 331-334). Clare Strand's *Gone Astray Portraits* (2002/2003) uses a typical Victorian, pastoral style of background, but her models wear modern costumes/outfits and props, thus not only creating a contrast between past and present but also playing with prejudices of the urban population and its appearance, just as does Strand's inspiration, Charles Dickens's 1853 essay 'Gone Astray' (see Flint 2017: 334-337). In both neo-Victorian examples, the visual element allows for striking contrasts and echoes Victorians' reliance on photographs and illustrations to conceptualise themes such as class consciousness.
6. Kieron Gillen, Stephanie Hans, and Clayton Cowles's fantasy series *Die* (2018-2021) features a segment on the Brontë sisters (see Vol. 2, *Split the Party*, 2020) and includes other real-life people such as H. G. Wells. Only Charlotte is here re-visioned as a character, presented as a jailor of Angria, with the other sisters excluded from the narrative. Manuela Santoni's *Brontë* (2021) is another recent graphic novel centring on the Brontë sisters' lives.
7. Besides graphic novels on the Brontës, Santoni's *Jane Austen – Her Heart Did Whisper* (2018), and Santoni's and Alessandro di Virgilio *Mary Shelley* (2021), as well as Annie Goetzinger's *Provocative Collette* (2018) highlight a trend of re-visioning women writers' lives. Similarly, a number of graphic adaptations of nineteenth-century male writers' lives have appeared in recent years, including Rob Marland's *Oscar Wilde: The Season of Sorrow: A graphic novel* (2018), Fabien Grolleau and Jérémie Royer's *Darwin: An Exceptional Voyage* (2019), and Javier de Isusi's *La divina comedia de Oscar Wilde* (2020).
8. Research remains largely bound to the genre of life writing or graphic memoir, focusing predominantly on auto- or semiautobiographical examples (see Schröer 2016) and (auto)biographical studies more generally (see Chute 2010, Elmwood 2011, and Kuhlmann 2017).

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9. Neo-Victorian crime and detective fiction includes titles such as Gyles Brandreth's *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* (2007), the first instalment in a series that re-imagines Wilde as sleuth, while J. C. Briggs's A Charles Dickens Investigation Series, which commenced with *The Murder of Patience Brooke* (2012), and Heather Redmond's *A Tale of Two Murders* (2018) both feature Charles Dickens as a detective.
10. Michael Sims's edited collection *The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime* (2011), in which Wilkins's story is anthologised, presents a range of detective stories of the Victorian period with female sleuths at the centre, just under half authored by women.
11. More well-known and popular titles include Wilkie Collins's 'The Diary of Anne Rodway' (1856) and already mentioned *The Law and the Lady* (1875).
12. Other examples are Laurie R. King's Mary Russell & Sherlock Holmes Series (1994–) and Sherry Thomas's revisioning of Sherlock Holmes in her The Lady Sherlock Series (2016–), in which Sherlock's sister Charlotte uses her brother as a pretence to solve crimes, with six novels published so far.

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