

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Revisiting/Reframing the Academic “Nineteenth Century”

What would it mean for us to look differently at nineteenth-century texts?

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<1>“[D]espite queer theory’s overarching critique of the normative in the aftermath of second-wave feminist criticism, ours remains a field that is more at ease speaking about gender (construed as race-neutral) than about race,” write Ronjaanee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong in their introduction to “Undisciplining Victorian Studies,” the special issue of *Victorian Studies* published amidst the outrage over George Floyd’s murder and the resulting reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (374). The authors of this now-canonical issue call for scholars of Victorian Studies to develop a “willingness to confront a racist past and its distorting aftereffects on life today” (Moy 406).

<2>In this issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, we—two female scholars of Victorian studies, one a native Indian scholar in India and one a white scholar in the U.S.—have compiled pieces by scholars of Victorian literature from around the world. Their essays discuss how nineteenth-century women authors and/or characters critique their era’s exclusions and injustices, anticipating the methodological “undisciplining” that we are prioritizing in our scholarly approaches today. In doing so, either the authors, texts, or both emerge as “historical hybrids,” their hands and ink operating both in the nineteenth-century past and the twenty-first century present.

<3>In most cases, the texts themselves are little-known and/or understudied and undertaught, making the issue a recuperative effort. These texts reject race-neutral worldviews, instead foregrounding issues of race, ethnicity, and empire. Moving

beyond proto-feminism, or what we might call the nineteenth-century equivalent of second-wave feminist criticism, they favor more complex explorations of gender identity and sexual preference rather than the experiences of (white) female oppression in a patriarchal society. To hearken back to the spirit of Olivia Loxing Moy's essay "Reading in the Aftermath: An Asian American *Jane Eyre*" in "Undisciplining Victorian Studies": were *Jane Eyre* written by one of the authors of the works of literature discussed in this special issue, Jane would be concerned with Bertha's forced emigration from the Caribbean; the ethics of St. John's desire to "convert the natives" in India; and the imperial origins of her inheritance, rather than (or more likely, in addition to) her own sense of being in "servitude" to the roles ascribed to women by the men of England. Nor would she refer to herself as a "slave."

<4>The texts discussed in this special issue do not skate over the major injustices of their times, even if they do not always land where we would wish. Take, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," which serves as an introductory case study for many of the concerns that arise in the essays that follow. While this poem boldly and unequivocally decries slavery, it was not published until 1846—almost thirty years after Barrett Browning's poetic debut, and half a decade after England's Slave Trade Act 1824 finally outlawed slavery even by the East India Company. That it focuses on American slavery rather than the enslavement that persisted under the British empire in various forms after the Emancipation Act of 1833 might also suggest a desire to displace or project Barrett Browning's well-known sense of shame over her father's and uncle's enslavement of West Indian peoples. However, Barrett Browning's father forbade her from publishing "political" poetry even when she was solicited to do so in relation to the Corn Laws, meaning that her first opportunities did not come until after she had eloped with Robert Browning (Schaub 559). One wonders just how often such obstacles existed for nineteenth-century women writers who would otherwise have been speaking out against injustice, or doing so sooner, or differently, or more effectively.

<5>Relatively little has been published on "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," and some of the most salient recent scholarship on the poem has been pedagogical in nature. There is agreement regarding its perennial "teachability" (to quote Tricia Lootens, 490), but the challenges that faculty have when discussing it with students have changed over the past two decades or so, a trajectory that can be mapped by reading articles published in *Victorian Poetry* from 2006 to 2021 and which my own experience from 2023 can supplement. I want to note peremptorily that my interest

here lies primarily with changing student reactions to the poem over time rather than individual faculty approaches to teaching it.

<6>Writing in 2006, Lootens discussed her students' apparent discomfort reading the poem aloud—particularly, the stanzas describing infanticide—and the “heated discussions” which can ensue when they do so, presumably about the morality of the enslaved woman’s actions (496). As of 2011, at least, Melissa Schaub’s experiences were quite different; she writes that her students “accept [the infanticide] relatively easily as a terrible thing that should be blamed on the condition of slavery rather than on the speaker” (557). Her pedagogical difficulties lay elsewhere: in getting her students to understand that Barrett Browning is not the poem’s speaker, that the poem is not autobiographical. Schaub sees this persisting tendency of her students as a function of the dramatic monologue as a genre, which requires us to ask as we read, “suppose I *were* this person?” (558) and of this specimen in particular, which paints the woman’s situation in such realistic detail. She argues that the mistake stems from the absence of dramatic irony in the poem, which is also the source of its success: “If the poem succeeds politically, it does so by violating its own form, and it succeeds precisely because it is written so passionately that it exceeds the margins of fiction and begins to seem like biography” (558).

<7>Schaub’s students’ difficulties are tightly linked to the concerns raised in the collective essay Lucy Sheehan, Jennifer Sorensen, and Sarah Allison published about the poem in 2021, which highlights the confusion between author and speaker from an authorial–ethical rather than an aesthetic angle. The trope Barrett Browning employs “elides the personhood of the central figure in the poem, the woman who was enslaved, and her agency in liberating herself, a frame that doubly signals the objectifying tendencies of white abolitionist discourse (‘runaway,’ ‘slave’)” (261), they write, a problem exacerbated by the fact that Barrett Browning speaks for her poetic creation in the first person. “In seeking not only to feel for the objectified idea of the ‘runaway slave’ but to imagine and give voice to such a ‘character,’ Barrett Browning as white author further obscures Black subjectivity,” they conclude. That the poem was published in the gift book *The Liberty Bell*, to which Barrett Browning was asked to contribute in her capacity as (white) celebrity poet, adds another layer of complication.

<8>Though the essay is not primarily pedagogical in focus, it contains important pedagogical insights. The authors write that “Barrett Browning’s poem speaks for another; live readings of the poem, particularly those staged in the twenty-first-century classroom, perpetuate this effect, even if the poem is approached critically” (263). Indeed, my experience teaching the poem in 2023 aligns with the concerns

Sheehan, Sorensen, and Allison outline. Feeling as much concerned about the degree of emotion the poem could evoke as about the ethics of ventriloquism, I had decided ahead of time I wouldn't have us read any of it aloud. I was soon very thankful I decided against this. My students were disturbed that Barrett Browning would perform this act of poetic blackface and were not entirely satisfied by John McNeill Miller's argument that Barrett Browning was writing in an established tradition. We discussed how few narratives by enslaved persons were available at that time and why, as well as how those that were available were so heavily manipulated by white editors and publishers as to call into question their very legitimacy. My students wondered what Barrett Browning could have done, if anything, to share her large platform with contemporary Black voices, since publishers themselves seemed to do so little: what was the 1846 equivalent of not just posting a black square on your social media profile to support BLM, but handing over your account for a day if you were someone who had enough followers to make an impact? I didn't have answers for them, especially for Barrett Browning in particular, living in Italy whilst writing for an American publisher, only just escaped from her father's grasp. But I was glad that was the conversation we were having.

<9>None of the texts in our issue ask us to confront the problems of ventriloquism or the potential misuse of celebrity author status posed by Barrett Browning's poem. Some of the concerns about the limitations of authorship for women do resurface, however, and I will point to them as I turn to introducing the essays in our special issue.

<10>The abolitionist novella *Adolphus*, serialized in the newspaper *The Trinidadian* in 1853, better positions readers to understand the psychological complexities wrought by enslavement. Tentatively attributed to the editor of *The Trinidadian*, the mixed-race revolutionary George Numas Des Sources, it is not only authored by someone enmeshed in the colonial plantationocene, but also both set in and published there. In her essay, Alicia Carroll demonstrates how the novella's bold vision for an equitable, multi-racial, multi-species community depends on a particular kind of knowledge: knowledge that is the unique province of female Caribbean gardeners, like the novella's character Antonia.

<11>It is texts like *Adolphus*, in which the usually-peripheral in one way or another becomes the central, that we have tried to privilege here, even if the other texts discussed were written by white authors. Interestingly, it seems a very product of authors' or characters' whiteness that some of the texts at hand raise the potential for promising resolutions for depicted injustice, only to reveal authorial or narratorial hesitation or uncertainty when the problems posed by these injustices are ultimately

resolved via plot devices. This is most clear in Mary-Catherine Harrison's essay on Dinah Craik's short story "The Half-Caste," in which the solution to the author's (apparent) uneasiness about imperialism in India is to create what Harrison calls "the myth of consensual colonialism." Similarly, in other cases, there is no resolution: instead, the tensions remain to haunt the texts. This is what we witness in Jessica Durgan's essay about Eliza Hilliard, wife to the British consul to Siam, who published three articles in Dickens's *Household Words* about the people of Siam. Durgan shows us how Hilliard's articles vary startlingly in tone, even internally, and leave her readers unsure of her intentions in describing the Siamese to a British audience.

<12>These narrative hesitations can be understood as attempts to work through injustice, regardless of outcome. Still, when concerns about empire are dismissed or left hanging, these Victorian authors—like Elizabeth Barrett Browning forbidden to write "political poems" by her father—seem to find themselves caught in a position familiar to that of many white women today: aware of the ways in which they are privileged compared to the people they write about, but also cognizant of how prescribed gender roles limit both their own social status and their power to effect change. Indeed, Durgan speculates convincingly that Dickens, infamous for the way he edited contributor essays to create a universal voice for *Household Worlds*, may have affected Hilliard's writing and contributed to the uneven tone in her articles.

<13>For some authors, however, there was a certain pleasure to be found in choosing to write against public opinion when they were in a position to do so. Megan Witzleben reveals how adapters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* for the stage in Melbourne changed Lady Audley's ending, arguably granting her more agency in a colonial landscape enmeshed in debate over how best to care for its mentally ill and/or criminal citizens. Similarly, Chimi Woo describes how George Eliot knowingly took risks with the Jewish plot in *Daniel Deronda* late in her career, believing the experiment to be both good and necessary for the English readers she found too insular and closed-minded. In these cases, the author/adapter was especially cognizant of the visibility of their art, and therefore of its potential for greater influence.

<14>Shuhita Bhattacharjee discusses below how the historical hybridity we sought to foreground in this issue functions at both ends of the historical divide. Her analyses of immensely popular neo-Victorian film and TV series—perhaps the rough equivalents of an Eliot novel or staged Braddon play—remind us that we cannot merely nod at what we might call the "prescience" of nineteenth-century texts and mark them as points on a linear timeline culminating in the here and now.

Neither should we fall into the trap of thinking our own moment superior. Instead, we should understand these visual texts as commentaries, revealing (sometimes uncomfortably) the ways we are ourselves historical hybrids, operating within the framework of the nineteenth century even as plenty of the twenty-first century remains visible.

<15>In this light, Katerina García-Walsh’s essay on “monstrous gender” in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* and Suvendu Ghatak’s essay on “the malarial queer” in Vernon Lee’s “A Wicked Voice” seem particularly relevant to our current moment as legislative and cultural attacks on the basic rights of the transgender community loom all too large. In these texts, gender identity is murky and therefore dangerous, associated with science experiments gone wrong, disease, and being somehow out of time or place. In short, what cannot be brought under the strict purview of accepted knowledge is feared. Yet at the same time, those with amorphous gender identities sometimes have access to higher planes of knowledge, unobtainable to the uninitiated. García-Walsh highlights how fear in *The Great God Pan* is a product not so much of a lack of understanding, but an unwillingness to accept that not everything *can* be understood. Nor does this uncertainty justify fear or disparagement.

<16>Our hope for this special issue, then, is that we can be equal parts encouraged and humbled by the ways in which we find ourselves hybridized with the writers and characters discussed here. As these essays will show, to say that we are “still in” the nineteenth century need not have only one meaning, nor does it necessarily mean that we are somehow “stuck” in ways of thinking that we have shed—or would unilaterally want to shed.

What would it mean for us to look differently at how the nineteenth century views us?

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<17>The key element in many ways is the historical hybridity of nineteenth-century texts and the self-conscious prescience particularly of the plot’s female characters who comment on the roots of impending crises. While examining this anticipatory potential of Victorian texts and their female characters—an aspect that has often been overlooked in our scholarly examinations—one may also want to briefly examine our contemporary retellings of texts set in the long nineteenth century and the kind of foresight that these recent neo-Victorian cultural productions, often based on Victorian and neo-Victorian literary works, directly or suggestively impute to the

characters that they represent as an acknowledgement of the era's historical hybridity.

<18>The neo-Victorian genre—a term that is used most readily to refer to the body of works that revive and represent the (long) nineteenth century—has been variously defined by its ability to reiterate. Felipe Espinoza Garrido notes that “reimaginings of the long nineteenth century”—whether we call it “Victoriana, post-Victorian, retro-Victorian, or neo-Victorian” —are alert to “the mechanisms by which Victorian reverberations still distort collective imaginations of the nineteenth century” (459). As such all of these varied neo-Victorian recreations “attend to ‘lost’ voices and marginalized perspectives, the exclusivist nature of racialization, and the racialized inflections of gender”—overthrowing the concealed politics of texts from the long nineteenth century by “addressing lasting effects of colonialism and deprovincializing the field’s historical emphasis on Britain” (“for example, with work on global neo-Victorianisms, neo-Victorian Asia, or the methodological transnationalization of neo-Victorian studies”) (Garrido 459). However, Garrido suggests that much like the call to ‘undiscipline’ Victorian studies, we need to ‘undiscipline’ the study of neo-Victorian recreations as well. This would include “extend[ing] critical attention under the rubric of ‘neo-Victorian’” to literary and cultural traditions that have been ignored for far too long in neo-Victorian scholarship—“narratives written from South Asian, Caribbean, and Indigenous perspectives (often from the Americas or the Pacific region), . . . [and including] anglophone African literatures and . . . Black British culture” (460).

<19>Neo-Victorian cultural productions that comment on colonial tensions or that are born at the global margins have begun to be examined in scholarship. H.D.J. van Dam, for instance, examines postcolonial neo-Victorian fiction and its representation of British anxieties relating to uncontained aspects of the empire. The genre of neo-Victorian horror has been particularly evocative of these fears and in my soon forthcoming work I examine how the genre of Neo-Victorian horror from the margins may re-enact the anxieties, fears, and threats from the sordid chapters of the long nineteenth century in ways that mirror contemporary crises. My study focuses on two contemporary Indian supernatural horror films (*Pari*, 2018, and *Bulbbul*, 2020) to understand how they stage the afterlife of the nineteenth-century trope of vampirism through the blood-sucking forms of the female protagonists, Rukhsana and Bulbbul, in order to metaphorically represent contemporary anxieties surrounding sexual violence in South Asia (Bhattacharjee 2024). One may even be tempted to examine an older Indian film *1920* (2008) that evokes tensions relating to the 1857 Indian Uprising by showing how a woman (Lisa) of mixed Indo-British descent is possessed in 1920, in the middle of tense

colonial military conflicts, by the spirit of a treacherous soldier (Mohan)—a British spy who had been killed in 1857 by Indian troops for having betrayed and caused the slaughter of his army unit at the hands of British soldiers during the uprising.

<20>But the revisionary approach to neo-Victorian interpretation I am suggesting here has to do with one of Garrido's concluding comments. What Garrido insightfully notes as problematic is the way the neo-Victorian reimaginings "claim a transparent, self-reflexive perspective on today's heterogeneous relationships to the Victorians" (459). This is where it becomes both important and interesting for us to delve deeper to understand ways in which this modern straightforward recuperation project, skewed in favour of modernity's supposedly superior retrospective insight (seen as being embodied by the producers/authors and consumers of neo-Victorian works), may be in need of revision. Underlying most contemporary neo-Victorian approaches is the tendency to initiate an informed exposition of past ills. Scholars note neo-Victorianism's aim to "lay bare, debunk, and destabilize" romanticised notions of the Victorians and their achievements in "sanctioned versions of a sanitized past" (Arias 138, 154) to "offer a much darker picture of the period as, above all, pathological" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012, 6). Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's landmark definition of neo-Victorianism considers the genre as a process of self-conscious '(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians' (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4; original emphasis). Kate Mitchell also notes the "sense of reiteration, of repetition and re-assertion that characterises our fascination with the Victorians" (1). But while these formulations of neo-Victorianism as informed reiteration are crucial as they establish a parallel timeline between the Victorian text and its modern retelling, most such theorizations also participate in the temporal privileging of the present. Helen Davies notes how "[s]ometimes we might see our own images in the nineteenth century as a process of identification, but also sometimes we seek to distance ourselves from the 'otherness' of the Victorians," and concludes therefore that neo-Victorian "reflections are never realities, but offer only distorted images of the Victorian past, twisted and misshapen by contemporary culture's desires" (1). Kate Mitchell's reading also points us to our contemporary privileging of modern neo-Victorian memorialization and of what is assumed to be the advantage of such a retrospective position. Mitchell observes that positioning "neo-Victorian novels as acts of memory" allows us to evaluate their "investment in historical recollection as an act *in the present*" (4, emphasis added). Mitchell notes how neo-Victorian fiction "ensures that the Victorian period continues to exist as a series of afterimages, still visible, in altered forms, despite its irrevocable past-ness, its disappearance" and how it "couple[s] a contemporary scepticism about our ability to know the past with *a strong sense of the past's inherence in the present*, often in non-textual forms

and repetitions” (7; emphasis added). However, in my view what is crucial for us to register is that while scholarship has discussed how neo-Victorian works are characterized by a “strong sense of the past’s inherence in the present,” what it has not fully acknowledged and what lies at the centre of the kind of historical hybridity of the long nineteenth century that we are exploring in this issue is *the present’s inherence in the past*—the anticipatory consciousness that neo-Victorian cultural works attribute to nineteenth-century characters which allows these characters to foresee the impact of their conflicts and the stakes of their debates for future societies (Mitchell 7). Studying neo-Victorian gothic works, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note how the genre treats “the Victorians as ourselves-as-other,” allowing neo-Victorian writers “to transfer an idea of the (self-) otherness of the *present* into the *past*.” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012, 9, 10). They note how neo-Victorianism “elegiacally validates ‘the Victorian’ exactly because it *wants* to view it as already dead, past and superseded, as *other-than* the present” and that the “period’s appeal lies in its (would-be) *transcended otherness*, alternately gothically horrid and cheerfully quaint” (12). Kohlke and Gutleben’s reading seems to impute a self-awareness in modern characters about their inner ‘otherness’ from the present, a feeling of disjointedness which in turn is displaced onto the past to create characters that one can sense as being inherently hybrid. What my brief look at recent neo-Victorian cultural productions may reveal, however, is that the hybridity of the nineteenth-century characters in neo-Victorian recreations stems not from a deflected self-awareness traceable to our modern condition but from a prescience attributable to the nineteenth-century past. What is interesting to note therefore in the recent outpouring of neo-Victorian cultural productions is how, instead of attributing ethical insight to our current moment, they use humour to reimagine historical prescience and moral perspicacity on the part of the female characters from the past, ultimately highlighting the long awareness of crises (relating to climate change, sexual violence, parental abuse, domestic violence, reproductive rights, sexuality education) that have reached nearly irresolvable extremes in today’s world.

<21>While the foresight of nineteenth-century historical texts has long been recognized (Claudia Nelson, Barbara T. Gates etc.), and both Victorian humour (Bill Nicholson) and neo-Victorian humour (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017) have been explored for their subversive and visionary potential in significant works of scholarship in recent years, the very interesting cultural instance towards which I gesture here is the case of neo-Victorian humorous/comedic recreations with female characters at the centre who directly and indirectly act as the viewers’ confidantes and interlocutors from across the historical divide. These works use humour to orchestrate a meaningful conversation between the female characters and the viewer

on the side—at times directly and on other occasions more suggestively—to impress upon us the characters’ ability to anticipate the historical significance of the seemingly personal situations they happen to be battling. Perforated with the force of reflexive and prescient humour, the female characters in these neo-Victorian productions signal their historical hybridity and anticipatory self-consciousness. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note that while “Victorian writers were commenting on their own here-and-now, . . . neo-Victorian commentary on contemporary affairs and anxieties is much more obliquely encoded, if decipherable at all, in imagery of the past (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012, 10). I suggest, however, that we can effectively identify neo-Victorian perspectives on, and critique of, current crises and their historical trajectories through the genre’s recent deployment of women’s prophetic humour, particularly in cultural productions based on Victorian and neo-Victorian literary works.

<22>One of the most obvious among such neo-Victorian renderings is *Persuasion* (2022) that departs from Jane Austen’s novel to offer a first-person narrative by Anne Elliott. Anne’s character often speaks directly to us as viewers in entertaining asides where she looks straight into the camera to set up with a modern audience an ancillary channel of shared understanding, inside jokes, and trans-historical critique with a modern audience. Self-conscious of how her voice carries over from the nineteenth century to the contemporary viewer, the character is relentless in her mordant sniggers, feminist sarcasm, and emotional frankness. Anne emphasizes her lack of options, including her lack of options to fall in love, when she explains how she had to give up on Wentworth because he was a sailor with no prospects. Comically describing to us in a secret aside her dejection and misery after having rejected Wentworth, she describes her ‘happy’ state ironically. She hints cheekily to us about her relentless yearning for her ex-lover even while visibly unperturbed, uses double entendres about her sexual choices with a naughty side glance to us, and winks secretively at us at the very end as she interlocks fingers with Wentworth in her happy ending with him. In this trans-historical conversation with the modern viewer, Anne criticizes the narrowness of choices allowed to women on the matrimonial market, a subversive historical awareness that finds expression in the battle-cry of a little game aimed at the toppling of the “bad queen” (“Marie Antoinette”) that she plays with her sister’s children in the film—absent from the novel: “Vive la révolution!”

<23>One significant theme that emerges in these historically prognostic neo-Victorian cultural productions is that of the ‘monstrous mother,’ a trope that echoes contemporary debates on a range of topics—suitable womanhood, the ‘tradwife’ fad, abortion. Neo-Victorian gothic horror mines this figure for its gruesome feminist

promise. A crucial recent example is the second season of *The Alienist* (2020) that is centered around the Medea-like figure of a mother who is charged with and electrocuted for the crime of killing her girlchild in late nineteenth-century New York. A somewhat earlier example is *Tumbbad* (2018) where the goddess mother's womb, a cavernous opening underneath the ground which avaricious men invade, is seen as a site of both prosperous nourishment and gory death. Neo-Victorian horror stokes the cultural fears surrounding the figure of the murderous and monstrous mother, brewing with the potential to decimate her offspring—a theme that transports interestingly into the kind of neo-Victorian humour I am discussing, famously in the case of Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* (2023).

<24>Based on Scottish author Alasdair Gray's 1992 novel of the same title, *Poor Things* (2023) offers a hyper-stylized comedic rendering of the nineteenth century. Unlike the novel, the film offers a travelogue-like view of the world most overtly from the perspective of the female protagonist, Bella Baxter, seemingly a human hybrid produced by the father-like figure of the scientist, Godwin Baxter. The narrative is a reworking of the early nineteenth-century classic, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and the scientist almost transparently appears to be the original monster of Shelley's novel, with a broken face stitched together clumsily and an intertextual name that does not just reference Mary Shelley's father (William Godwin) but also the scientific and social debates about human agency and God's creative power that surrounded the appearance of the original text. It is this complex figure, now a doctor himself like his scientist father in Shelley's text, who saves a pregnant Bella from her attempted suicide, resuscitates her dying body by replacing her brain with that of her unborn foetus, and raises her as a strange hybrid entity that is only half-human. The female-in-training echoes the nineteenth-century discourse of women as socializable automatons that found expression in a vast array of texts including Kellet's "The Lady Automaton" and Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Having produced his own Frankensteinian monster—interestingly a conventionally good-looking woman—Godwin Baxter raises her as a scientific experiment with the help of his student Max McCandles whom he hires as an assistant. After engaging herself to be married to Max, Bella leaves her home with Duncan Wedderburn, who offers to her the prospect of sexual pleasure and and travel. She embarks on a hilarious yet meaningful path of sexual and intellectual exploration—pursuing pleasure freely with multiple partners including as a sex worker, emphasizing the importance of women's sexual consent and freedom to all men, and ingesting books of history and philosophy in defiance of Duncan. In this dark comedy, Bella sends the viewer into fits of laughter as she argues commonsensically with the outraged and maddened Duncan about the irrationality of his proprietorial claims over her and confesses her befuddlement at men's inability to reconcile sexual pleasure with sexual consent.

The journey ends with Duncan landing himself in a Glasgow lunatic asylum, the absurdity and arrogance of his desire to control women exposed and thwarted. The historical hybridity of the work is literalized not just through the hybrid form of Bella but also through the menagerie of animal hybrids (goose-bulldog, pig-chicken, goat-duck, chicken-pug, goose-basset hound etc) that roam the Baxter household freely and benignly domesticate its radical potential.

<25>In terms of the film and Bella's historical prescience, what is particularly interesting is the way Godwin explains the mystery of Bella's survival to her on his deathbed towards the end of the film as she listens intently, and with grave judgment on her face, to how she is both "mother and daughter": "[Y]ou are your baby and also I suppose you are your mother, and also neither. No memories survive, no experiences survive." In a disturbing cinematic moment, Godwin Baxter's comment evokes the contemporary problematic discourse surrounding abortion—the mother devouring her own unborn foetus at a moment in time when she is literally incapable of intellection (as Bella has a dysfunctional brain on the surgical table after the attempted suicide). In the most superfluous reading, and one that may resonate with contemporary accusations familiar to us, the woman who jumps off a bridge in a state of pregnancy to escape from unhappiness can be seen as physically consuming her own baby to fuel a life of solitary travel and learning—a mordant criticism of women's right to terminate their own pregnancies. However, Bella Baxter's deep disapproval of her father for not seeking her consent is obvious, as is her silent communion with the viewer who has wondrously witnessed her march towards women's liberty across Lisbon, Alexandria, Paris—"fearlessly creat[ing] Bella Baxter with wonder," as Godwin says on his deathbed—and learning from people across different races and classes about unjust exploitation by the powerful and endless suffering of the marginalized. In a revived feminist and postcolonial interpretation, what she seems to mother by absorbing her foetus within herself, in the logic of the film, is a new just and sustainable world to come—one better suited to the needs of women, infants, and animals alike. The visual depiction of cities (Lisbon, Alexandria, Paris) are experimental and quirky— evocative of Coppola's take on *Dracula* that used decades-old effects from the silent film era and turn-of-the-century illusions. *Poor Things* also echoes the early age of cinema, using traditional and cutting-edge techniques, miniatures, painted backdrops, LED screens, and CGI enhancements—reflecting elements from both the gothic style as well as futuristic steampunk—and ultimately pointing the viewer to the questionable state of nature today by portraying it as painted and unreal, while also evoking the state of nature in earlier times from where began the process of categorical exploitation and resource-extraction. The film consistently offers a commentary on the human treatment of nature through Bella's eyes. Bella is shown shocked when

she witnesses a member of the ship's crew kill a bird by twisting its neck for having defecated on him. The film closes with the promise of a vastly different future—one where nature sustains the social structure by absorbing the toxicity that characterizes human relationships. Bella succinctly voices her ecofeminist protest when Duncan tries to imprison her, shutting out both books and nature by bending over her on the ship's deck as she sits reading in the sun, insisting that she desist from reading and come inside the ship to their cabin to “take the air.” She responds defiantly: “You are in my sun.” In the final resolution, Bella escapes General Alfie Blessington, her abusive husband from her life before the attempted suicide who tries to imprison her again while she is about to get married to Max, and attempts to mutilate her genitals through clitoral removal and impregnation to control what he (and nineteenth-century opinion) considered to be female ‘deviant’ tendencies. Furthermore, acting as a doctor, she replaces his brain with that of a goat to arrive at yet another household hybrid—tame and nurturing. In the closing scene, we see women claiming the space (and the future) as their own—the foursome includes Bella, Toinette—Bella's friend who taught her about the Socialist movement while at the establishment for sex workers, Felicity—another hybrid woman much like Bella created by Godwin Baxter in her absence, and Mrs. Prim—the housekeeper. While Bella offers the other women gin (“Ladies, gin?”), and they toast as the egalitarian Max serves them, the evil Major Blessington—now converted into a goat-human hybrid—chews peacefully on garden leaves. We are offered a glimpse of nature's capacity to absorb toxicity and nourish organic life. In a powerful ecofeminist ending, masculinist predatoriness, directed against both women and nature, is tamed and contained, purged by the self-purifying circle of nature, in contrast to the yellow smoke churned out of chimneys earlier in the film.

<26>The notion of violent masculinity, and in particular the spectre of abusive and violent fatherhood—somewhat muted in *Poor Things*—comes to the forefront in *Wicked Little Letters* (2024), a film that offers a comedic depiction of parental abuse and domestic violence in the context of the long nineteenth century. The sneakily villainous protagonist and our implicit interlocutor here is Edith, a single woman who we later learn secretly writes herself (and other members of her community in Littlehampton) the most hilariously profane, crude, and offensive letters as a way of martyring herself in the public imagination in order to emerge as a worshipped heroine, a status her ‘plain’ appearance had not afforded her in her heyday. Loaded with comedic subtext, the profanity of her letters almost seem directed at us as a secret joke, promising a liberation from propriety that both she and the viewer seem to conspiratorially seek and relish together. Underneath this joke however is the truth of extreme parental abuse to which we discover Edith had been subjected at the hands of a cruel father (Edward) and an indifferent and

unprotesting mother (Victoria). Significantly, Edith's climactic public outburst in the film shows her chortlingly spouting a string of endless profanities against her controlling father in a town-square scene that crystallizes the cathartic joy shared between her, the woman she had tried to implicate (Rose), and the film's modern audience—all united in the outrage against parental abuse.

<27>The historical hybridity of nineteenth-century characters is also showcased in the hugely popular Netflix show, based on Julia Quinn's (neo-Victorian) Regency romances, called *Bridgerton* (2020-2024) through the comedic, conspiratorial, borderline “scandalous,” and ultimately prescient voice of Lady Whistledown—the pseudonymous local scandal sheet writer whose periodical is devoured by the whole community and whose voice frames and comments on the goings-on in the show in a way that is absent from the texts. This woman writer, whose identity is hidden from us for almost the whole of the first season and from others until much later, speaks intuitively to viewers across the historical divide separating her from us, implicitly addressing us as “Dear Reader” and offering a first-person perspective on the show's meandering turns. Most powerfully through her the narrative comments knowingly and humorously on the issue of sexuality education—a subject squarely at the heart of current debates, whether it be USA's curtailment of sex education in elementary schools and delegation of its crucial medical/social aspects to state legislation in the last two years or UK's delimitation of younger children's access to sex education this year. Making significant departures from the books that include scripting sustained discussions on the issue and modifying character emphases, the show offers a commentary on the centrality of sexuality education that is far more chiselled and urgent than in the novels. With historical foresight, the female characters (Daphne Bridgerton) and their scandalous mouthpiece (Lady Whistledown) urgently and prophetically note the tragic fallout of inadequate and misdirected sex education in a world such as our modern one that is rife with sexual violence.

<28>Very early in the first season Penelope Featherington informs her friend Eloise Bridgerton about how an unmarried ‘maid’ was “with child” (secretly referring to the pregnancy of her own unmarried cousin, Marina Thompson) and they both puzzle over how it was possible to get pregnant outside of marriage. Subsequently, Eloise returns home to frustratedly pitch the same question in the Bridgerton parlour—a naïve outburst that is greeted with her mother's unobliging indignance, Daphne's uncomprehending consternation, and her brothers' smiles and double entendres that clearly indicate that they are fully in the know. Later, while Penelope and Eloise promenade one morning, they wonder how Marina's claim of being pregnant out of “love” could possibly be true. The devastating repercussions of women's lack of sexual information are discussed most trenchantly in the case of the

season's two primary characters, Eloise's older sister Daphne Bridgerton and Simon, the Duke of Hastings, both of whom decide to embark on a pretend courtship with each other so that Daphne may receive serious matrimonial offers from other suitors and Simon may be relieved of bothersome marital proposals. As their friendship grows, Daphne asks Simon about the "other things, physical or perhaps intangible, that bring a couple together" and Simon laughs "at the absurdity of how little mothers tell their daughters." Confessing her helplessness, Daphne remarks—"they tell us nothing . . . [and] . . . no one else will tell me anything," following which Simon informs her about the pleasures to be derived from masturbation—a completely uncharted territory for Daphne that she then proceeds to explore.

<29>The show dramatically foregrounds the inconsiderateness, ignorance, and indifference of parents who fail to inform their daughters about sexual consent, rights, processes, and boundaries, even while the sons enjoy all sexual liberties necessary for the acquisition of such information, an issue tragically resonant for us. Drastically altering the novelistic character of Simon from a borderline chauvinistic sexual aggressor to a reasonable participant in a consenting relationship, the show isolates the issue of sexuality education as the only point of concern. Simon marries Daphne only when she signals her assent after he informs her that he "cannot have children." However, Daphne is shown struggling in her marriage trying to understand whether her husband suffers from a sexual/reproductive dysfunction or whether he was choosing to opt out of pregnancy. It is only after consulting with her maid—to whom she explains that her mother had left her ill-informed—that she discovers that Simon's repeated ejaculation outside of her body was a conscious strategy to prevent pregnancy. She then strategically mounts Simon during the sexual act till he ejaculates inside her and proceeds to blame him for having tricked her by lying about his inability to have children when it was a matter of choice for him. Simon clarifies that he had assumed that she knew about sexual intimacies (about "how one came to be with child") and had never intended to mislead her. This commentary comically returns in the show's third season (2024) of the show where Lady Featherington is seen rushing her two daughters to get pregnant in vain for they are hilariously lacking in even the most basic information about sexual processes—a theme that comes full circle when Penelope Featherington, the omniscient Lady Whistledown and the wisest of all characters in the show, also reveals her shocking lack of sexual education during her first act of consummation with Colin Bridgerton, requesting instructions for sequentiality and pleasure ("Tell me what to do"; "Is there more?"). Daphne offers the most excruciating and prescient criticism of our current half-hearted efforts at, and strategic denials of, sexuality education when, in a conversation absent in the original novel, she blames her mother who had spoken to her superfluously about the "natural"-ness of the "marital act"—natural as "rain

soak]ing] the field in autumns,” “flowers grow[ing]” in spring, or hounds giving birth to puppies—and confusingly about the possibility of pleasurable non-reproductive sexual intimacies. In a voice that resonates with some of the most worrying issues of our contemporary society, Daphne blames her mother for teaching her only “how to play pretend” and for sending her “out into the world no better than a fool,” with “vague metaphors and trite remarks,” and no information about “the realities of married life, of marital relations.” The obfuscation of women’s right to consent in intimate relationships through the strategic delimitation of their sexual knowledge becomes a point of core discussion in the show. Lady Whistledown remarks, in a voice that speaks across the historical divide to us as viewers: “Can the ends ever justify such wretched means?” At one level, given its timing, this appears as a comment on Daphne’s manipulative planning to get pregnant, while at another level it emerges as a critique of our own continuing socio-legal strategies that throttle women’s sexual expression/freedom and limit their ability to exercise informed sexual consent by narrowing the kind and volume of sexual information available to them. The comic relief offered by the floundering women—who struggle either with hilarious misinformation about pregnancy or are caught up in a romantic swirl around such misunderstandings till the situation is resolved by love and passion—is offset at least partially by the trans-historical voice of the sagacious Lady Whistledown (Penelope) who consistently critiques such dangerous conservatism and on one early occasion in the third season defies these conventional boundaries to engage in safely non-reproductive yet pleasurable sexual intimacy outside of marriage while in a moving carriage with Colin.

<30>The onerous project of ‘undisciplining Victorian studies’ with which Michelle started this discussion thus acquires a broader mandate—to draw on Garrido, one must also direct one’s scholarly attention towards ‘undisciplining neo-Victorian scholarship’—and in ways that allow us to register the prescience of the nineteenth century, and particularly of its marginalized gender voices, that anticipated contemporary crises and conflicts, the woman's guffaw drawing attention to historical gaffes. This may be a worthwhile starting point for Public Humanities projects—whether from a medical, legal, or environmental humanities approach—that identify as their starting point not the privileged perspective of the present which posits the critical barrenness of the past, but one that acknowledges the long nineteenth century’s historical awareness of compounding complexities and crescendoing injustice. Understanding when bodies of colour are disproportionately shamed for public violence, why marital rape legislation remains elusive, or how (neo-)colonial resource extraction impoverishes the global South may become simpler if we are able to invest in this concept of historical prescience. An alertness to the long historical antecedence of geopolitical imbalances, institutionalized

biases, and critical debates—as well as a respectful understanding of how those in the past may have been more aware of the repercussions of ongoing historical processes and their chosen actions than we ourselves often seem to be about ours—can lay the foundation both for a scholarly exploration of the nineteenth century relatively free of inherent and inherited biases (of race/class/gender) and for a more effective dismantling of unjust structures by the exposition of their complex histories.

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