

**Reimagining the Brontës:
(Post)Feminist Middlebrow Adaptations and
Representations of Feminine Creative Genius, 1996-
2011.**

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Abstract

Investigating conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination, this thesis examines representations of the Brontës and adaptations of their novels released between 1996 and 2011. I focus on portrayals of Charlotte and Anne Brontë alongside reworkings of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) in various media. Contributing to existing research on the cultural afterlives of the Brontës and their novels, I position the works discussed within contemporary middlebrow culture whilst considering the influence of feminism.

The Introduction discusses the gendering of creative genius before identifying the tensions between critical, middlebrow and popular discourses' conceptualisations of the Brontës' imaginations. Thereafter, the first chapter proposes the contemporary usefulness and considers the gendering of the concept of the middlebrow. I demonstrate that middlebrow culture is fascinated by the Brontës' lives, art and feminine creative imaginations. To further this argument, the second chapter analyses neo-Victorian novels' engagement with Charlotte Brontë's life, art and creativity. I illustrate that these works draw from second-wave feminist criticism on *Jane Eyre* and belong to a tradition of middlebrow feminine writing about the Brontës. The third chapter also examines representations of feminine creativity and discusses how screen adaptations portray the artistry of *Jane Eyre*'s heroine. Additionally, the legacies of second-wave feminism in a wider postfeminist cultural context are explored. In the fourth chapter, the thesis turns to analyse the cultural dissemination and reputations of Anne Brontë and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I delineate how middlebrow culture has rediscovered the youngest Brontë, her novel and her feminism.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that the works examined indicate middlebrow culture's efforts to engage with feminism through the feminine creative imagination. Yet these works expose a prevailing tension in feminism between the status of the individual and the collective.

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Introduction

In their most famous novels, Charlotte and Anne Brontë contemplate and offer differing perspectives upon the feminine creative imagination.¹ In CB's *Jane Eyre* (1847), the governess-protagonist presents her new employer Edward Rochester with her watercolour portfolio in their first official meeting. Although she deems her images to be “nothing wonderful”, her account of her inspiration and creative methods alerts us to the extraordinariness of her imagination.² According to Jane, the subjects in her paintings had “risen vividly on my mind. As I saw them with the spiritual eye before I attempted to embody them, they were striking”.³ Her description clarifies that she draws upon internalised forms of inspiration and refuses to be constrained by her amateur status. Despite pointing out Jane's deficiencies, Rochester appears titillated by her creative visions. He ponders that she must have withdrawn into “a kind of artist's dreamland” and observes that “the drawings are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar.”⁴ As his remarks make clear, her paintings intrigue him as expressions of her selfhood and evidence of her originality and genius.

A competing conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination can be found in AB's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).⁵ The contrast between the two novels becomes apparent in the scene where Gilbert Markham visits the heroine, Helen Huntingdon, and learns that she is a professional painter. As Gilbert surveys the heroine's artworks, he recognises “a view of Wildfell Hall, as seen at early morning from the field below” that is

¹ For the purposes of clarity, this thesis will refer to the historical members of the Brontë family by their initials unless I am discussing a fictionalised version of them, in which case I will use their first name.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 107.

³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 108.

⁵ Hereafter, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will be referred to as *Wildfell Hall*.

“faithfully drawn and coloured, and very elegantly and artistically handled.”⁶ His description makes us aware of the verisimilitude of Helen’s painting and the fact that, unlike Jane, she deploys external sources of inspiration. Unable to glean insight into Helen’s character from her work, Gilbert makes sexual advances towards her that are less successful than Rochester’s flirtations with Jane. The dissimilarities between the two heroines underscore that Helen creates to earn a living and does not seek an outlet for her originality or genius in the same manner as Jane. In contradistinction to *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) does not feature a female protagonist who practises any form artistic expression and the “few artistic activities described in the novel are ephemeral”.⁷

Despite their differences, the three Brontë sisters have become synonymous with the feminine creative imagination and genius in contemporary culture. As Lucasta Miller points out, the sisters’ reputation has shifted “in the collective unconscious from the level of history onto that of myth.”⁸ One of the most significant aspects of this myth is the perceived enigma of the Brontës’ creative imaginations. Only half ironically, Polly Teale’s play *Brontë* (2005) opens with the three main characters pondering:

EMILY: How did it happen?

ANNE: How was it possible?

CHARLOTTE: Three Victorian spinsters living in isolation on the Yorkshire moors.

EMILY: (*examining a picture in a book*). It’s hard to believe that they really dressed like this, for walking on the moors, carrying in coal, scrubbing floors.

ANNE: Writing books.⁹

The same question is posed in the 2013 documentary “The Brilliant Brontë Sisters” when the presenter Sheila Hancock asks: “How did three spinsters who spent most of their life [sic] in a

⁶ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 1996), 46.

⁷ Jane Sellars, “Art and the Artist as Heroine in the Novels of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë”, *Brontë Studies* 20, no. 2 (1990): 75.

⁸ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), x.

⁹ Polly Teale, *Brontë*, rev. ed. (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), Act I, 3. After its first performance in 2005, the play has been staged several times. All references are to the published edition of the script. Throughout this thesis, emphases in quotations are found in the original source unless otherwise indicated.

remote parsonage, on the edge of the moors, come to write books that I find shocking, erotic, profoundly moving and quite wonderful?”¹⁰ These recent allusions to the Brontës share many of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*’s intermingled anxieties about the feminine creative imagination. Firstly, examples of women’s creative expression often raise uncertainties about the relationship between the art and the artist. Secondly, interest in the artist or the creative woman frequently becomes inextricable from interest in her gender and sexuality.

Focusing upon the cultural afterlives of AB and CB as well as their novels, this thesis aims to elucidate the significance of the Brontës and the feminine creative imagination in contemporary middlebrow culture. A complex and often pejorative term, the middlebrow will receive detailed explanation and is discussed throughout this thesis. At its most basic, this thesis understands middlebrow culture to be a strand of popular culture that usually displays a desire to engage with or disseminate high culture. For John Guillory, the middlebrow is the “ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural.”¹¹ Throughout this thesis, I reflect upon this ambivalence within middlebrow works. To undertake this research, I focus upon what I identify as two examples of contemporary middlebrow culture: the British Broadcasting Corporation’s adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall* (in various media) and neo-Victorian fiction. As a literary genre, neo-Victorianism can be classified as fiction that assesses contemporary culture’s relationship to the Victorian era, often in the form of consciously postmodern historical fiction set in the period. I am particularly interested in the ways that neo-Victorian fiction engages with the Brontë myth and portrays the Brontës’ creativity. As well as examining neo-Victorian fiction, I will be focusing upon adaptations of AB and CB’s two most famous works that were released between the years 1996 to 2011. As the selection of material reveals, this thesis is neither a straightforward adaptation study nor a

¹⁰ “The Brilliant Brontë Sisters”, *Perspectives*, ITV, March 31, 2013, television broadcast.

¹¹ John Guillory, “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture”, review of *The Western Canon* (1994) by Harold Bloom, *Transition* 67 (1995): 87.

study of the Brontë myth but combines these two types of project into one inquiry. Such an approach makes sense in light of the fact that representations of the Brontës and adaptations of their novels similarly conflate the authors with their heroines, construing the sisters' biographies and literature as mutually illuminating. By considering such elisions, I hope to elucidate how the Brontë myth influences adaptations of the sisters' novels and vice versa.

To investigate contemporary conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination, this thesis will concentrate upon the cultural afterlives of CB, AB, *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*. I have chosen not to examine the cultural afterlives of EB or *Wuthering Heights* even though EB's novel rivals and even exceeds the fame of *Jane Eyre* or *Wildfell Hall*. As I mentioned, *Wuthering Heights* does not give feminine creativity the same thematic prominence as either *Jane Eyre* or *Wildfell Hall*. I have also elected to leave aside the sisters' poetry and juvenilia, AB's *Agnes Grey* (1847) as well as CB's *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853) and *The Professor* (1857). None of these other works has inspired the same dense network of cultural allusions or adaptations as *Jane Eyre* or *Wildfell Hall*. Comparing the cultural afterlives of these two novels, furthermore, opens up new questions about their cultural dissemination and the construction of their authors' literary reputations. Why, for example, are CB and *Jane Eyre* so much more famous than AB and *Wildfell Hall*? To what extent can we attribute the different cultural statuses of these two sisters and these two novels to their conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination?

By examining the conceptualisation of the Brontës' genius and the feminine creative imagination, I also want to identify and consider the influence of second-wave feminism upon contemporary middlebrow culture. Of course, the Brontës' genius and femininity have been a source of widespread intrigue since the publications of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and

Agnes Grey in 1847 under the male pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Yet the fascination with the sisters' gender gained new dimensions thanks to second-wave feminist critics who sought to re-conceptualise feminine creativity. I am most interested in the effect of the work of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar who re-examined the Brontës' lives and works in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). In their study, Gilbert and Gubar asked "[w]hat does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are...both overtly and covertly patriarchal?"¹² Their question prompts further questions: how has second-wave feminist literary criticism shaped how contemporary culture conceptualises the creative imaginations of the Brontës? And how does contemporary culture conceive of the feminine creative imagination more generally? Through an exploration of these issues, I aim to elucidate the complex legacy of second-wave feminism's conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination upon middlebrow culture.

Throughout my examination of the middlebrow's relationship with second-wave feminism, I see different expressions of feminism occurring and overlapping in the different spheres of the women's movement, academic discourse as well as popular and middlebrow culture. Of course, second-wave feminism can be understood first and foremost as a movement but one that "never had a single, clearly defined common ideology or [has] been constituted around a political party or a central organisation or leaders or an agreed policy or manifesto, or even been based upon an agreed principle of collective action."¹³ Feminism, moreover, required "the establishment of women's and gender studies within academia" to become "equated with

¹² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 45-6.

¹³ Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 9.

a body of theory.”¹⁴ Even so, I want to resist clear-cut distinctions and do not presume that feminism must remain “in an ‘outside’, and vanguard position” or that “a ‘real’ feminism and ‘authentic’ feminism exists outside of popular culture.”¹⁵ Rather, I view popular and middlebrow culture as in conversation with and contributing to other forms of feminist discourse.

As numerous scholars have observed, feminism exists in a complex relationship with popular culture. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley point out that “most people’s initial knowledge and understanding of feminism has been formed within the popular and through representation”.¹⁶ Commenting upon this matter, Imelda Whelehan advises recognising the fact that “feminism is characterized and defined by the fiction and films that attempt to represent it, echo its ideas, or even discredit it. It is better, surely, to acknowledge ‘feminist’ interventions wherever they appear” rather than separating the “party faithful” from more popular, commercially successful examples.¹⁷ Yet the issue is complicated by the fact that many commentators perceive contemporary popular culture to be postfeminist. As subsequent chapters will explain, postfeminism is “a set of assumptions widely disseminated within popular media forms having to do with the pastness of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated.”¹⁸ Because I am interested in the legacies of feminism, I have chosen to focus upon Gilbert and Gubar due to the fact that their scholarship constitutes an interesting site of convergence. In the second chapter, I will discuss more fully how Gilbert and Gubar drew upon the ideals of second-wave activists in their work as literary critics whilst becoming emblems of the movement within popular and middlebrow culture.

¹⁴ Harris, *Staging Femininities*, 9.

¹⁵ Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, “Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism”, in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 2, 1.

¹⁶ Hollows and Moseley, “Popularity Contests”, 2.

¹⁷ Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 73.

¹⁸ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction”, in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

Throughout its investigation, this thesis will return to the question of whether the Brontës' novels or the contemporary neo-Victorian fictions or adaptations under examination can be classified as feminist. We face a difficult task when deciding what does and does not constitute "feminism" or a "feminist work". Conscious of this matter, I discuss the many forms of and competing discourses contained within feminism throughout the following chapters. At the same time, I will repeatedly analyse how the (contemporary and Victorian) examples under discussion construe the relationship between women's personal and collective empowerment. I am particularly interested in the extent to which representations of individual creative women elucidate the broader effects of living in a patriarchal society on women. At its most basic level, this thesis designates a work to be feminist if the work displays a broader awareness—however imperfect (or even unwittingly exclusionary)—of women's systematically enforced disadvantages within a patriarchal culture.

By focusing upon feminism's relationship with middlebrow culture, I engage with a term that tends to be associated with the interwar period and is frequently used in a derogatory sense. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word applies to things "regarded as intellectually unchallenging or of limited intellectual or cultural value" or a person "who is only moderately intellectual or who has average or limited cultural interests (sometimes with the implication of pretensions to more than this)".¹⁹ Because of such perceived pretensions, the middlebrow is sometimes defined as part of industrialised, mass culture and a "watered-down version of a more authentic high culture".²⁰ Indicatively, Dwight Macdonald argues that what he calls "midcult" has the "essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in

¹⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, "middlebrow, n. and adj.", *OED Online*, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/252048>.

²⁰ Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-Of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12.

reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf.”²¹ Yet Janice Radway contests this perception and proposes that we should understand the middlebrow as a “culture with its own particular substance and intellectual coherence.”²² In contrast, Nicola Humble argues that it “is not a fixed designation, there is no such thing as ‘middlebrow literature’. It is a category into which texts move at certain moments in their social history.”²³ But from Beth Driscoll’s perspective, “it is possible to maintain an awareness of this historical burden and its legacy in contemporary culture and still use the [term] middlebrow analytically.”²⁴

Throughout this thesis, I engage with the debate concerning the unstable definition and status of the middlebrow whilst demonstrating the middlebrow’s long-running fascination with the Brontës and the feminine creative imagination. According to Humble, middlebrow interwar women writers frequently invoked the Brontës and their novels for the purpose of creating “a web of cross reference and echo, as a sort of sub-genre, and in so doing [they] establish a distinct identity for their readers.”²⁵ In addition to its entrenched preoccupation with the Brontës, middlebrow culture possesses an established association with feminine producers and consumers whilst acting as a forum for the exploration of feminist issues. For example, Xiaotian Jin argues that the interwar feminine middlebrow novel frequently enacts women’s “quest for a modern sexual and gender identity”.²⁶ Building on such insights, the first chapter will challenge the strict periodization of the middlebrow. Once I have argued for the concept’s continued usefulness, I will be able to investigate how second-wave feminist

²¹ Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 37.

²² Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 12.

²³ Elke D’hoker, “Theorizing the Middlebrow: An Interview with Nicola Humble”, *Interférences Littéraires/Littéraire Interferenties* 7 (2011): 260.

²⁴ Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 44.

²⁵ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 178.

²⁶ Xiaotian Jin, “Battle of Femininity: Romantic Heroines and Modern Sexuality in the Interwar Middlebrow Women’s Novel”, *Women’s History Review* 24, no. 2 (2015): 253.

literary criticism has influenced contemporary middlebrow representations of the Brontës and conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination. Another reason for my decision to concentrate upon middlebrow culture is that the wealth of material that could be included in this thesis is vast and spans the cultural spectrum. *Jane Eyre*, for example, has inspired a series of lithographs and pastels (2001-2) by the prominent artist Paula Rego²⁷ but was also the subject of numerous allusions in E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011-2).²⁸ Yet a diverse range of cultural works exist between Rego's illustrations and James's mass-market publishing phenomenon. Exploring between these two cultural extremes, this thesis aims to illuminate contemporary middlebrow culture's engagement with the Brontës' lives and works.

This thesis's concentration upon the middlebrow will be further justified in the next section, which offers an overview of the relevant and existing scholarship from various fields. After outlining the contribution this thesis seeks to make to these fields, I want to examine the origins and the implications of the concept of creative genius. In this discussion, I aim to demonstrate that the popular comprehension and the Brontës' sense of their own creative genius stem from Romantic theories of creative genius. Yet Romanticism frequently marginalised women, denied the possibility of their genius and left a legacy that meant many Victorian women writers struggled to conceptualise the feminine creative imagination. Similarly to the Brontës and other Victorian women writers, many second-wave feminist literary scholars and critics sought to reconceive the feminine creative imagination. But I will also note that second-wave efforts to conceptualise femininity and creative genius resulted in tensions between feminist theory and other theoretical frameworks. Before considering these matters, I wish to delineate the current state of research upon the Brontë myth and adaptations

²⁷ Paula Rego, *Jane Eyre* (London: Enitharmon, 2004).

²⁸ For example, James's novels portray key scenes of erotic torture within a secret annex known as the Red Room of Pain, recalling the bedroom in the early part of the novel where the young Jane is imprisoned. E.L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (London: Arrow, 2012).

to establish what original contribution this thesis aims to make to knowledge and to indicate its wider significance.

Original Contribution to the Field(s)

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that middlebrow culture is heavily invested in exploring the relationship between the Brontë myth, the sisters' literary output and feminism. One of the key aims is to glean insight into contemporary conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination by analysing the convergence of the Brontë myth and the cultural afterlives of the sisters' novels. Throughout this study, I argue that adaptations of the Brontës' novels often deploy the writers' lives as a source of inspiration with far-reaching ramifications for the conceptualisation of the sisters' creativity. This overlap is widely acknowledged, but prior studies have tended to address the Brontës' biomythology and the cultural afterlives of their works separately. Yet popular culture also elides Jane Austen's biography and novels, and this phenomenon has already attracted the attention of critics and scholars. In her analysis, Deborah Cartmell points out that the "stubborn refusal to free the author [Austen] from her fiction is especially present in adaptations of the two novels that provide bookends to her career: *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*."²⁹ Despite the similarities, Austen and the Brontës have had their lives and art blurred in distinct and even contrasting ways. The implications of this difference will receive further consideration at several points in this thesis with the intention of elucidating the middlebrow's conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination and genius.

At the same time, this thesis aims to complement, update and expand existing studies of the Brontë myth. As early as 1950, the extent of the myth had inspired an article by Walter R.

²⁹ Deborah Cartmell, "Becoming Jane in Screen Adaptations of Austen's Fiction", in *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 151.

Cunliffe entitled “The Brontës in Other People’s Books”.³⁰ The first major work in this area, however, is Miller’s *The Brontë Myth* (2001), a “metabiography” that provides a comprehensive overview of the construction and continuation of the cult surrounding the Brontë sisters.³¹ *The Brontë Myth* examines the period from the Victorian era until the late 1990s and mentions several adaptations of *Jane Eyre*. Yet such material remains peripheral to the study and Miller primarily focuses upon depictions of the sisters. Since then, Miller has produced a follow-up article to “offer one writer’s personal reflections in retrospect on the whys, hows, and problematics of afterlife study” rather than “add to the burgeoning cornucopia of recorded Brontëana”.³² Her comment reflects the growth of scholarship in this area.

Since *The Brontë Myth*, other scholars and critics have addressed the often surprising instances in which the Brontë myth has been disseminated and transmuted in the Anglophone world and beyond. One of the more unexpected examples is the postmodern, gender-bending Hungarian play *Brontë-K* (1992) that has been the subject of an essay by Mărta Minier.³³ The diversity and international flavour of the Brontë myth is also made apparent in Patsy Stoneman’s chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës* (2002).³⁴ Prior to this overview essay, Stoneman had also considered invocations of the literary family in young adult and children’s fiction,³⁵ the profusion of which has led Kelly Hager to identify a

³⁰ Walter R. Cunliffe, “The Brontës in Other People’s Books”, *Brontë Society Transactions* 11, no. 5 (1950): 332-6.

³¹ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, x.

³² Lucasta Miller, “Lives and Afterlives: *The Brontë Myth Revisited*”, *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 4 (2014): 254.

³³ Mărta Minier, “Living and (Re)Writing Against the Odds: Embroidering the Brontës into the Hungarian Postmodern”, in *Loving Against the Odds: Women’s Writing in English in a European Context*, ed. Elizabeth Russell (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 125-39.

³⁴ Patsy Stoneman, “The Brontë Myth”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214-41.

³⁵ Patsy Stoneman, “The Brontës in Other People’s Childhoods”, *Brontë Society Transactions* 23, no. 1 (1998): 3-16.

“curious subgenre” that she calls “‘Brontë for Kids’”.³⁶ More recently, Stoneman has drawn on recent Brontë biographical fiction to explore the “hybrid status of the Brontë myth which, unlike the unhistorical events of, for instance, Greek myth, is tied to documented history.”³⁷ In this work, Stoneman considers twenty-five different novels written between 1956 and 2010 that she sees as “a fruitful field for further research”.³⁸ I discuss some of the same novels but in significantly more depth and with a focus on constructions of the Brontës’ feminine creative imaginations. As the first sustained and focused consideration of representations of the sisters’ creativity, this thesis demonstrates that middlebrow culture regards the Brontës’ lives and art as providing powerful paradigms for the feminine creative imagination.

Though I am engaging with scholarship on the mythologies of CB and the Brontë family collectively, I also aim to rectify the critical neglect of AB’s cultural afterlives. In *The Brontë Myth*, Miller focuses upon CB and EB on the basis that AB “has never taken on the mythic stature of her sisters in her own right. Though she has now been rediscovered, for most of her posthumous life she was regarded as the least interesting sister”.³⁹ Building upon Miller’s assessment, this thesis analyses AB’s individual mythology in conjunction with her critical re-evaluation and re-emergence in middlebrow culture as an explicitly feminist writer. Some insight can be gleaned from articles on the youngest Brontë by Marion Shaw, Stevie Davies and Marianne Thormählen.⁴⁰ Though helpful, their scholarship primarily examines AB’s changing critical reputation and gives limited consideration to her cultural presence. Yet shifts

³⁶ Kelly Hager, “Brontë for Kids”, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2005): 314.

³⁷ Patsy Stoneman, “Sex, Crimes and Secrets: Invention and Imbroglia in Recent Brontë Biographical Fiction”, *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 4 (2014): 341.

³⁸ Stoneman, “Sex, Crimes and Secrets”, 341.

³⁹ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, xi.

⁴⁰ Marion Shaw, “Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist”, *Brontë Studies* 38, no. 4 (1994): 330-8; Stevie Davies, “The Pilgrimage of Anne Brontë: A Celebration of her Life and Work”, *Brontë Society Transactions* 25, no. 1 (2000): 9-17; Marianne Thormählen, “Standing Alone: Anne Brontë out of the Shadow”, *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 4 (2014): 330-40.

in AB's critical reputation have facilitated her partial comeback in middlebrow culture, which will be delineated in the fourth chapter.

Additionally, this thesis intends to contribute to the field of "Brontë Transformations" by examining the cultural afterlives of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*. With the latter, I am breaking new ground as all of the existing studies have focused upon the critical and popular fortunes of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. The foundational critical work in this area is Stoneman's *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (1996).⁴¹ In this study, Stoneman presents a history of *Jane Eyre* derivatives in various media dating from 1848 until 1997. As Stoneman perceptively notes, "[f]rom this distance in time, 'Charlotte Brontë' is as much a textual construct as 'Jane Eyre', and there is no way of preventing our knowledge of one influencing the way we read the other."⁴² *Brontë Transformations* devotes a chapter to biographical representations of the Brontës between 1855 and 1946. Yet Stoneman's study and subsequent scholarship fail to consider in detail how more recent cultural adaptations, reworkings and engagements with *Jane Eyre* influence understandings of the Brontës' creative imaginations. This thesis addresses the lacuna by examining a variety of adaptations with the specific aim of uncovering how CB and AB's lives are referenced and alluded to within reworkings of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall* for various media.

Brontë Transformations inspired further scholarship that elucidates the diversity of *Jane Eyre*'s cultural afterlives. John Seelye's *Jane Eyre's American Daughters: From The Wide, Wide World to Anne of Green Gables—A Study of Marginalised Maidens and What They Mean* (2005) examines the novels of several American women writers published between

⁴¹ Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).

⁴² Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 154.

1850 and 1908 that rework *Jane Eyre*'s "Cinderella" narrative.⁴³ Also foregrounding fairy tales, Heta Pyrhönen's *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny* (2010) offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the "Bluebeard" plot in *Jane Eyre* and several rewritings of the text, dating from 1872 to 2002.⁴⁴ Recently, Carl Plasa has sought to enlarge our understanding of *Jane Eyre*'s transatlantic dissemination and to illuminate "the role the novel plays in the shaping of late nineteenth-century literature."⁴⁵ These studies restrict their focus to fiction and fail to consider the reworkings of *Jane Eyre* in other media. The narrative's adaptation in a variety of forms, including novels, films, theatre, opera and dance receive consideration in Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann's collection of essays entitled *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (2007).⁴⁶ Additionally, a burgeoning field of research examines the dissemination of the Brontës' works in range of media beyond Europe and the United States. Shouhua Qi and Jacqueline Padgett, for example, have edited a collection entitled *The Brontë Sisters in Other Wor(l)ds* (2014).⁴⁷ The essays in this volume consider the transportation of the Brontës' works (primarily *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*) to China, the Caribbean, Mexico, Japan, Australia and other cultural contexts.⁴⁸

Jane Eyre's cultural legacies and proliferating adaptations in a range of forms and different cultural contexts have inspired myriad articles, book chapters and sections of monographs. For example, Rebecca White examines the BBC's 2006 serialisation of *Jane Eyre* to delineate

⁴³ John Seelye, *Jane Eyre's American Daughters: From The Wide, Wide World to Anne of Green Gable—A Study of Marginalised Maidens and What They Mean* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ Heta Pyrhönen, *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2010.

⁴⁵ Carl Plasa, "Prefigurements and Afterlives: Bertha Mason's Literary Histories", *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 1 (2014): 6.

⁴⁶ Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann, ed., *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

⁴⁷ Shouhua Qi and Jacqueline Padgett, ed., *The Brontë Sisters in Other Wor(l)ds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁴⁸ For a detailed overview of scholarship upon the Brontës' dissemination outside of Europe or the United States, see Shouhua Qi and Jacqueline Padgett, "Introduction", in *The Brontë Sisters in Other Wor(l)ds*, ed. Shouhua Qi and Jacqueline Padgett (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-18.

this production's engagement with CB's novel but also previous costume drama adaptations.⁴⁹ The same adaptation and another young-adult novel are discussed in Katie Kapurch's article examining neo-Victorian constructions of girlhood.⁵⁰ This small selection indicates the variety of *Jane Eyre*'s cultural afterlives and potential directions that this thesis could have taken. To narrow the focus and distinguish this thesis from existing scholarship, I concentrate upon examining the ways in which different reworkings of *Jane Eyre* draw upon the Brontë myth and construct the feminine creative imagination in recent fiction, television, film and radio.

I anchor this investigation further through my exploration of how the Brontë myth and adaptations of the sisters' novels respond to the feminist discourse that has grown up around *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*. The relationship between feminism and *Jane Eyre* costume drama adaptations has inspired some previous—and now rather dated—scholarship.⁵¹ But a number of useful studies exist upon the critical and feminist reception and reputations of the Brontës and their novels. Of these, the most significant is an essay in a collection by Cora Kaplan entitled “Heroines, Hysteria and History: *Jane Eyre* and her Critics”.⁵² Kaplan identifies *Jane Eyre* as a “Western cultural monument which has moved generations of its mainly woman readers to tears of desire and rage, as well as loss.”⁵³ This piece outlines the critical reception of CB's “most enduring novel” with a special emphasis upon “those assessments which consider *Jane Eyre* in direct or oblique relationship to its proto-feminist

⁴⁹ Rebecca White, “Fresh Eyre: How Original is Sandy White's Televised *Jane Eyre*”, *Brontë Studies* 33, no. 2 (2008): 136-47.

⁵⁰ Katie Kapurch, ““Why Can't you Love me the Way I am?: Fairy-tales, Girlhood and Agency in Neo-Victorian Visions of *Jane Eyre*”, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2012): 89-116.

⁵¹ For example, Kate Ellis and E. Ann Kaplan, “Feminism in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and its Film Versions”, in *Nineteenth-Century Women at the Movies: Adapting Classic Women's Fiction to Film*, ed. Barbara Tapa Lupack (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1999), 192-206.

⁵² Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 15-36.

⁵³ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 15.

themes.”⁵⁴ Kaplan also acknowledges “an astonishing compendium of *Jane Eyre* spin-offs: imitation, prequel, sequel, adaptation and pastiche” and she includes some consideration of Rego’s lithographs.⁵⁵ Yet Kaplan does not inspect the effects of the critical discourse on the popular afterlives of the novel. Building upon these foundations, this thesis intends to adumbrate the intersections between the Brontë myth, *Jane Eyre*, *Wildfell Hall* and second-wave feminism in middlebrow culture.

Although prior studies have examined popular culture, this thesis offers the first sustained consideration of and attempt to situate the Brontës’ myth and adaptations of their novels within contemporary middlebrow culture. Other studies acknowledge the broad appeal of the Brontës’ lives and work but set aside the issue of cultural status or concentrate upon the more obvious extremes of “high art” and “mass culture”. Such research often seeks to adumbrate how the Brontës and their novels permeate the cultural spectrum and, as a consequence, illustrate the fluidity of cultural divisions. Indicatively, Stoneman’s *Brontë Transformations* dispenses with “traditional notions of literary value” and insists upon the necessity of regarding “high and low culture as a continuum”.⁵⁶ Similarly, the introduction to *A Breath of Fresh Eyre* pointedly notes that Hollywood films and “[n]o less a librettist than David Malouf” have reworked *Jane Eyre*’s narrative.⁵⁷ These references implicitly recognise an artistic hierarchy in which opera ranks higher than mainstream cinema but further analysis of these distinctions is unforthcoming. Likewise, Miller recalls that *The Brontë Myth* “gathered together a host of raw materials ranging across the cultural spectrum”.⁵⁸ Throughout her study, Miller traces the Brontës’ critical reputation alongside their appropriation and

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 16.

⁵⁵ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 31.

⁵⁶ Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 1.

⁵⁷ Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann, “Introduction”, in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, ed. Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 12.

⁵⁸ Miller, “Lives and Afterlives”, 254.

commodification by mass culture that has transformed the family name into a biscuit brand.⁵⁹ Otherwise, Miller devotes limited attention to the Brontës in middlebrow culture apart from a few examples dating from when the term was in common use during the interwar era and the mid-twentieth century.

Existing scholarship on these periods has demonstrated that the Brontës' lives and works have been a recurrent reference point in middlebrow culture. In *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001), Humble posits that "familiarity with the Brontës' lives and works is used in a number of novels as a test of the personal, intellectual and social worth of individuals."⁶⁰ Since Humble's important study, Erica Brown has also written on two middlebrow novelists' engagement with the Brontës' lives and art in *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (2013). From Brown's perspective, both writers are "self-consciously positioning themselves as part of a tradition of distinctly feminine literature."⁶¹ Brown's observation hints at the significance of the Brontës' creative imagination for middlebrow women's writing. As this remark also elucidates, the middlebrow has entrenched connotations of femininity that apply not just to fiction but also other forms of culture associated with female consumers.

Building upon this research, this thesis examines the ways that the Brontës and their novels circulate within contemporary middlebrow culture. More specifically, I am interested in the middlebrow as a feminised cultural space that has consistently employed the Brontës to reconceptualise the feminine creative imagination. At the same time, my consideration of the middlebrow recognises the value of suspending judgments about the distinctions between

⁵⁹ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 107-8.

⁶⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 178.

⁶¹ Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 4.

“high” and “low” culture and I am careful throughout this thesis not to lose sight of the fluidity of cultural boundaries. Indeed, the first chapter argues that the concept of the middlebrow frequently foregrounds the instability and mutability of cultural distinctions. Before I explain this and other features of the middlebrow, I want to think about the origins of the mythologies surrounding the Brontës’ creative imaginations. According to Terry Eagleton, the literary sisters are an “idiosyncratic English phenomenon which might well give one the impression of having sprung from nowhere.”⁶² To understand the source of this impression, I want to consider the foundations of the Brontë myth, particularly the role of CB, who influentially took charge of and shaped the Brontë sisters’ collective mythology after EB and AB died in 1848 and 1849.

Romantic and Victorian Conceptualisations of Genius

How did the understanding arise that the Brontës’ creative imaginations sprang “from nowhere”? In part, the Brontë sisters themselves were responsible because they cultivated creative identities that heightened the mystery of their literary talents. All three sisters constructed individual reputations for themselves during their literary careers but they also associated themselves with each other by publishing as the Bell brothers. When she became the sole living Brontë sibling, CB decided that she would reveal her sisters’ real names in the “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” that she wrote for the second edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* in 1850. In her tribute to her sisters’ lives, CB stated that neither

Emily nor Anne was learned; they had no thought of filling their pitchers at the well-spring of other minds; they always wrote from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition, and from such stores of observation as their limited experience had enabled them to amass.⁶³

⁶² Terry Eagleton, “Introduction to the Anniversary Edition” in *Myths of Power*, ann. ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), xix.

⁶³ Charlotte Brontë, “Biographical Notice on Ellis and Acton Bell”, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-51*, vol 2., ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 747.

CB not only emphasised EB and AB's lack of education but also suggested that their literary works were an outlet for their 'natural', socially uncorrupted, inner genius. Such an explanation has much in common with the representation of the heroine's internalised creative imagination in *Jane Eyre*. In both cases, CB drew upon the conceptualisation of creativity by an earlier cultural movement: Romanticism. Romanticism not only informed the Brontës' work but has also shaped popular culture's understanding of the creative genius as "an outsider figure, rapt in imaginative experience, one beyond full comprehension."⁶⁴ This section outlines the Romantic origins of this concept and then turns to consider the effects of its legacy upon the Brontës and women writers in the Victorian era.

"Romantic genius" is less of a coherent concept than a cluster of characteristics and associations. Modern usage of the term "genius" suggests an individual with "[i]nnate intellectual or creative power of an exceptional or exalted type" and an "instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery".⁶⁵ Such an understanding of creative genius emerged from the wider cultural, intellectual and historical context of eighteenth-century Europe, which led to an "unprecedented interest among writers and readers in the subject of genius and, in particular, in examining and discussing the personal characteristics and life histories of 'great men'" in nineteenth-century Britain.⁶⁶ Growing up in this cultural atmosphere, the Brontë children were admirers of a number of "great men", such as the printmaker and artist John Martin, whose life-long and "hypnotic" effect upon CB and her writing will be discussed in the third chapter.⁶⁷ The Brontë

⁶⁴ Adam White, "John Clare and Poetic 'Genius'", *Authorship* 3, no. 2 (2014): 7.

⁶⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, "genius, n. and adj.", *OED Online*, accessed April 01, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77607>.

⁶⁶ David Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

⁶⁷ Christine Alexander, "'The Burning Clime': Charlotte Brontë and John Martin", *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 3 (1995): 286.

siblings' other personal heroes included the Duke of Wellington and the "Big Six" Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley, Keats and Byron.⁶⁸

Wider cultural currents might have nurtured the young Brontës' fascination with these genius figures but the poets themselves encouraged their own celebrity through their poetic theories that proclaimed the power, originality and exceptionality of their poetic imaginations. As Julian North points out, their

self-mythologizing works, together with their popular and critical afterlives, have left us with the image of the Romantic poet as an inspired originator, a visionary prophet, a solitary figure, simultaneously authoring himself and his art; a man who is heroically but also tragically alienated from his society.⁶⁹

One of the most influential pronouncements upon the creative imagination comes from William Wordsworth's "Preface" (1800) to the *Lyrical Ballads* where he posits that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity".⁷⁰ With this claim, Wordsworth advanced an understanding of poetry as expressive, grounded in feeling and artlessly instinctive. The value of emotion reflects a broader cultural appreciation for subjectivity that contests the Enlightenment's earlier emphasis on rationality. Expressing similar views in "A Defence of Poetry" (1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley asserts that "Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; Imagination the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and Imagination the similitude of things."⁷¹

⁶⁸ For a discussion of Wellington's influence on CB, see Christine Alexander, "Charlotte Brontë, Autobiography, and the Image of the Hero", *Brontë Studies* 36, no. 1 (2011): 1-19. A considerable amount of scholarship exists on the influence of individual poets on the literary sisters. For example, Patsy Stoneman, "'Addresses from the Land of the Dead': Emily Brontë and Shelley", *Brontë Studies* 31, no. 2 (2006): 121-31; Michael O'Neill, "'Visions Rise, and Change': Emily Brontë and Male Romantic Poetry", *Brontë Studies* 36, no. 1 (2011): 57-63.

⁶⁹ Julian North, "Romantic Genius on Screen: Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009) and Julien Temple's *Pandaemonium* (2009)", in *The Writer On Film: Screening Literary Authorships*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77.

⁷⁰ William Wordsworth, "Prefaces of 1800 and 1802" to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), 260.

⁷¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry", in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 674-5.

A similar retreat from rationality in favour of feeling occurs in John Keats's much-debated phrase "Negative Capability". In a letter to his brothers, Keats asserts that Shakespeare's genius derives from his "*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason".⁷² As well as turning away from reason, Keats proposes the significance of emotional empathy when he attempts to theorise his concept of the "camelion Poet".⁷³ He states that a "Poet is the most unpoetic of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none: no identity".⁷⁴ In another letter, Keats also contends that "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."⁷⁵ Such a declaration encapsulates Romanticism's emphasis on the unstudied "naturalness" of the poet's creative imagination.

The extent to which Romanticism shaped the Brontës' imaginations becomes apparent if we consider CB's life-long influence by and allusions to the poetry and legend of Byron. During her late-teenage years, CB indulged in what Fannie Ratchford dubbed an "orgy of Byronism" during which she obsessively read the poet's work.⁷⁶ In CB's early writings, Byron's life and work served as a significant inspiration for the Duke of Zamorna with his "changing, ever-darkening, vengeful moods, his cynicism, defiance of conventional morality" and "fatal magnetism" on women.⁷⁷ Critics have viewed CB as continuing to engage with and

⁷² John Keats, letter to George and Tom Keats, December 21, 1817, in *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 41.

⁷³ John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818, in *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 157.

⁷⁴ Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818, 157.

⁷⁵ John Keats, letter to John Taylor, February 27, 1818, in *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 70.

⁷⁶ Fannie Ratchford, *The Brontës' Web of Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 84.

⁷⁷ Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 117, 118.

interrogate Byron's writings and the Byronic hero in her later fiction, particularly in the form of *Jane Eyre*'s Rochester.⁷⁸ According to Sarah Wootton, CB's "success with the Byronic type replicates that of her Romantic predecessor. Just as Byron capitalised on the popularity of several pre-existing literary figures, so Brontë selected traits from his most notable heroes" to characterise Rochester.⁷⁹ Similarly, Stoneman argues that the Byronic Zamorna is the prototype for Rochester who also "has smouldering dark looks and a powerful black horse. Like him, he has a crimson drawing-room and a history of entanglements with women. Like him, he is unaccountably moody and hints at hidden sorrows."⁸⁰

The other Brontës are also known to have engaged with Byron's poetry and myth. Critics frequently argue, for example, that *Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff is also cast in a Byronic mould. "Through Heathcliff", Andrew Elfenbein states, "Emily presents the Byronic lover at his best and at his worst, and reveals that the two are the same."⁸¹ If CB and EB tend to be construed as reworking Byron in Rochester and Heathcliff, however, AB is often understood as reworking Rochester and Heathcliff in Arthur Huntingdon. Edward Chitham, for example, posits that "it is hard not to see Anne's novel as a corrective to Emily's soft nonsense."⁸² In a similar vein, Jill Matus argues that whereas *Jane Eyre* "invests male dominance and mastery with allure, men are least attractive when commanding" in AB's novel.⁸³ For Caroline

⁷⁸ For example, Tanya Llewellyn, "'The Fiery Imagination': Charlotte Brontë, the *Arabian Nights* and Byron's Turkish Tales", *Brontë Studies* 37, no. 3 (2012): 216-26.

⁷⁹ Sarah Wootton, "'Picturing in Me a Hero of Romance': The Legacy of *Jane Eyre*'s Byronic Hero", in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre*, ed. Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 230-1.

⁸⁰ Patsy Stoneman, "Rochester and Heathcliff as Romantic Heroes", *Brontë Studies* 36, no. 1 (2011): 113.

⁸¹ Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157.

⁸² Edward Chitham, "Diverging Twins: Some Clues to *Wildfell Hall*", in *Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems*, ed. Edward Chitham and Tom Winiffrith (London: Macmillan, 1983), 100.

⁸³ Jill Matus, "'Strong Family Likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 109.

Franklin, these intertextual connections indicate that AB's "second novel implicitly charged Emily and Charlotte with residual Byromania."⁸⁴

Yet CB and EB were not alone either in their infatuation with Byron or their habit of adopting poets and other public figures as personal heroes. Christine Alexander remarks that nineteenth-century hero-worship took a number of forms, including the "celebrity status of the type created by Byron in his identification with his fictional hero and the popular adulation of his figure by admiring women in the street and at soirées while he was still in England".⁸⁵ According to David Higgins, "Romantic emphasis on the individual consciousness behind artistic creation—and on the exceptional nature of genius—contributed to an increasing fascination with the personalities and private lives of creative artists."⁸⁶ Frequently, this interest in the life of a genius led to the obfuscation of any works produced by that genius. The clearest example of this phenomenon is the cult surrounding Byron that "resulted from what was perceived to be his personality as much as his poems."⁸⁷ Even when his poetry was examined, many readers "supposed that his poems provided an almost unmediated knowledge of his mind. The most secret, intimate aspects of his personality were widely felt to be public property."⁸⁸ In this respect, Romanticism and its conceptualisation of genius instigated a culture of literary celebrity that anticipates and continues to manifest around the Brontës.

Though informing our understanding of the Brontës' creative imaginations, the concept of Romantic genius exists in a contentious relationship with femininity. According to a number

⁸⁴ Caroline Franklin, *The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists and Byronism* (London: Routledge, 2013), 127.

⁸⁵ Alexander, "Charlotte Brontë, Autobiography, and the Image of the Hero", 2-4.

⁸⁶ Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine*, 3.

⁸⁷ Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, 9.

⁸⁸ Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, 13.

of feminist critics, Romanticism constitutes a retreat from reason that co-opted feminine characteristics for male writers whilst excluding women and denying the possibility of their genius. Of course, the assumption that women's artistic capabilities were inferior to men's talents was not a novel belief. But Christine Battersby argues that Romanticism added "a distinctly new feel" to ingrained cultural misogyny because "qualities previously downgraded as 'feminine' had become valuable as a consequence of radical changes in aesthetic taste and aesthetic theory."⁸⁹ Higgins notes that although "the Romantic genius was supposed to have qualities such as sensibility and intuition, which were traditionally associated with femininity, he was almost always imagined as a virile, masculine figure."⁹⁰ Similarly, Anne K. Mellor observes that male Romantics not only claimed feminine characteristics but also silenced women and appropriated their influence in the realms of "emotion, love and sensibility".⁹¹ Consequently, male Romantic poets usurped women's "primary cultural authority as the experts in delicate, tender feelings and, by extension, moral purity and goodness" even whilst retaining their claims to intellectual superiority.⁹² As Battersby opines, genius still "apparently, required a penis. Indeed, the more psychically feminine genius appeared, the louder the shout that went up: 'It's a boy!'"⁹³ So what effect did this discourse have on the way that the Brontës and the middlebrow (as well as popular culture more generally) conceive of the feminine creative imagination?

Commentators have long positioned the Brontës as inheritors of this Romantic tradition, particularly EB who is often construed as the least feminine sister. Walter Pater, for example,

⁸⁹ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 23.

⁹⁰ Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine*, 6.

⁹¹ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), 23.

⁹² Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, 23.

⁹³ Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 6.

pronounced that the “spirit of romanticism bore...characteristic fruit” in EB.⁹⁴ More recently, Francis O’Gorman has stated that EB’s poetry is “in persistent negotiation with its Romantic inheritance”.⁹⁵ Such a perception not only derives from EB’s literary work but also owes much to CB’s “Biographical Notice”. In this account, CB declared that in “Emily’s nature the extremes of vigour and simplicity seem to meet” and her description portrays EB as possessing many of the qualities associated with Romantic genius, including spontaneity and intuition.⁹⁶ At the same time, CB implied that her sister’s genius was inextricable from her more masculine attributes and relates that EB possessed “a secret power and fire that might have informed the brain and kindled the veins of a *hero*” and was “[s]tronger than a *man*, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone” [emphases added].⁹⁷ CB initiated EB’s reputation as not only the Brontë most aligned with Romanticism but also as the most creatively androgynous, even masculine, sister. This perception of Emily persists in critical, middlebrow and popular discourse. Mellor, for example, describes EB as a “literary cross-dresser” whose work simultaneously conforms to and resists “a specifically masculine Romanticism”.⁹⁸ Further illustrating the author’s renown for androgyny is Peter Kosminski’s film adaptation *Wuthering Heights* (1992), which cast the shaven-headed, provocatively feminist singer Sinéad O’Connor in the role of EB.

In contrast to EB, AB tends to be viewed as the Brontë most lacking in creative or Romantic genius as well as the most feminine sister. Once again, we can attribute much of this impression to CB’s “Biographical Notice”, which offers a character sketch of AB with only limited consideration of her literary achievements. Comparing AB with EB, CB proposes that

⁹⁴ Walter Pater, “Postscript” to *Appreciations* (1889) in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 445.

⁹⁵ Francis O’Gorman, ed., *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 220.

⁹⁶ Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, 746.

⁹⁷ Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, 746.

⁹⁸ Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, 186.

the youngest Brontë was “milder and more subdued; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister, but was well-endowed with quiet virtues of her own.”⁹⁹ Additionally, CB asserts that AB’s quiet virtues settled as a “nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted” upon her feelings and mind.¹⁰⁰ This feminised simile turns our attention away from AB’s literary achievements and towards her womanly reserve, modesty and religious devotion. In this account, CB emphasises her sister’s blameless life to counteract the controversy surrounding *Wildfell Hall*. To this end, she identifies gentleness and mildness as AB’s defining qualities to erase her youngest sister’s individuality and other characteristics. Through such a manoeuvre, she portrays AB as an anonymous bit player in the larger drama of the Brontë family, particularly in comparison to EB’s masculine genius.

We can further perceive the tension between genius and femininity if we consider the reception of CB and her work. Although the Brontës published under male names in the hope of deflecting attention away from their gender, their attempts to hide their identities inadvertently stoked much conjecture about the Bell brothers. Commenting upon the speculation in a review of *Jane Eyre*, Elizabeth Rigby contended in 1848 that “if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.”¹⁰¹ When CB did admit that she was a woman, speculation about her femininity and sexuality frequently threatened to obscure her reputation as a genius. Various men of letters “found something titillating in the idea that a single woman could have written a novel as passionate as *Jane Eyre*” or simply dismissed

⁹⁹ Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, 746.

¹⁰⁰ Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, 746.

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Rigby, unsigned review in *Quarterly Review* (1848), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 111.

CB for being sex-starved.¹⁰² William Makepeace Thackeray, for instance, might have admired CB for her intellect and artistic talent but still opined after reading *Villette*:

poor little woman of genius! the fiery little eager brave tremulous homely-faced creature! I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy in her book, and see that rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one she wants some Tomkins or another to love her and be in love with.¹⁰³

To neutralise such slurs, CB adopted a number of—not always successful—tactics to cultivate a reputation as a respectable “country spinster”.¹⁰⁴ After her death, however, CB became an icon of Victorian domestic femininity through the interventions of her friend and fellow-writer, Elizabeth Gaskell.

CB built the foundations of her own mythology during her lifetime, but she owes her subsequent fame to Gaskell’s biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). In this influential biography, Gaskell sought to neutralise the scandal surrounding *Jane Eyre* and its now-deceased author by emphasising CB’s domesticity, modesty and femininity. With this portrayal of CB, Gaskell hoped to “relaunch Currer Bell on the public stage as an irreproachable martyr-heroine and, in the process, sanctify the image of the woman writer more generally.”¹⁰⁵ According to Miller, the “immediate effect of the *Life* on the public imagination was to make Charlotte an icon of exemplary womanhood.”¹⁰⁶ When writing the biography, then, Gaskell had two combined aims: assuage the rumour surrounding CB’s passionate nature and protect her reputation as a genius.

¹⁰² Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 22.

¹⁰³ William Makepeace Thackeray, letter to Lucy Baxter, March 11, 1853, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 197.

¹⁰⁴ Charlotte Brontë, letter to William Smith Williams, July 21, 1848, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-51*, vol 2., ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 95.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 57.

¹⁰⁶ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 81.

To achieve this goal, Gaskell's depiction of her subject had to balance several competing conceptualisations of the creative imagination within the Victorian era. Though Gaskell and the Brontë sisters alike were influenced by Romanticism, they also lived during a period that was increasingly suspicious of this cultural legacy. Carol Bock points out that a number of Victorian poets struggled with the Romantic view that their occupation "was, of necessity, either completely isolated from the human community or wracked by a divided allegiance to private vision and public duty."¹⁰⁷ The distrust of Romanticism reflects the inchoate professionalization of authorship during the period,¹⁰⁸ coupled with a greater concern with creative professionals' moral and social responsibilities.¹⁰⁹ As Higgins notes, Romanticism was responsible for the notion that the "aesthetic rule-breaking associated with genius was reflected in the transgressive conduct of its possessors in private life."¹¹⁰ As a result, many Victorians rejected their Romantic predecessors' belief that writing had "a secret, inexplicable origin enclosed in the mind of the poet."¹¹¹ Rather, many Victorians held the opposing view that writing "originates from the world that we all share: a world of books and book publishers, and a world in which writers, like the rest of us, need to eat and sleep, look after their children, and earn money to do these things."¹¹² Whilst the private and individualistic nature of the creative imagination prompted concern in male and female authors alike, these anxieties were likely "exacerbated by social expectations that were particularly intense for women."¹¹³ We can see the effect upon CB who occasionally felt "profoundly guilty of her deep need to create" and could be uncomfortable with the erotic or "licentious" nature of her

¹⁰⁷ Carol Bock, "Gender and Poetic Tradition: The Shaping of Charlotte Brontë's Literary Career", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7, no. 1 (1988): 60.

¹⁰⁸ See Richard Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁹ See Julie F. Codell, *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, c. 1870–1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹¹⁰ Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine*, 12.

¹¹¹ Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824–40* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 259.

¹¹² Cronin, *Romantic Victorians*, 259.

¹¹³ Bock, "Gender and Poetic Tradition", 61.

imagination.¹¹⁴ Bock argues that because CB viewed poetic composition as the most suspect form of creativity, she abandoned her ambitions to be a poet and focused upon becoming a novelist to “achieve a less conflicted form of artistic identity”.¹¹⁵ Though CB decided to eschew the selfishness of being a poet, the solipsism of her creative imagination creates an anxiety that runs throughout Gaskell’s biography.

When writing about CB’s creative process, Gaskell still felt the need to emphasise that the author of *Jane Eyre* never allowed her desire to write to interfere with her feminine responsibilities or domesticity. Throughout her biography, Gaskell aimed to “show how orderly and fully [CB] accomplished her duties, even at those times when the ‘possession’ was upon her.”¹¹⁶ Gaskell relates that when CB was inspired, all of her “care was to discharge her household and filial duties so as to obtain leisure to sit down and write out the incidents and consequent thoughts, which were, in fact, more present to her mind at such times than her actual life itself.”¹¹⁷ Immediately after this admission, Gaskell shares an anecdote about CB “breaking off in the full flow of interest and inspiration in her writing” to take over the task of preparing the potatoes for dinner from the unwitting blind family servant, Tabby.¹¹⁸ Such incidents counterbalance the implications of CB’s creative imagination and keep her womanliness intact. The biography’s preoccupation with CB’s femininity could be one explanation for why Gaskell devotes limited attention to CB’s frequently professional interest in the publishing market and process, which could have been construed as too masculine.¹¹⁹ At the same time, Gaskell’s decision to distance her from such matters may have been

¹¹⁴ Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’”, 315.

¹¹⁵ Bock, “Gender and Poetic Tradition”, 65.

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 306-7.

¹¹⁷ Gaskell, *Life*, 306.

¹¹⁸ Gaskell, *Life*, 306.

¹¹⁹ Linda Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 148. For further discussion of the Brontës’ professionalization as authors, see Carol A Bock, “Authorship, the Brontës, and *Fraser’s Magazine*: ‘Coming Forward’ as an Author in Early Victorian England”, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2001): 241-66.

motivated by “a desire to preserve for Brontë the Romantic claim to ‘genius’, a category that soars above material concerns.”¹²⁰

Even though Gaskell sought to defend CB’s femininity and domesticity, she still wanted to demonstrate her subject’s genius to challenge “earlier, less fruitful nineteenth-century models that saw literary genius and domesticity as oppositional.”¹²¹ According to Linda Peterson, the Romantic emphasis on genius “had been lost in early Victorian accounts of women’s authorship, and Gaskell reclaims it strategically in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.”¹²² In one of the *Life*’s most famous passages, Gaskell writes that growing fame means that

Charlotte Brontë’s existence becomes divided into two parallel currents—her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character—not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled.¹²³

From Richard Salmon’s perspective, Gaskell represents CB as living a “twofold existence as woman *and* author” and “readers are invited to observe the painful splitting of Brontë’s subject position.”¹²⁴ In this interpretation, Gaskell takes a different approach from other Victorian writers who argued that women’s authorship was an extension of their womanly obligations or that their writing was enhanced by their gender.¹²⁵

Gaskell’s claim that CB’s life split into “parallel currents” introduces further complexity into her gendering of the other woman author’s creative imagination and genius. By dividing CB the woman from Currer Bell the author, furthermore, the biography implies that its subject’s “doubleness retains the capacity to be resolved through sacrifice.”¹²⁶ As such, Gaskell

¹²⁰ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 148.

¹²¹ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 145.

¹²² Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 143.

¹²³ Gaskell, *Life*, 334.

¹²⁴ Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*, 179.

¹²⁵ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 142.

¹²⁶ Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*, 180.

exonerates CB of any unfeminine solipsism but she also emphasises the God-given nature of literary genius, advancing that the woman writer “must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others.”¹²⁷ But if Gaskell insists upon the femininity of CB’s literary service, she does not insist upon the femininity of CB’s creative imagination. According to Peterson, “Gaskell presents Brontë’s talent as something distinct from her womanly character—not unfeminine or unwomanly, but ungendered, unsought, and God-given.”¹²⁸ By representing the creative imagination as “ungendered”, Gaskell attempts to achieve one of CB’s major desires: for her literary reputation to be evaluated without recourse to her femininity.¹²⁹ For as CB related in the “Biographical Notice”, she and her sisters decided to publish under male pseudonyms because they believed that “authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.”¹³⁰

If Gaskell and CB wished to defeminise CB’s creative imagination, second-wave feminist literary critics sought to achieve the converse goal. In the next section of this Introduction, I turn my attention to the literary critics who identified CB and other women writers’ creative imaginations as specifically feminine. During this discussion, I will examine some of the objections directed at second-wave feminist literary criticism to consider the effects of twentieth-century theorists’ reconceptualisations of authorship, creativity and femininity beyond the academy.

¹²⁷ Gaskell, *Life*, 334.

¹²⁸ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 142.

¹²⁹ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 145.

¹³⁰ Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, 743.

Twentieth-Century Reconceptualisations of Feminine Creativity

In the 1970s and 1980s, the subject of women's creativity and authorship was viewed as "exciting, challenging and *theoretically significant* stuff."¹³¹ Influential second-wave critics used the Brontës' lives and art to theorise feminine literary aesthetics whilst positioning them within a feminine literary tradition. Such a desire is unsurprising in light of the fact that for many feminists "the need for women to claim cultural legitimacy through authorising themselves in various ways is indisputable."¹³² Critics such as Gilbert and Gubar focused upon the Brontës and other women authors to advocate "a reclamation of women's literary history and an exhortation to women to claim a voice."¹³³ But if one of second-wave feminism's central projects was redefining literary genius to include women authors, women's creativity and writing have since become a "marginal topic in feminist theory today" according to Toril Moi.¹³⁴

We can attribute this change to a number of causes, including Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" (1967) and the rise of poststructuralism more generally. In his influential essay, Barthes erroneously contends that "[c]lassic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature."¹³⁵ On this basis, he declares that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."¹³⁶ His focus upon the text led him to postulate that writing "is that neutral, composite, oblique space

¹³¹ Toril Moi, "'I am not a Woman Writer': About Women, Literature and Feminist Theory Today", *Feminist Theory* 9, no. 3 (2008): 260.

¹³² Mary Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

¹³³ Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author*, 3.

¹³⁴ Moi, "'I am not a woman writer'", 259.

¹³⁵ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 148. Prior to Barthes, several schools of literary criticism—such as New Criticism or Russian Formalism—had advocated less author-centric approaches. See Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 25-6.

¹³⁶ Barthes, "The Death of the Author", 148.

where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.”¹³⁷ As such, the author’s

only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish “to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary”.¹³⁸

With his insistence on language, Barthes refutes the Romantic belief that writing is the expression of an author’s individual genius. Consequently, “The Death of the Author” not only reduces the author into “a text himself” but also ensures that “the writer’s dematerialised ‘self’ was shorn of his romantic right to be the final referent or even a key witness of his work, and the work itself was denied an idealised aesthetic transcendence.”¹³⁹ In the process, “The Death of the Author” challenged not only previous conceptualisations of creativity but also the foundations of liberal humanism by construing human subjects as “now no more than the intersection of the discourses that constructed them”.¹⁴⁰

After the first English translation of his essay appeared in 1977, Barthes’s dictum quickly became a “theoretical cliché”¹⁴¹ in the Anglophone academy but also contributed to a “curious contradiction in intellectual history”.¹⁴² At the same time that poststructuralist theorists were challenging the significance of the author and—by extension—the concept of literary genius, second-wave feminist theorists were agitating for the rediscovery and recognition of individual women writers and a feminine literary heritage. According to Kaplan, feminist scholars in the 1980s struggled to reconcile their project with the fact that

¹³⁷ Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, 142.

¹³⁸ Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, 146.

¹³⁹ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 40.

¹⁴⁰ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 40.

¹⁴¹ Jane Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

¹⁴² Eagleton, *Figuring The Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, 3.

human identity itself was “on trial, accused of supporting an essentialised reference to a biologically, psychologically and culturally fixed femininity.”¹⁴³

Feminist and poststructuralist positions seemed further incompatible in the aftermath of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990).¹⁴⁴ Butler is a philosopher whose work deconstructs traditional gender categories and ensures that “it became difficult to speak of ‘women’ except in inverted commas.”¹⁴⁵ Indicatively, the Editorial Statement for the inaugural issue of the journal *Contemporary Women’s Writing* made clear that few “would now consider ‘woman’ a self-evident category. We know too much about the differences between women, bolstered by structural and personal inequalities; we are too conscious of the problems in claiming a coherent identity”.¹⁴⁶ Because of this intellectual shift, second-wave feminist literary critics have garnered significant criticism for their lack of theoretical sophistication. Moi posits that the perception of second-wave feminism’s naivety means “the vanguard of feminist theory shifted away from literature and literary criticism.”¹⁴⁷ But as she also observes, an intellectual climate of “schizophrenia” currently exists where “one half of the brain continues to read woman writers, while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word ‘woman’ is theoretically dodgy.”¹⁴⁸

Yet in spite of these theoretical challenges, contemporary literary criticism has not eschewed the subject of women’s writing. Many feminists still perceive “a *political* duty to be interested in women writers” even if they acknowledge the theoretical problems with their interest.¹⁴⁹

For example, Nancy K. Miller acknowledges the weakness of her position even as she argues

¹⁴³ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁴⁵ Moi, “‘I am not a woman writer’”, 263.

¹⁴⁶ Mary Eagleton and Susan Stanford Friedman, “Editorial Statement”, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 1, no. 1 (2007): 2.

¹⁴⁷ Moi, “‘I am not a woman writer’”, 263.

¹⁴⁸ Moi, “‘I am not a woman writer’”, 264.

¹⁴⁹ Moi, “‘I am not a woman writer’”, 262.

for the necessity of literary critics who believe “that ‘we women’ must continue to work for the woman who has been writing, because not to do so will reauthorize our oblivion”.¹⁵⁰ The concept of women’s writing gains further traction due to the fact that female authors have achieved such legitimacy “only recently and tentatively and, even then, only within certain parts of the globe.”¹⁵¹

Similarly to literary critics working upon women’s writing, middlebrow culture exhibits the desire to reflect upon feminine authorship and creativity, often from a politicised perspective. In the second chapter, I will argue that fictionalising CB enables contemporary neo-Victorian authors to consider the historical but also contemporary challenges faced by women writers in patriarchal societies. In some cases, these works lend credence to Mary Eagleton’s observation that “the figure of the woman author provides the living woman author with opportunities to explore, to some extent at least, her own situation, her aspirations and anxieties.”¹⁵² As a result, these writers often revive the concerns of second-wave feminists such as the politics of representation or canon formation. This ongoing fascination with women writers illustrates that Barthes’s essay did not staunch popular culture’s continued curiosity about and interpretive investment in authors or their lives.

Likewise, adaptations (in various media) of the Brontës’ novels consistently nurture popular or middlebrow culture’s fascination with the sisters’ authorship and feminine creativity. In the third chapter, I shall propose that costume drama adaptations of *Jane Eyre* frequently plunder the Brontës’ lives and iconography for inspiration. Similar borrowings occur in adaptations of

¹⁵⁰ Nancy K. Miller, “The Text’s Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions”, *Diacritics* 12, no. 2 (1982): 49.

¹⁵¹ Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author*, 6.

¹⁵² Eagleton, *Figuring The Woman Author*, 5.

other women writers' novels and biopics of their lives.¹⁵³ As Sonia Haiduc remarks, film and television biopics reveal “an unremitting drive to place female literary icons under the lens—a development in tune with the current voracious consumption of female celebrity across a variety of media.”¹⁵⁴ These onscreen portrayals contribute to a wider “biographilia” that—in conjunction with the influence of second-wave feminism—has “inspired fat new studies of Victorian women writers”, including Juliet Barker’s *The Brontës* (1994) and Lyndall Gordon’s *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (1994).¹⁵⁵ Such works suggest that, even after “The Death of the Author”, middlebrow and popular culture remain interested in authors whilst readers “crave, and seek, origins” for literary works.¹⁵⁶ For Judith Buchanan, this continued popular interest in authorial lives “stems from a cultural—even, in its more extreme expressions, quasi-mystical—compulsion to invest in heightened terms what an author/artist *is*.”¹⁵⁷ This fascination reflects the extent to which contemporary culture remains deeply indebted to Romanticism’s conceptualisation of the creative imagination and genius.

In many respects, popular and middlebrow culture shares this interest with literary scholars and critics. Even when “The Death of the Author” was at the height of intellectual fashion, many historians and literary scholars retained a view of the author and the humanist subject as “unified, self-conscious and in charge of its own destiny in an ideal world if not always in the real one”.¹⁵⁸ Since the heyday of poststructuralism, literary scholarship has demonstrated a

¹⁵³ No film or television biopics of the Brontës have been recently made but previous cinematic treatments of their lives include *Devotion*, directed by Curtis Bernhard (Warner Brothers, 1946) and *Les Soeurs Brontë*, directed by André Téchiné (Gaumont, 1979). In May 2015, the BBC announced that the television auteur Sally Wainwright will be writing and directing a television drama entitled *To Walk Invisible: The Brontë Sisters*. BBC Media Centre, “BBC One Announces New Drama by Award-Winning Writer Sally Wainwright”, *BBC Media Centre*, May 18, 2015, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2015/to-walk-invisible>.

¹⁵⁴ Sonia Haiduc, “‘Here is the Story of my Career...’: the Woman Writer on Film”, in *The Writer On Film: Screening Literary Authorships*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 52.

¹⁵⁵ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 38-9.

¹⁵⁶ Judith Buchanan, “Image, Story, Desire: the Writer on Film”, in *The Writer On Film: Screening Literary Authorships*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 18.

¹⁵⁷ Buchanan, “Image, Story, Desire”, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 40.

lively and persistent interest in authorship and Romantic genius. Both of these concepts received much consideration in the research and criticism that I drew upon in my earlier discussion of Romanticism, the Brontës and Gaskell. We can still differentiate, however, between scholarly or critical interest in and a wider cultural fascination with creative genius. Scholars and critics identify myriad and shifting conceptualisations of authorship whilst aiming to situate each one in their specific cultural, literary, social and economic contexts. Higgins, for instance, explores the role of the literary magazine in constructing the archetype of the Romantic genius. Meanwhile, Peterson tackles how nineteenth-century women writers “articulated their role of authors, negotiated the material conditions of authorship, and constructed myths of the woman author, often against the material realities”.¹⁵⁹ Like Peterson and Higgins, Salmon is interested in “early Victorian debates upon literary genius, labour and professionalism” and examines “the generic forms of print culture through which the figure of the modern professional author was first mediated.”¹⁶⁰ What these scholars have in common is that they do not treat the author or creative genius as transhistorical concepts and, thereby, they avoid invoking the assumptions of liberal humanism. Yet the following chapters will reveal that the middlebrow often resists interrogating authorship or creative genius as culturally constructed entities. This investment reflects that Romantic genius is one of “the most seductive and enduring models of literary authorship” in contemporary culture.¹⁶¹

Middlebrow and popular culture’s preoccupation with figures of “genius” and their “great works” foregrounds another issue that arises throughout this thesis: canonicity and canon formation. The cultural prominence of the Brontës and other similarly revered authors lends support to Joe Gixti’s observation that the “belief that there is a canon of superior and lasting

¹⁵⁹ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 5-6.

¹⁶⁰ Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*, 16.

¹⁶¹ North, “Romantic Genius on Screen”, 77.

works is still very much alive in both popular and educated discourse.”¹⁶² The continued significance of the canon suggests the need to reconsider or readjust the widespread view that we are living in a postmodern era where the “blurring of cultural boundaries between high art and low is manifest in all manner of cultural spheres”.¹⁶³ As such, commentators often perceive the impulse to construct cultural distinctions as now having disappeared. For instance, Lawrence Napper observes that the terms of high-, middle- and lowbrow “have largely fallen out of use now, partly because the struggle over cultural value to which they refer has largely been emulsified by the postmodern condition.”¹⁶⁴ I turn to consider more fully in the first chapter of this thesis whether postmodernism has dissolved cultural distinctions and invalidated contemporary culture’s need for the concept of the middlebrow.

Outline of Thesis Chapters

The first chapter aims to demonstrate the relevance of the concept of the middlebrow for this thesis’s analysis of contemporary engagements with the Brontës’ lives and literary achievements. For initial insight into this matter, I will begin with a discussion of Jennifer Vandever’s neo-Victorian novel, *The Brontë Project* (2005). According to Stoneman, *The Brontë Project* with its “bright, sparky tone, its plot of romantic dilemmas and easy satire on academia and Hollywood might belong to upmarket chick-lit, but it is nevertheless an intelligent book”.¹⁶⁵ Such an assessment suggests that the desire to evaluate and create cultural taxonomies has not waned during the postmodern era. To support this proposition, chapter one will consider the origins, different definitions and feminine associations of the term “middlebrow”. I will also review existing research undertaken upon the middlebrow to

¹⁶² Joe Gixti, “Pop Goes the Canon: Consumer Culture and Artistic Value in Screen Adaptations of Literary Classics”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 4 (2009): 448.

¹⁶³ Stephen Brown, *Postmodern Marketing* (London: Routledge, 1995), 74.

¹⁶⁴ Lawrence Napper, “British Cinema and the Middlebrow”, in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), 111.

¹⁶⁵ Stoneman, “Sex, Crimes and Secrets”, 349.

reflect on the approaches used in this thesis. Additionally, I want to explicate my decision to position the neo-Victorian fiction and the BBC adaptations of the Brontës' novels discussed in this thesis within the cultural middlebrow.

Building upon the first chapter's exploration of the contemporary middlebrow, the second chapter will examine the constructions and representations of CB's life, creative imagination and literary works in three neo-Victorian novels. These novels are Sheila Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009), Justine Picardie's novel *Daphne* (2008) and D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte* (2000). Throughout the chapter, I aim to illuminate the debt that contemporary middlebrow culture and neo-Victorian fiction owe to second-wave feminist literary scholarship, particularly *The Madwoman in the Attic*. As part of their mission, Gilbert and Gubar sought to recover a secret feminine literary tradition and identify a feminine literary aesthetic. This critical legacy has, in turn, influenced *Becoming Jane Eyre*, *Daphne* and *Charlotte*, which offer insight into the middlebrow's ongoing desire to reflect upon the Brontës and the feminine creative imagination. Throughout my examination of these novels, I attempt to elucidate the relationship between these contemporary novels and an earlier tradition of middlebrow women's writing. In the process, I hope to demonstrate the existence of a shared middlebrow feminine aesthetic. At the same time, this inquiry will lead me not only to consider the legacies of second-wave feminism but also to introduce the concept of postfeminism.

Continuing to explore the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and postfeminism, the third chapter compares the representation of the heroine's feminine creative imagination in four costume drama adaptations of *Jane Eyre*. These adaptations include: *Jane Eyre* (feature film, Franco Zeffirelli, 1996); *Jane Eyre* (telefilm, ITV, 1997); *Jane Eyre* (television serial, BBC, 2006)

and *Jane Eyre* (feature film, Cary Fukunaga, 2011). The purpose of this examination is to investigate whether film and television costume drama adaptations of CB's novel appeal to feminine pleasures and construct a feminine aesthetic. To illuminate this issue, I focus upon costume as a source of feminine pleasure. Such an analysis seeks to demonstrate how costume contributes a complex range of meanings to the adaptations that have significant implications for the representation of the heroines' creative imaginations. Examining the portrayal of the feminine creative imagination enables this chapter to consider how the separate productions have engaged with not only the feminist reputation of CB's novel but also how they reveal the feminist possibilities of the genre. But I will also interrogate to what extent the recent *Jane Eyre* adaptations recycle femininities from the past in ways that potentially construct a postfeminist sensibility and mystique.

Whilst the second and third chapters examine the many cultural afterlives of CB and *Jane Eyre*, the fourth chapter seeks to explain the relative anonymity of AB and obscurity of *Wildfell Hall*. I aim to demonstrate that whilst AB and *Wildfell Hall* may not be as famous as her sisters or their works, both have a place within the intertextual web of middlebrow culture. The chapter will begin with a discussion of how the cultural mythology surrounding AB developed, before outlining the ways in which AB's creative imagination has been conceptualised and distinguished from the imaginations of her more prominent sisters. Thereafter, I will consider representations of the historical AB in middlebrow and neo-Victorian fiction as well as the construction of the feminine creative imagination in *Wildfell Hall* and in adaptations of *Wildfell Hall*. The adaptations discussed include *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (television serial, BBC, 1968/9); *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (television serial, BBC, 1996) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (radio serial, BBC, 2011). For insight into AB and *Wildfell Hall*'s cultural afterlives, I will consider the two screen costume drama

adaptations of *Wildfell Hall* to investigate why this novel is so rarely adapted. This analysis will lead to a close examination of the approaches used by the television adaptation in 1996 and the radio adaptation in 2011 to conceptualise the feminine creative imagination. As in the earlier chapters, I consider the feminine aesthetics of AB's work and costume drama adaptations of her novel. This examination will enable an exploration of the conceptualisation of AB's creative imagination in relation to her evolving representation as an early and politicised feminist within an increasingly postfeminist cultural context.

At the beginning of this Introduction, I pointed out that AB and CB had a similar investment in but offered contrasting views of the feminine creative imagination in *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*. The differences between the two sisters and their novels indicate the complex and wide-ranging implications of women's artistry and desire for creative expression. Over the course of this thesis, I hope to adumbrate how CB and AB's engagement with their heroine's creativity continues to inspire middlebrow culture's interest in the feminine creative imagination. To develop this argument, the next chapter turns to consider *The Brontë Project*.

Chapter 1

The Brontës and Middlebrow Culture

A comedic novel, Jennifer Vandever's *The Brontë Project* (2005) satirises the way that the canonical Brontës and their novels have been appropriated across the cultural spectrum. Much of *The Brontë Project*'s parody derives from its portrayal of academia as a sphere where common sense and the study of the literary canon have been displaced by vacuous scholarship and pretentious theory. The heroine is Sara Frost, a PhD student researching CB's letters. Sara has become weary of the posturing of academia and fending off her PhD advisor's suggestion that she bring CB back into intellectual fashion by finding evidence of "some sexual abuse" in the letters.¹ Sensing that her traditional, humanist approach is being edged out of the academy, Sara accepts an invitation to develop a screenplay for a biopic about CB in Los Angeles. Yet in Hollywood, Sara struggles to advise philistine studio executives who complain that the "bitchy" CB's life lacks the romance necessary to make a commercially successful film.² Caught between the extremes of highbrow academia and lowbrow Hollywood, she represents the only intelligent and dissenting voice not prepared to distort CB's life or novels for her own purposes. An emblem of various competing cultural anxieties, Sara is the archetypal middlebrow reader. To illustrate my conceptualisation of the middlebrow, this chapter will argue that Vandever's novel can be situated within a longer tradition of feminine middlebrow responses to the Brontës' lives and work.

The aim of this chapter is to illuminate the continued applicability of the concept of the "middlebrow" in a postmodern era. *The Brontë Project* is a useful example of a middlebrow text that recognises the advent of postmodernism but ridicules the assumption that cultural

¹ Jennifer Vandever, *The Brontë Project* (London: Pocket, 2006), 6.

² Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 201-2.

distinctions have disappeared. As Sara negotiates contemporary academia, she encounters various juxtapositions that bring to mind Jean-François Lyotard's description of the postmodern world as a place where "one listens to reggae, watches a Western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong".³ One of Sara's fellow PhD students, for example, is working on a "comparative study of meter and lyric in the works of Samuel Beckett and Tupac Shakur."⁴ Struggling to secure funding for her work on CB, Sara has to watch her departmental rival Claire Vigee receive accolades and financial recognition as the founder of Princess Diana Studies. Such details reflect that *The Brontë Project* construes academia as confused about its remit and more likely to turn its attention towards popular "trash" rather than—as would be more fitting—canonical literature.

In this chapter's first section, I want to consider how *The Brontë Project* attempts to protect cultural boundaries whilst defying the widespread assumption that such demarcations have been dissolved by postmodernism. Then I will turn my attention to defending my hypothesis that many of the works discussed in this thesis fall into the middlebrow. As its name suggests, the middlebrow occupies what Virginia Woolf referred to as the cultural space "betwixt and between" high and low culture.⁵ Yet mapping this territory is a difficult task. To this end, I will consider various definitions of the middlebrow and the origins of the concept in the interwar years of the twentieth century. The middlebrow may have a specific historical origin but I will also demonstrate that its "relational status within a cultural hierarchy" means that it

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 76.

⁴ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 56.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow", in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), 113-119. Woolf employs the phrase "betwixt and between" throughout her essay.

“has an inbuilt flexibility that makes it continually available to critics.”⁶ From Beth Driscoll’s perspective, it “is this combination of specificity and fluidity that keeps the term compelling.”⁷ As well as considering Driscoll’s claim, this section will reflect upon the various methodologies used to study the middlebrow before justifying the approaches applied in this thesis.

Thereafter, this chapter will position the material discussed in this thesis within contemporary middlebrow culture. More specifically, I want to suggest that the middlebrow label can be applied to many examples of neo-Victorian fiction and BBC adaptations. To begin, I will examine different definitions of neo-Victorianism and outline the growth of the field of neo-Victorian studies. In Samantha J. Carroll’s view, neo-Victorian fiction is a subgenre of historical fiction that deploys “an ironic double-coding that splices together nineteenth-century realist representations with a postmodern sensibility.”⁸ In that section, I aim to demonstrate that the emphasis on the genre’s postmodernism means that the critical discourse has often failed to examine the position of many neo-Victorian works upon the cultural spectrum. After considering neo-Victorian fiction, the chapter turns to explore the relationship between adaptations—particularly those for the screen—and middlebrow culture before discussing the recent burgeoning of adaptation studies. The field has moved beyond previously dominant assumptions about cultural hierarchies—such as high-, middle- or lowbrow culture—that tend to rank literature over other media. Yet I also intend to illustrate that the middlebrow remains a fitting term for certain types of adaptation. To advance this point, I will reflect upon the cultural status of costume drama adaptations, particularly

⁶ Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10.

⁷ Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 10.

⁸ Samantha J. Carroll, “Putting the ‘Neo’ Back into Neo-Victorianism: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Historical Fiction”, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 183.

adaptations made by the BBC. As I will argue, the BBC can be seen as a middlebrow cultural institution in light of the organisation's history and role as a public service broadcaster.

During the course of this chapter, earlier examples of feminine middlebrow culture will be used to adumbrate contemporary representations and adaptations of the sisters and their novels. These comparisons serve to elucidate the fact that the middlebrow has an established and still prevalent fascination with Brontës' lives, art and creative imaginations. This fascination manifests in *The Brontë Project*, a novel that also decries academia's apparent failure to respect cultural boundaries or appreciate the canonicity of the literary sisters. As *The Brontë Project*'s defence of the literary canon foregrounds, the concept has come under much intellectual and ideological suspicion. In the next section, I aim to situate this suspicion of the canon—and clear cultural boundaries more generally—within broader contemporary discourses about cultural value..

The Dissolving Boundaries of Contemporary Culture?

The term “canon” once meant a collection of authoritative religious scriptures but now chiefly refers to the “corpus of works comprising the ‘classics’ of art and literature, the very summit of cultural achievement in the West”.⁹ Since the eighteenth century, cultural theorists have attempted to compile canons using different criteria and for a variety of purposes.¹⁰ Famously and influentially, the liberal humanist Matthew Arnold proposed that studying “the best which has been thought and said in the world” could be morally beneficial to society.¹¹ More recently, Harold Bloom has rejected the premise that the canon could serve any moral purpose, arguing instead that canonical works derive their worth solely from their aesthetic

⁹ E. Dean Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (Boulder: Westview, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ Douglas Lane Patey, “The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon”, *Modern Language Studies* 18, no. 1 (1988): 17-37.

¹¹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), viii.

excellence. Throughout *The Western Canon* (1994), Bloom mocks commentators who deny the “actuality” of aesthetic value.¹² Despite their dissimilarities, Bloom and Arnold alike express the view that the canon is a repository of works that retain a timeless and universal appeal and value for all humanity. Bloom repeatedly emphasises that he seeks merely to preserve aesthetic excellence, postulating that nothing “is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity, which are elitist only to the extent that they are founded upon severely artistic criteria.”¹³ His defence of this point reflects the fact that disagreement and debate exists around the canon and the values that the canon supposedly preserves.

For many commentators, the concept of a canon cannot be defended because of the relative and contingent “value” ascribed to canonical works. Advancing this point, Terry Eagleton states that the so-called “literary canon” needs to be understood as a

construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a particular time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable *in itself*, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. ‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria in light of given purposes.¹⁴

As such, the concept has come to be attacked as an instrument that enshrines the values of those in hegemonic, powerful positions to exclude or oppress marginal groups. This critique will be further explored in the next chapter where I discuss second-wave feminists’ efforts to construct alternative, non-patriarchal canons.

Other commentators have argued that the concept of a canon no longer appears tenable due to the advent of postmodernism. According to Lyotard, postmodernism is a cultural condition

¹² Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Papermac, 1996), 1.

¹³ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 22.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 10.

that is characterised by “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹⁵ Such metanarratives include not only the liberal humanist conviction that timeless, universal values exist but also that these values could be sustained by the canon. The project of classifying certain works as canonical, moreover, seems redundant in a postmodern epoch associated with “the blurring and collapse of the traditional boundaries between culture and art, high and low culture, commerce and art, culture and commerce.”¹⁶ Stephen Brown argues that just

as popular preoccupations have been appropriated by ‘high’ culture (vernacular architecture, pop-art, literary genres) so too serious treatment is now accorded to what were once dismissed as ‘low’ or degrading cultural forms—film, television, popular music, fashion and so on.¹⁷

Contradicting this proposal, *The Brontë Project* portrays the dissolution of cultural boundaries as a source of comedy but also suggests that neither the middlebrow’s need for such distinctions nor the attachment to liberal humanist values have entirely evaporated.

As a satire of contemporary academia, Vandever’s novel articulates suspicion of “high” theory and anxiety about the destruction of the canon and liberal humanist values. For most of the novel, the Parisian Claire represents the threat and worst excesses of theory, particularly “French” theory. She garners credibility for Diana Studies (and her narcissistic sexual self-exposures) by spouting theoretical-sounding pronouncements, such as popular culture is “a kind of dream, a lucid dream, in which the participants are acting in a kind of dumb show of the collective unconsciousness.”¹⁸ Claire’s declarations parody the type of exegesis of popular culture found in, for example, Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1957) where he expounds the semiotic significance of “The Face of Garbo” or “Steak and Chips.”¹⁹ Theory’s worrying effects upon academic standards becomes clear in an episode in which Sara teaches *Romeo*

¹⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

¹⁶ Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2008), 202.

¹⁷ Stephen Brown, *Postmodern Marketing* (London: Routledge, 1995), 72-4.

¹⁸ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 61.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers and Sian Reynolds (London: Vintage, 2009).

and Juliet to Claire's students. In the seminar, the students eschew close reading but use pseudo-intellectual buzzwords to insist that "Juliet's main emotional bond is with the Nurse" whilst the play's central themes are "castration and female rage".²⁰ Dismayed, Sara realises that the students do not recognise *Romeo and Juliet*'s concern with "true love thwarted by violence and vengeance".²¹ Academia here is presented as using theory to destroy readers' ability to draw on the literary canon to explore genuine emotions related to the transhistorical human condition. As such, *The Brontë Project* further demonstrates Joe Gixti's contention that "allusions to older canonical sources continue to reflect and reinforce popular (and ultimately liberal humanist) assumptions about the somehow 'intrinsic' and 'timeless' values of high cultural products."²²

As part of its defence of liberal humanism, Vandever's work castigates literary theory for its deconstruction of the author. In this respect, *The Brontë Project* supports Seán Burke's contention that Barthes did not invalidate the "author" in wider discourse but merely contributed to a "growing breach between academic literary criticism and broad intellectual culture."²³ The novel supports the impression that literary scholars and critics dispute

the notion of individual literary genius, by treating novels and poems as no different from any other kind of literary texts, and by analysing them to uncover the ideological and economic forces responsible for their production. But readers outside the academy have not surrendered their piety.²⁴

Indicatively in *The Brontë Project*, Sara's respect for the canon means that she retains a traditional, pragmatic concern with the historical CB in spite of her environment's indifference to her scholarship. In comparison to Sara, Claire does not even deign to study an

²⁰ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 49, 51.

²¹ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 51.

²² Joe Gixti, "Pop Goes the Canon: Consumer Culture and Artistic Value in Screen Adaptations of Literary Classics", *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 4 (2009): 455.

²³ Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), ix.

²⁴ Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 16.

author but works upon the celebrity figure of Diana. Notably, Claire treats Diana as a mythic abstraction rather than a person, such as when she declares the princess to be a “warrior, as a symbol of Woman not willing to be a victim anymore”.²⁵ Yet at the end of *The Brontë Project*, cultural order seems to be returning when Claire arranges for the Diana Studies foundation to support Sara’s quest for CB’s letters.

In this respect, *The Brontë Project* oversimplifies the divide between academia and the middlebrow by portraying academia as universally dismissive of the author and the literary canon. As Cora Kaplan notes, the author remained in “favour with historians” and the “reading public” even when “an object of condescension with the new breed of literary critics in the 1970s and 80s”.²⁶ The Introduction pointed out that literary scholarship and criticism has since returned to, re-explored and resituated different models of authorship within their cultural or historical context. Yet *The Brontë Project* represents academia as still hoodwinked by Barthes’s “The Death of the Author”. Vandever’s novel, thus, signals a desire to debunk “high” theory and contest the authority of institutions associated with high culture. Paradoxically, such hostility is bound up with the work’s combined efforts to re-impose clear cultural boundaries whilst critiquing academia for its embrace of the lowbrow. In this respect, *The Brontë Project* aspires to be highbrow whilst supporting Driscoll’s view that the university has “become one of the defining sites of elitism against which the middlebrow operates.”²⁷

As well as castigating academia for being simultaneously elitist and populist, *The Brontë Project* exhibits fascination with but also a desire to distance itself from the lowbrow. At

²⁵ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 64.

²⁶ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 38.

²⁷ Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 37.

various points, Vandever's novel expresses ambivalence towards the Brontës' adoption by and dissemination throughout mass popular culture. In *The Brontë Project*, Hollywood provides relief from academia (where even Juliet's love for Romeo in Shakespeare's play is in doubt) by recognising the value and pleasure of romance. Equipped with emotional intelligence and a longing for love, Sara contrasts favourably with Claire's cynical and misguided students. Unlike them, the nine-year-old Sara could see a cinematic version of *Wuthering Heights* and be "shattered. She immediately read the book and was devastated."²⁸ Yet when working as a script advisor for the CB biopic, Sara discovers that the author's life and marriage cannot satisfy the demands of Hollywood. Indeed, one film executive advises turning the character of CB's eventual husband—the curate Arthur Bell Nichols—into a blacksmith so that he appears less "like a total whipped pussy" when CB repeatedly refuses his marriage proposals.²⁹ His suggestion not only construes Hollywood's investment in romance as reductive and crassly commercial but also implies that mass culture has tainted the Brontës.

With its conflicting attitudes towards high and low culture alike, *The Brontë Project* exemplifies one of the key contentions of this thesis: the middlebrow is an "essentially parasitical" taxonomy that

depends upon the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights, while at the same time fastidiously holding its skirts away from lowbrow contamination, and gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions."³⁰

Bearing this description in mind, I now turn my attention to the challenging task of defining and identifying the contours of the middlebrow.

²⁸ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 15.

²⁹ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 205.

³⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11-2.

Defining the Middlebrow

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the phrenological terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” started to be used as indicators of cultural value and thus led to the eventual creation of the notion of the middlebrow.³¹ From the beginning, the middlebrow has been burdened with pejorative connotations. One of the earliest recorded uses can be found in a 1925 issue of *Punch*, which jibes that the “B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow’. It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like.”³² This section examines different attempts to theorise the middlebrow from the interwar period onwards. To provide insight into why the term first came into circulation, I will refer to Q.D. Leavis’s early and influential study of the middlebrow, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). Leavis conducted her research by collecting empirical data from a variety of sources (such as libraries, book clubs and newsagents) using approaches that she labelled “anthropological”.³³ Drawing from her work, I hope to demonstrate that the status of cultural works tends to be inextricable from the status of their consumers and modes of consumption. Thereafter, the concept’s associations with the middle classes and, in particular, femininity will be considered. To reveal some of the key features of middlebrow culture, the final part of this section will compare an earlier example of feminine middlebrow fiction with *The Brontë Project*.

Though I do not use the term “middlebrow” in a historically specific sense, I am indebted to scholarship that, for the most part, does focus upon a particular era. My conceptualisation of

³¹ These terms reflect the phrenological belief that “the organs of intellect were clustered at the front of the brain, discernable in the front of the forehead”. David Stack, *Queen Victoria’s Skull: George Combe and the Mid-Victorian Mind* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008), xvi.

³² *Punch* quoted in Oxford English Dictionary, “middlebrow, n. and adj.”, *OED Online*, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/252048>.

³³ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), xv.

the middlebrow owes much to research on interwar and mid-twentieth-century women's writing that has developed the "notion of a distinctly feminine middlebrow".³⁴ Just as this scholarship challenges the periodization of literary history,³⁵ I wish to look beyond the periodization of the middlebrow to reveal continuities between earlier and more contemporary invocations of the Brontës and their novels. Debate already exists about the feminine middlebrow's periodization. Theresa Mangum, for example, traces the feminine middlebrow backwards to the nineteenth century and argues that New Woman fiction explored territory that would "develop into middlebrow women's fiction".³⁶ In her pioneering study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (2001), Nicola Humble focuses on the period from the 1920s to the mid-1950s when she claims the feminine middlebrow novel faded away due to changes in women's social circumstances and literary culture.³⁷ In a recent monograph, Erica Brown has proposed that the "dividing line between high and middlebrow culture is in fact more strongly marked after World War II than before."³⁸ In light of this realisation, Brown critiques feminine middlebrow scholarship's tendency to concentrate upon the interwar years and posits that "the dominance of these 'periods' has tended to construct rather arbitrary divisions."³⁹ On closer inspection, the feminine middlebrow displays greater temporal fluidity than initially appears.

Before I examine this matter further, I first want to consider why the idea of a "middlebrow" gained currency during the interwar years. The concept's emergence can be attributed to concurrent developments at both ends of the cultural spectrum. The period witnessed, firstly,

³⁴ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 14.

³⁵ "Convenient literary fictions like 'Modernism', 'the Auden Generation', 'the angry young men' leave little space for writers like Rosamund Lehman, Rose Macauley, Elizabeth Bowen, and Elizabeth Taylor, and none at all for their more frivolous contemporaries". Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 2.

³⁶ Teresa Mangum, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 7.

³⁷ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 4.

³⁸ Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 11-2.

³⁹ Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 11.

the burgeoning of mass popular culture and, secondly, the arrival of an avant-garde producing works that were increasingly inaccessible to large sections of the public. We can get a sense of these developments if we consider the changes that were occurring in literary culture and the fiction market simultaneously. After the First World War, the publishing industry reduced the range of books on offer and began catering for a mass readership to offset the rising costs of book production.⁴⁰ For cultural commentators such as Leavis, this drive for profit fundamentally compromised the standards of contemporary fiction for writers who “must be willing to sacrifice a potential public and write only for the highbrow” if they chose not to write for a mass audience.⁴¹ Such anxieties permeate *Fiction and the Reading Public*, in which Leavis bemoans the profusion of bestselling works designed for “mental relaxation” and repeatedly condemns the proposition “that fiction is only meant to entertain”.⁴² Leavis’s dislike of leisure reading was the result of developments in highbrow literary culture, which—in part due to snobbery directed at mass culture—placed a new emphasis on difficulty and abstraction. Humble notes that “where poetry had been the main literary vehicle for intellectual debate and stylistic experimentation throughout the nineteenth century, the influence of Henry James and the coming of modernism concentrated the attention of the avant-garde on the novel.”⁴³ Modernism’s radical and complex innovations were accompanied by the conviction that reading should be “properly effortful intellectual work” rather than entertainment or pleasure.⁴⁴

For many contemporary commentators, the stratification of cultural life heralded the destruction of liberal humanist values that would lead to a social crisis. One proponent of this

⁴⁰ Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 51.

⁴¹ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 263.

⁴² Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 50, 1.

⁴³ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 11.

⁴⁴ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 28.

view was Q.D. Leavis's husband and collaborator, F.R. Leavis, who theorised that only a small minority are ever capable of a "discerning appreciation of art and literature" and that upon this minority "depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of the age."⁴⁵ Yet he argued that those with elite tastes and standards could no longer guide taste and had ended up in a marginalised, precarious position because of mass culture. For the Leavises, mass culture's industrial and commercial motivations meant that the tastes of the unrefined masses—whose choices could not be restrained by a judicious minority—would now drive the processes of cultural production. Strikingly, they end up envisioning a world in which commercial and economic machinery have entirely displaced human agency, thereby allowing less enlightened cultural consumers to amuse themselves unchecked.⁴⁶ Concurring with this view, Q.D. Leavis maintained that most individuals would struggle with the "sifting of rubbish" and that this situation would be detrimental for society.⁴⁷ At one point, she notes the number of men working in the church, law or business who are readers of detective fiction and decries how they are the same professions that "in the last century would have been the guardians of the public conscience in the matter of mental self-indulgence."⁴⁸ In light of this analysis, we can perceive why Q.D. Leavis evinced such alarm at her impression that "the general reading public of the twentieth century is no longer in touch with the best literature of its own day or of the past".⁴⁹

Though she perceived mass culture as overwhelming "high" culture, Leavis also noticed the number of works that fell "betwixt and between" the binaries of lowbrow and highbrow in the

⁴⁵ F.R. Leavis, "Mass Culture and Minority Civilisation", in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (London: Sage, 2005), 33, 34.

⁴⁶ In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Q.D. Leavis posits that commercial and economic machinery now "run on their own and whither they choose; they have assumed such monstrous personality that individual effort towards controlling or checking them seems ridiculously futile." Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 270.

⁴⁷ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 225.

⁴⁸ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 51.

⁴⁹ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 235.

middlebrow. Leavis defines this category of fiction as that written by “respected middling novelists of blameless intentions and indubitable skill” whose works, nevertheless, lacked the experimentation of highbrow novelists.⁵⁰ According to Leavis, writers such as J.B. Priestly or Thornton Wilder provide nothing but “commonplace sentiments and an outworn technique” and their works amount to merely “echoes of the Best People of the past”.⁵¹ In her condemnation of the middlebrow, furthermore, Leavis expresses highbrow culture’s paranoia about and suspicion of reading for pleasure. From her perspective, the market for these works existed because of middlebrow readers’ desire for the “agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue.”⁵²

As part of her attack, Leavis pointed out that many of these “middling” writers were distributed by “Book-of-the-Month Clubs” and were, therefore, part of the mass fiction market. In the Introduction, I mentioned that the middlebrow has been defined as the “ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural”, often judged to be a purchasable and “watered-down version of a more authentic high culture”.⁵³ Related objections come from Woolf, who maintains that when highbrow writers have “earned enough to live on, then we live. When middlebrows, on the contrary, have earned enough to live on, they go on earning enough to buy”.⁵⁴ Woolf then proceeds to condemn the “sham antiques” and other items of execrable taste on which middlebrows spend “vast sums”.⁵⁵ Such excoriations reflect that the middlebrow is often deemed to be incompatible with high art because of its association with selling and consumption. As Driscoll remarks, “it is the

⁵⁰ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 36.

⁵¹ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 36.

⁵² Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 37.

⁵³ John Guillory, “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture”, review of *The Western Canon* (1994) by Harold Bloom, *Transition* 67 (1995): 87; Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-Of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12.

⁵⁴ Woolf, “Middlebrow”, 117-8.

⁵⁵ Woolf, “Middlebrow”, 118.

collation of the cultural and the commercial that provides the focus for elite condemnation of the middlebrow.”⁵⁶

Despite her scorn for such commercialisation, Leavis’s consideration of the middlebrow unwittingly typifies how attempts to study this cultural taxonomy often expose the provisional nature of all cultural distinctions. Throughout her discussion, Leavis assumes the existence of clear cultural standards even as her divisions become progressively more inadequate. This fact becomes clear when she classifies contemporary writers into the following strata: a) Highbrow; b) Middlebrow “read as ‘literature’”; c) Middlebrow “not read as ‘literature,’ but not writing for the lowbrow market”; d) Absolute bestsellers.⁵⁷ Her need to develop sub-categories for the middlebrow reflects the diversity and range of what she perceives as belonging in this category. Indeed, she acknowledges that not all of her contemporaries would agree with her; for instance, she notes that Ernest Hemingway and his “crude idiom of the he-man” are “something of a cult in highbrow circles”.⁵⁸ Leavis’s understanding of the middlebrow not only includes writers that other commentators took seriously at the time but also covers literary figures later reclaimed—as will be discussed—as part of the modernist movement. Underneath Leavis’s analysis is the half-realisation that her judgments are subjective and that the category of the middlebrow remains in flux. Leavis’s difficulties can be explained by Driscoll’s observation that the middlebrow

is not simply ‘in-between’ but a complex phenomenon that challenges hierarchies as much as it reinforces them. The label ‘middlebrow’ may promote a sense of cultural order, but the practices of this cultural formation expose the instability and mobility at work in the cultural hierarchy.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 26.

⁵⁷ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 45.

⁵⁸ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 200.

⁵⁹ Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 17.

Not quite able to recognise this mobility, Leavis remains convinced of the certainty of her aesthetic, moral and cultural values. Yet her examination of the middlebrow reveals the instability of her cultural divisions and, by extension, the instability of her values.

Leavis further exposes the instability of these cultural values during her discussion of canonical or “classic” works.⁶⁰ In her repeated comparisons of CB and EB, she consciously contests prevailing views whilst paradoxically presuming the universality of her judgment. Hence, Leavis acknowledges that “*Jane Eyre* was admitted to be literature long before *Wuthering Heights*” before repeatedly insisting upon the superiority of EB’s novel.⁶¹ As justification for this appraisal, Leavis labels *Jane Eyre* a “fable of wish fulfilment” that represents “both for the author and reader a favourite form of self-indulgence.”⁶² When she turns to *Wuthering Heights*, she does praise the novel’s structural complexity but chiefly recognises the work for not being “an instrument of wish fulfilment”.⁶³ At the centre of Leavis’s argument is the conviction that *Wuthering Heights* does not invite the type of readerly identification, fantasy or easy pleasure that she associates with *Jane Eyre*. As such, she reveals that her evaluation of these two works has less to do with the novels themselves than with her evaluation of their readerships. For Leavis, *Jane Eyre*’s popularity confirms that CB lacks EB’s “genius” and that this “genius” is why EB’s novel “is not and never has been a popular novel (except in the sense that it is now an accepted classic and so on the shelves of the educated)”.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Guillory notes that as late as the 1970s “it was still possible to discuss what we call canon formation exclusively by reference to the word ‘classic’.” John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 344.

⁶¹ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 60; Tom Winiffrith, “Charlotte and Emily Brontë: A Study in the Rise and Fall of Literary Reputations”, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 14-24.

⁶² Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 237.

⁶³ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 238.

⁶⁴ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 41, 238. Her claim reflects that for many years *Wuthering Heights* was less widely read than *Jane Eyre* although EB’s novel’s reputation as a forgotten masterpiece “outlasted its actual neglect”. Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), 201. Leavis’s admiration for small

Leavis's consideration of EB and CB elucidates another important point: aesthetic judgements of a work are frequently inextricable from judgments about the work's consumer. For insight into Leavis's cultural snobbery, I want to turn briefly to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on taste cultures in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgements of Taste* (1979). Bourdieu undertook extensive research in France during the 1960s and his chief area of concern was social class. His examination of the tastes of the French petit-bourgeois led him to the conclusion that

[w]hat makes the petit-bourgeois relation to culture and its capacity to make "middle-brow" whatever it touches, just as the legitimate [or highbrow] gaze "saves" whatever it lights upon, is not its nature but the very position of the petit-bourgeois in social space, the social nature of the petit-bourgeois himself, determining his relation to legitimate culture and his avid, but anxious, naïve but serious way of clutching at it.⁶⁵

Because of his French context, Bourdieu's observations cannot be directly transposed upon the Anglophone material examined in this thesis. Indeed, Caroline Pollentier points out that Bourdieu's term *la culture moyenne* has specifically French associations and does not correspond exactly with the "middlebrow".⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Bourdieu's insights do enable us to understand some of the reasons for Leavis's condemnation of mass and middlebrow culture.

As Bourdieu's analysis elucidates, the vitriol directed at low- and middlebrow culture is often entangled with class prejudice. Indeed, Leavis's class prejudices explain her dislike of individuals who read for pleasure or relaxation. As Alison Light states, whereas "before the war 'leisure' might be seen as primarily the property of the 'leisured', that is, wealthy,

audiences does not extend to *Wildfell Hall* and her failure to consider AB underscores the persistent critical marginalisation of this text.

⁶⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 327.

⁶⁶ Caroline Pollentier, "Configuring Middleness: Bourdieu, *l'Art Moyen*, and the Broad Brow", in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 37-51.

classes, a new market of ‘leisure consumers’ amongst the working classes was in the process of being created” during the interwar period.⁶⁷ Leavis herself notes that the growth of mass culture correlates with the “increased leisure for rest and amusement” across the social spectrum.⁶⁸ In light of these factors, I will give some consideration to the issue of class in contemporary culture’s engagement with the Brontës’ lives and work. I am, however, primarily concerned with the relationship between the contemporary middlebrow and gender. Conversely, Bourdieu is “notorious” for his failure to incorporate gender adequately into his analysis of taste cultures.⁶⁹

Though Bourdieu does not engage with the issue, subsequent scholarship on the middlebrow has examined its perceived connections with femininity and female cultural consumers. In her study of interwar novels, Humble argues that there “is a sense in which virtually all women’s writing of the period in question (with the standard exception of Virginia Woolf) was treated as middlebrow.”⁷⁰ Although male writers did produce novels that were classed as middlebrow, the impression persisted that the main readers of their works were women.⁷¹ These connotations can be attributed to a number of factors including the substantial overlap between feminine concerns and the thematic preoccupations of middlebrow fiction, such as domesticity, courtship and marriage, manners and class distinctions. These novels recycle the conventions “that dominated the mainstream novel throughout the nineteenth century (we need only think of Austen and the Brontës, Trollope and Charlotte M. Yonge).”⁷² Consequently, these novels suffered in comparison to the more experimental, radical forms of

⁶⁷ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 160.

⁶⁸ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 49.

⁶⁹ Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and David Wright, *Culture, Class, Distinction* (London: Routledge, 2008), 216.

⁷⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 15.

⁷¹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 14. Since Humble’s study, scholarship has addressed the masculine middlebrow. See Kate Macdonald, ed., *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁷² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 11.

modernist, avant-garde fiction. But to what extent were novels deemed middlebrow merely because they were written or read by women?

In response to this possibility, recent feminist critics have reassessed and repositioned a number of novels and novelists formerly regarded as middlebrow within the movement of modernism. For example, the works of Elizabeth Bowen and Willa Cather have undergone significant re-evaluation.⁷³ In many instances, critics have attempted to demonstrate that these writers were deemed middlebrow and had their contribution to modernism overlooked because they dealt with feminine spheres and concerns. Bonnie Scott Kime, for example, advances that modernism “was unconsciously gendered masculine.”⁷⁴ The widening of modernism’s parameters and subsequent recognition of these women writers lends credence to Humble’s observation that “it is largely because particular novels were read by women that they were downgraded at the time”.⁷⁵ These shifting reputations clarify that the fluctuating boundaries of the middlebrow cause the cultural boundaries above and below to fluctuate simultaneously.

Thus far, this section has not only explored various definitions but also begun to consider the different approaches used to examine and/or theorise the middlebrow. Because the status of a cultural work’s consumers often determines the cultural status of the work, sociology has enhanced our understanding of the middlebrow (and taste cultures generally). The denigration of these consumers, moreover, reflects the fact that the middlebrow resides within the terrain of mass and popular culture. Leavis was the first of many researchers to explore middlebrow

⁷³ For further discussion, see Chris Hopkins, “Elizabeth Bowen: Realism, Modernism and Gendered Identity in her Novels of the 1930s”, *Journal of Gender Studies* 4, no. 3 (1995): 271-9. Likewise, see Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 120-2.

⁷⁴ Bonnie Scott Kime, “Introduction”, in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Scott Kime (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 2.

⁷⁵ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 10.

culture through a consideration of its production, dissemination and consumption. Hence, the middlebrow has been studied in relation to organisations like the BBC, the British film industry, Oprah's Book Club, the Man Booker Prize and literary festivals.⁷⁶ These investigations come from a variety of disciplines whilst using an array of approaches and methodologies. Janice Radway, for example, manages to incorporate ethnographical research, historical analysis and autobiographical reflection into her study of The Book-of-the-Month Club. Conscious that literary and cultural reputations fluctuate, other scholarship in this area has researched the reception and social history of works perceived to be "middlebrow".⁷⁷

To study the middlebrow, my primary mode of analysis will be to examine the works themselves alongside other approaches. In subsequent sections, this chapter will consider the reception of neo-Victorian fiction and costume drama screen adaptations in order to position both within contemporary middlebrow culture. Additionally, I intend to consider the BBC's adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall* in relation to the organisation's related roles as a middlebrow cultural institution and a public service broadcaster. Like many prior studies, I remain conscious that middlebrow status often depends upon extrinsic factors. Humble admits to "wavering" between the "position that the middlebrow is just about reception" or "the idea that there is something more generic, more substantial to it, that there are certain characteristics of the middlebrow."⁷⁸ Because of this ambiguity, many investigations of the middlebrow turn away from (or supplement with some other approach) detailed discussion of the middlebrow works themselves. Yet I want to suggest that middlebrow culture does possess common characteristics and that examining middlebrow works can be enlightening.

⁷⁶ For example, Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture*; Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon*; Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*.

⁷⁷ For example, Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel*.

⁷⁸ Elke D'hoker, "Theorizing the Middlebrow: An Interview with Nicola Humble", *Interférences Littéraires/Littéraire Interferentia* 7 (2011): 261.

To support this proposition, the remainder of this section will compare *The Brontë Project* with Rachel Ferguson's interwar novel *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931).⁷⁹

The Brontë Project and *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* exemplify middlebrow fiction's awareness of the fluidity of cultural boundaries. In her "broad working definition", Humble posits that this category of novel often consciously "straddles the divide between the trashy romance or the thriller on one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort."⁸⁰ In many instances, this middling fiction tends to reference the categories both below and above itself in a gleeful celebration of catholic cultural tastes. For example, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* features three upper-middle class sisters who enjoy alternatively discussing the Brontës with Judge Toddington, a high court judge, before taking tea with another friend who is a "low comedian".⁸¹ Similarly, *The Brontë Project* derives humour from (even whilst disapproving of) the unlikely cultural juxtapositions found in postmodern culture. Hence, Vandever's work draws several spurious but also half-serious parallels between CB and Diana. Eventually and somewhat against her will, Sara finds herself proposing that Diana's public persona "was continuing the tradition that the Brontës pioneered of accepting and using her emotional life as the point of engagement with the rest of the world."⁸² These parallels simultaneously mock but also emulate academic scholarship on popular culture.

Though parodying academic scholarship, Sara's comparisons between CB and Diana reflect that middlebrow novels are not only associated with femininity but also foster a sense of

⁷⁹ Rachel Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

⁸⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 11.

⁸¹ Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, 77.

⁸² Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 63.

feminine community. Numerous critics have argued this point, including Humble, who includes a number of male writers under the umbrella of the middlebrow but also posits that “it is works largely read by and in some sense addressed to women readers that are denoted by this term.”⁸³ We can understand how this feminine and communal address is constructed if we examine the novels’ recurrent representations of reading and their elaborate intertextuality. Through these elements, feminine middlebrow fiction creates communities of women who experience reading as “a life-enhancing, joyous experience, and one that serves to bind the woman reader into a community of other readers through an almost cultish involvement with favourite books.”⁸⁴ In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, for instance, the narrator relates that she and her sisters see books in similar terms to “having a bath or sleeping, or eating bread—absolute necessities which one never thinks of in terms of appreciation.”⁸⁵ Similarly in *The Brontë Project*, Sara has been fixated upon the Brontës since her first encounter with *Wuthering Heights* left her “obsessed with dying on heath, cold and alone, her only comfort being the sound of her lover’s name.”⁸⁶ After Sara gains a more critical attitude towards the Brontës, she not only overcomes her fantasy of solitude and romantic enchantment but also cements her connections with other women through her CB scholarship. For example, Claire pursues Sara’s friendship by inviting her to participate in joint panels and by securing a research fellowship from the Diana Studies foundation for Sara’s work.

Feminine middlebrow novels not only portray a feminine mode of reading but also recognise this reading as pleasure-led in contradistinction to more intellectual, unimaginative male reading. In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, Judge Toddington is a rare masculine character

⁸³ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 14. See also Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 8; Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Women’s Novel, 1914-1939* (London: Virago, 1983), 5.

⁸⁴ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 9.

⁸⁵ Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, 1.

⁸⁶ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 15.

who can indulge in flights of literary fantasy along with the sisters. *The Brontë Project* presents reading as similarly gendered. As an undergraduate, Sara's obsession with the Brontës leads her to cultivate a "vaguely erotic" appearance that

was enough to make her young male counterparts put down their secondhand copies of Kafka or Camus, gaze across the student café, and seriously consider finally getting down to reading de Beauvoir or Duras or—good God, was sex really this worth it?—Charlotte Brontë.⁸⁷

Like *The Brontë Project*, other contemporary neo-Victorian works discussed in the next chapter consciously represent and defend feminised modes of engaging with literature that contrast with more "cerebral", masculine reading. I am not suggesting that any of these novels would classify themselves as middlebrow. Yet these works do exhibit a consistent awareness that an association with femininity can cause a work to lose cultural value.

Feminine middlebrow novels also create a sense of identity and connection for themselves and their readership through intertextual references of which some of the most frequent and symbolic are to the Brontës' lives and novels. As mentioned in the Introduction, Humble and Brown have already explored this phenomenon. From Humble's perspective, the Brontës "were in many ways the perfect middlebrow subject: available for both serious analysis and gossipy speculation; their works clearly of high literary status, but also intimately familiar to many middle-class women through repeated adolescent re-readings."⁸⁸ An impression of close acquaintance pervades *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, the title of which refers to the sisters' fantasy of EB and CB visiting the shop to buy quotidian items like basins and hairnets.⁸⁹ Likewise, Sara in *The Brontë Project* reads the Brontës with such intensity that she had "always secretly regarded it as an accident of fate that she hadn't been born into their

⁸⁷ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 16.

⁸⁸ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 177-8.

⁸⁹ Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, 186-7.

family.”⁹⁰ This sense of connection plays a crucial role in how feminine middlebrow fiction conceptualises the feminine creative imagination. I will return to this point in the second chapter of this thesis.

So why does feminine middlebrow fiction continue to deploy the Brontës and their oeuvre as a useful symbol? One reason is the oddness of the sisters’ cultural position. Even though they are writers held in high literary esteem, the Brontës and their works—particularly *Jane Eyre*—resist straightforward cultural classification. In an 1847 review of *Jane Eyre*, for example, George Henry Lewes praises the novel’s artistry but also notes the excessive “melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating library.”⁹¹ Similarly, Tania Modleski suggests that CB “can be credited with inventing many of the characters and situations of the popular romantic mythos, although, ironically, a close reading of *Jane Eyre* shows us that even as she created, she subverted them.”⁹² Compounding the impression that they defy easy categorisation, the Brontës and their works have become familiar reference points across the cultural spectrum. Lampooning this cultural ubiquity, *The Brontë Project* mocks Hollywood for attempting to shoehorn CB’s life into a romance biopic whilst pondering how the Brontës retain their high reputation even though their plots resemble the narratives found in mass culture. Despite their prestigious status, the Brontës emblemise an intriguing cultural hybridity. Consequently, they and their works are subject to widespread cultural dissemination that exposes the fluidity of cultural distinctions. For this reason, invoking the literary sisters enables feminine middlebrow fiction to reflect upon and negotiate its own cultural status.

⁹⁰ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 37.

⁹¹ G.H. Lewes, unsigned review of *Jane Eyre* in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1847), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 85.

⁹² Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 38.

During this discussion, I have used two novels to identify some of the characteristics of feminine middlebrow fiction whilst illustrating continuities in feminine middlebrow culture from different eras. Humble may still define the middlebrow as a temporally and culturally specific phenomenon, but she also tentatively acknowledges that “you could also call ‘chick lit’ a middlebrow genre, but not in the same way. Perhaps we need to complicate our sense of the middlebrow, allowing for different versions of it in different periods.”⁹³ I have tried to complicate our sense of the middlebrow through a discussion of *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* and *The Brontë Project*. Despite having been written during different periods, both novels reveal connections through their invocations of the Brontës’ lives and work. By exploring these similarities, I have attempted to demonstrate the continued usefulness of the term “middlebrow” despite the prevalent assumption that postmodernism means that cultural life appears much less stratified and that the concepts of the high-, middle- or lowbrow no longer have cultural currency.

One might classify *The Brontë Project* and the other works discussed in this thesis as “high-pop” but I have resisted this term for a number of reasons. According to Jim Collins, high-pop is “a reaction against the sordidness of aggressive mass-marketing and blockbuster entertainment, yet its high-profile visibility depends on the incorporation of marketing techniques borrowed directly from that world.”⁹⁴ The emergence of high-pop means that “institutions and tastes which were formerly thought to be mutually exclusive have become common-place—*good design* chain stores, *blockbuster* museum shows, *high-concept* literary adaptations.”⁹⁵ In this respect, high-pop resembles definitions of the middlebrow as high culture’s transformation into forms accessible for and purchasable by mass audiences. Yet

⁹³ D’hoker, “Theorizing the Middlebrow”, 262.

⁹⁴ Jim Collins, “High-Pop: An Introduction”, in *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 1.

⁹⁵ Collins, “High-Pop”, 1-2.

Collins's conceptualisation of the differences between the "middlebrow" and "high-pop" are not entirely adequate. As Driscoll points out, "while there are differences between popularized high culture and mainstream culture, a strict theoretical division is difficult to sustain."⁹⁶ More specifically, I do not share Collins's view that the middlebrow primarily exists within a specific historical period.⁹⁷

I do not agree, furthermore, with all the differences that Collins identifies between "high-pop" and middlebrow. For Collins, Joan Shelley Rubin and Radway's studies of the Book-of-the-Month Club reveal the "heterogeneity" but also the "separateness" of middlebrow culture and entertainment.⁹⁸ Collins maintains that the middlebrow "depended on a certain kind of intellectual experience that was demonstrably not of the highest order in terms of cultural prestige."⁹⁹ I would concur with Collins that middlebrow culture distinguishes itself as separate cultural territory but he over-emphasises the extent to which middlebrow culture promotes the "decidedly non-canonical".¹⁰⁰ Consequently, he fails to appreciate the complexity of middlebrow culture's engagement with high culture or how this engagement enables middlebrow culture to position itself within the cultural hierarchy. As I have tried to demonstrate through my discussion of *The Brontë Project*, middlebrow culture simultaneously constructs and challenges the demarcations between itself and either "low" or "high" culture. *The Brontë Project* also indicates that the literary sisters are some of the most frequent referents in neo-Victorian fiction. In the next section, I will consider definitions and the cultural status of neo-Victorianism whilst tracing the development of neo-Victorian studies. Throughout this examination, I aim to demonstrate how the concept of the middlebrow can illuminate our understanding of neo-Victorianism.

⁹⁶ Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 9.

⁹⁷ Collins, "High-Pop", 7.

⁹⁸ Collins, "High-Pop", 7.

⁹⁹ Collins, "High-Pop", 7.

¹⁰⁰ Collins, "High-Pop", 8.

The Neo-Victorian Middlebrow

So where does neo-Victorianism fall upon the cultural spectrum? For many years, historical fiction was regarded as “an undemanding staple of middlebrow and lowbrow fiction: mildly salacious novels in costume with a particular appeal to the woman reader.”¹⁰¹ The publication of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), however, “helped reverse the declining critical fortunes of the historical novel, a genre out of favour with the modernist sensibilities of an interwar literary avant-garde.”¹⁰² Since then, postmodern historical fiction set in the Victorian period has “garnered an astonishing amount of interest”, led to the creation of neo-Victorian studies yet still “inspires fascination and loathing in equal parts.”¹⁰³ In 1994, for instance, the novelist Jeanette Winterson proclaimed: “[i]f you want to read nineteenth-century novels, there are plenty for you to read, and you may as well read the real thing and not go out and buy a reproduction.”¹⁰⁴ In 2002, John Sutherland reviewed two of the most prominent examples of neo-Victorian fiction: Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002). From Sutherland’s perspective, “[h]owever much research Faber and Waters do, however intensely they fantasise on what they have researched, however vividly they write it all up, their belated generation can never really know Victorian England.”¹⁰⁵ Advancing a different critique, Christian Gutleben argues that neo-Victorian fiction is “an artificial conglomerate” that

¹⁰¹ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 89.

¹⁰² Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 89.

¹⁰³ Imelda Whelehan, “Neo-Victorian Adaptations”, in *A Companion to Literature, Film, Adaptation*, ed. Deborah Cartmell (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 272.

¹⁰⁴ Eleanor Wachtel, *More Writers and Company: New Conversations with CBC Radio’s Eleanor Wachtel* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 141.

¹⁰⁵ John Sutherland, “Hoist that Dollymop’s Sail”, review of *The Crimson Petal and The White* (2002) by Michel Faber and *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters, *London Review of Books* 24, no. 21 (2002): 28.

resembles an iceberg whose visible part is constituted by a few well-known novels which perfectly exemplify the postmodern *Zeitgeist* and whose less conspicuous part is made up of a whole series of novels which resist the experimental spirit of postmodernism[.]¹⁰⁶

As these examples clarify, neo-Victorian works are often described as pale imitations of “authentic” Victorian or postmodern literature.

In light of these critiques, this chapter section will examine several definitions of neo-Victorianism whilst aiming to demonstrate that neo-Victorian studies has been covertly and, more recently, explicitly pondering neo-Victorianism’s cultural status. For Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, many scholars have been making implicit cultural evaluations that have “not only begun to fossilise the body of works and media to be addressed under the heading of neo-Victorianism but also some critical approaches, theories and predominant concerns.”¹⁰⁷ As their observation reflects, existing scholarship has tended to focus on literary examples and attracted criticism for its failure to draw upon related areas, such as adaptation studies.¹⁰⁸ Contributing to the debate, this section argues that the field failed to address this issue for an extended period because of the critical attention devoted to the genre’s postmodernism. As part of my analysis, I seek to reframe the contentious suggestion that neo-Victorianism constitutes a pastiche of nineteenth-century literature and culture.

To address this issue, this section intends to draw attention to the work of earlier theorists who accused middlebrow culture of being an inauthentic copy of both high culture and the culture of the past. In the process, this part of the chapter will illustrate that dismissals of neo-Victorian fiction not only echo earlier dismissals of the middlebrow but also that the concept

¹⁰⁶ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 164.

¹⁰⁷ Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, “Introduction: Fashioning the Neo-Victorian—Neo-Victorian Fashions”, in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, ed. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.

¹⁰⁸ Imelda Whelehan contends that “even though adaptation criticism finds a place in neo-Victorian studies (and vice versa) there are glimpses of a retroactive return to a ‘not as good as the book’ premise of approaches to adaptations twenty or more years ago.” Whelehan, “Neo-Victorian Adaptations”, 273.

of the middlebrow can illuminate current understandings of neo-Victorianism. Nonetheless, I am not arguing that all examples of neo-Victorian fiction can be classified as middlebrow. Rather, I want to demonstrate that novels such as *The Brontë Project*—and some of the works discussed in the next chapter—simultaneously belong to an existing feminine middlebrow tradition of writing whilst also being examples of neo-Victorian fiction. As such, this section will examine whether the term middlebrow can illuminate neo-Victorianism’s frequent straddling of cultural boundaries as a theoretically informed, metatextual, intertextual, consciously postmodern and innovative as well as a derivative, popular and commercial cultural phenomenon. But before I examine that matter, I want to consider when the genre of neo-Victorianism was identified and how neo-Victorian studies came into existence.

Until recently, critics employed different labels for the neo-Victorian phenomenon and this plurality reflects the difficulty of defining the term. The first use of “neo-Victorian” occurred in 1997,¹⁰⁹ but a number of alternative terms exist, including “Victoriana”,¹¹⁰ “retro-Victorian”,¹¹¹ “pseudo-Victorian”¹¹², and “post-Victorian”.¹¹³ Since then, various critics have pointed out the shortcomings of the prefix “neo” and questioned the appropriateness of “Victorian” because of its national specificity and temporal vagueness.¹¹⁴ As Andrea Kirchknopf notes, “Victorian” is a denotative term that refers to Queen Victoria but also

¹⁰⁹ Dana Shiller, “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel”, *Studies in the Novel* 29, no. 4 (1997): 538-60.

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, *Victoriana*.

¹¹¹ Sally Shuttleworth, “Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel”, in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor Schaffer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 253-68.

¹¹² The pre-fixes of “retro”, “pseudo” and “neo” are used interchangeably in Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*.

¹¹³ Andrea Kirchknopf, “(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminologies, Contexts”, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 64-6.

¹¹⁴ For example, “neo” carries associations of a reprisal of conservative and retrograde values when used politically. Judith Johnson and Catherine Waters, “Introduction”, in *Victorian Turns, Neo-Victorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture*, ed. Penny Gay, Judith Johnson and Catherine Waters (Newcastle-on-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 10-11. Likewise, Kirchknopf critiques the temporal imprecision of “neo” and argues that the pre-fix attributes a misleading “newness” to “a movement that has been in vogue for almost fifty years”. Kirchknopf, “(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, 63.

“specifies characteristics of an era” that extends both before and beyond her sovereignty.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Kirchknopf argues that the term “Victorian” works connotatively but that the connotations change as successive generations reassess their understanding of this period.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, the founding of the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008 confirms that the term “neo-Victorian” has come to unify a large body of scholarship.

Consequently, several critics have devoted substantial attention to identifying what distinguishes neo-Victorianism from other examples of historical fiction set in the Victorian era. For a long time, the scholarly discourse understood neo-Victorian fiction as offering self-conscious, subversive postmodern reimaginations of the Victorians. Dana Shiller, for example, proposes that neo-Victorianism “is motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge” and that “even as these novels emphasize events that are usually left out of histories, they nonetheless manage to preserve and celebrate the Victorian past.”¹¹⁷ To develop this point, Mark Llewellyn employs Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “ex-centric” figures to contend that the genre seeks to restore “marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian.”¹¹⁸ For Kaplan, neo-Victorian fiction encourages a “self-consciousness that insists that I reflect on the complexity of what is at stake at any given point in my own time about my interest in the Victorian.”¹¹⁹ Likewise, Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann have influentially argued that neo-Victorian fiction

¹¹⁵ Kirchknopf, “(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, 55.

¹¹⁶ Kirchknopf, “(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, 56.

¹¹⁷ Shiller, “The Redemptive Past”, 541.

¹¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 114; Mark Llewellyn, “What is Neo-Victorian Studies”, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 165.

¹¹⁹ Cora Kaplan, “*Fingersmith*’s Coda: Feminism and Victorian Studies”, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 13, no. 1 (2008): 53.

constitutes “*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century”.¹²⁰ According to them, “texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” to qualify as neo-Victorian.¹²¹ For Heilmann and Llewellyn, “self-consciousness” is “at the heart of what neo-Victorianism in its more defined, theorized, conceptualized, and aesthetically developed form offers to its readers.”¹²²

Yet demarcating the distinction between neo-Victorianism and works that deliver a “stereotypical and unnuanced” version of the Victorians remains a difficult task.¹²³ We can appreciate this difficulty if we consider the numerous (potentially) neo-Victorian works that have engaged with the Brontës’ lives and art. For a long time, critics tended to identify *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as the earliest examples of neo-Victorianism.¹²⁴ A postcolonial critique and sort of “prequel” to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds that the Brontës have been one of the genre’s key points of return. Since then, the field has grown and scholars have backdated neo-Victorianism to include Marghanita Laski’s *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1953). Marie-Luise Kohlke points out that *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* contains a number of allusions to *Jane Eyre* that contribute to the novella’s deconstruction of Victorian but also twentieth-century femininities.¹²⁵ Some of the genre’s most significant referents, the Brontës and their novels have inspired some of the most prominent examples of neo-Victorianism’s self-conscious reinterpretation, rediscovery and re-envisioning of the Victorians.

¹²⁰ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

¹²¹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 4.

¹²² Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 5.

¹²³ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 6.

¹²⁴ For example, Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 5; Shuttleworth, “Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel”, 256.

¹²⁵ Marie-Luise Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Female Gothic: Fantasies of Self-Abjection”, in *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Reimagined Nineteenth-Century*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 232-3.

Other novels might provide us with different perspectives upon the Victorians and the Brontës but can we still classify them as neo-Victorian? For example, James Tully's *The Crimes of Charlotte Brontë: The Secret History of the Mysterious Events at Haworth* (1999) puts a new spin on the Brontë family. The author uses his knowledge of nineteenth-century poisons to propose that CB and Nichols—who allegedly impregnated EB—murdered the rest of the Brontë siblings. For Lucasta Miller, Tully's work is “an extreme case” of the “sensational new fictions” that are “likely to make the serious biographer weep.”¹²⁶ Making similarly outlandish claims are Laura Joh Rowland's spy-mystery romances *The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë* (2008) and *Bedlam: The Further Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë* (2010). In the first of the series, Charlotte helps foil a plot against the British government put in motion by a Chinese man intent on revenging himself against the British Empire for the Opium Wars. From Patsy Stoneman's perspective, “Rowland indicates by the sheer audacity of her fiction that this is indeed a delicious joke” and her works “offer an immensely enjoyable excursion into a kind of parallel universe.”¹²⁷ Yet Rowland's novel could be read as offering a postcolonial critique of imperial Britain's coercive trading practices. Such an example clarifies the difficulty in demarcating the boundaries between “neo-Victorian” and merely “Victorian” historical fictions.

Because of this issue, critics have spent much time speculating about the intellectual sophistication of neo-Victorianism's consumers. Heilmann and Llewellyn, for example, propose that neo-Victorian fiction frequently addresses “two distinct types of readership” that include the casual reader and the reader who is “professionalized, one imagines, as a

¹²⁶ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 153.

¹²⁷ Patsy Stoneman, “Sex, Crimes and Secrets: Invention and Imbrogio in Recent Brontë Biographical Fiction”, *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 4 (2014): 346.

Victorianist or literary academic”.¹²⁸ In their reckoning, neo-Victorian works entail “two levels of reading, identified by the respective awareness they prompt of the use being made of the Victorian text; for each reading experience, there is a distinct and different knowledge of the act of appropriation.”¹²⁹ For Kohlke, neo-Victorian fiction may offer a postmodern reclamation of Victorian tropes and “ex-centric” voices but “many general readers will likely register such metamorphoses unconsciously and instinctively rather than cognitively and intellectually.”¹³⁰ Likewise, Imelda Whelehan observes that many neo-Victorian works

do not actually require a deep reading of Victorian classics; neither is a familiarity with queer theory [or theory in general] essential, though an acquaintance with both (through reading, academia, broadsheet newspapers, screen adaptations) is seen as enhancing readerly pleasure. This is true of the double register at which much fiction of this category works, where the pleasures of recognition are available to those with knowledge of Victorian “Urtexts”, pastiched or otherwise quoted, but equally a knowledge of Victorian hypertexts may suffice.¹³¹

With its “double register”, much neo-Victorian fiction permits refraining from an engagement with the more complex dimensions that critics have consistently identified as one of the genre’s distinguishing features. At the same time, these analyses are based on conjecture and reflect that the field would benefit from research on the reception of neo-Victorian culture. What is striking, however, is that the “un-professionalized” consumer of neo-Victorianism is often envisioned as intelligent though not intellectual and, in many respects, a middlebrow figure. These assumptions affirm, furthermore, this chapter’s earlier point that the cultural status of works tends to be bound up with the status of their consumers.

The debates about the genre’s presumed readerships constitute a tacit acknowledgment by some critics that many of the works identified as neo-Victorian exist in uncertain, shifting

¹²⁸ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 17.

¹²⁹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 17.

¹³⁰ Marie-Luise Kohlke, “Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal”, in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, ed. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (New York: Routledge, 2014), 25.

¹³¹ Whelehan, “Neo-Victorian Adaptations”, 274.

cultural territory. This territory resembles the “betwixt and between” cultural terrain that would have been identified as middlebrow in earlier eras. Kaplan, for example, reflects upon this matter when she notes the genre’s “capacious and lucrative” range that incorporates “pastiche Victorian crime fiction and mass-market romance”.¹³² Furthermore, she observes that “middlebrow Victoriana” has made “a comeback at the high end of the [literary] market in the last few years” but does not develop this aspect of her discussion.¹³³ Also attempting to distinguish between neo-Victorian and pulpier historical fictions, Heilmann and Llewellyn have proposed that some texts’ metafictional “trickeries” indicate that the genre possesses a “higher end”.¹³⁴ They posit that “[i]t might be argued that this sets up an artificial ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural divide between literary fiction and its popular culture equivalent; and the divide is clearly there”.¹³⁵ With their passive construction, provisional taxonomies and the hedged claim that the divide is “artificial” but also “clearly there”, Heilmann and Llewellyn half-admit but also indicate discomfort with the cultural evaluation implicit within their definition of neo-Victorianism.

In response, several recent commentators have challenged the field’s ongoing, partially suppressed cultural evaluations whilst advocating for broader conceptualisations of neo-Victorianism as a cultural phenomenon. As early as 2001, Gutleben was opining that the prevailing understanding was too narrow and that “the most famous neo-Victorian novels are the least typical.”¹³⁶ His assertion reflects that examples such as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) or Sarah Waters’s oeuvre have achieved what amounts to canonical status in neo-Victorian studies. Meanwhile, Carroll offers the view that the critical discourse tends to measure the “artistic merits” of neo-Victorian fiction “in inverse

¹³² Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 88.

¹³³ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 88.

¹³⁴ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 23.

¹³⁵ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 23.

¹³⁶ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 164.

proportion to its accessibility”.¹³⁷ For this reason, Kohlke proposes the use of “‘neo-Victorian’ (albeit provisionally) as a generic and integrative umbrella term to encompass virtually all historical fiction related to the nineteenth century”.¹³⁸

Efforts to expand the definition of neo-Victorianism mean that Heilmann and Llewellyn have been subject to criticism for their insistence that neo-Victorianism must always be highly self-conscious. According to Kohlke, this precondition prevents the field from “conceptualising the full range and diversity of neo-Victorian writing.”¹³⁹ Likewise, Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss contend that Heilmann and Llewellyn’s study “implicitly reproduces the debate about high and low culture by installing the self-reflexive, critical quality of media as a criterion of value.”¹⁴⁰ Additionally, they point out that within neo-Victorian studies “one can clearly discern a split between ‘strong’ and therefore more specific definitions” and “‘soft’ definitions which are more inclusive”.¹⁴¹ Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss support a more “flexible interpretation of the ‘neo-Victorian’ which can address the fact that the neo-Victorian project is still in the process of disciplinary differentiation and comprises a larger body of primary sources.”¹⁴² Similarly, Kohlke has encouraged neo-Victorian studies to explore “its partisan and exclusive selectiveness and potential complicity with a reinstatement of the literary vs. popular/mass market distinction.”¹⁴³

Increasingly, critics are recognising the need for greater engagement with the matter of neo-Victorianism’s commercial production, dissemination and consumption. Kohlke, for example, maintains that subsequent scholarship “may prove that neo-Victorian writers, conscious of the

¹³⁷ Carroll, “Putting the ‘Neo’ Back into Neo-Victorianism”, 189.

¹³⁸ Kohlke, “Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein”, 27.

¹³⁹ Kohlke, “Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein”, 25.

¹⁴⁰ Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “Introduction”, 3.

¹⁴¹ Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “Introduction”, 2.

¹⁴² Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “Introduction”, 2.

¹⁴³ Kohlke, “Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein”, 30.

demands of the market, not only model their fictions on successful nineteenth-century literary sources and genres, but also deliberately borrow from current popular forms of writing.”¹⁴⁴ Such research might cure neo-Victorian studies of its frequent queasiness with the way that “writers of neo-Victorian fiction have capitulated to the demands of the publishing market”.¹⁴⁵ Eckart Voigts-Virchow, for example, observes that neo-Victorian fiction often explores Victorian subcultures in ways that “succeed in rendering subcultures culturally acceptable and commercially exploitable” and, therefore, ready to enter “the twenty-first century cultural mainstream.”¹⁴⁶ For Gutleben, neo-Victorianism has “a certain commercial orientation” and he condemns the genre’s attempts to attract a large readership by playing up its “Victorian pedigree”.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Heilmann and Llewellyn contend that it

would be false to suggest that texts which merely rewrite Victorian novels in contemporary ways are doing anything other than a straightforward pastiche: meeting a market demand but not necessarily adding anything new to our understanding of how fiction works, what that fiction can do, or possibly what it cannot do.¹⁴⁸

What this statement exemplifies is their own (but also a wider) trepidation that “meeting market demand” has a compromising effect on not just the ethics but also the *aesthetics* of neo-Victorianism. Their analysis suggests the lingering of the earlier anxieties of interwar cultural commentators—such as Leavis—who attacked the crass commercialism of mass and middlebrow culture.

Understandably, critics like Kohlke or Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss have postulated that neo-Victorian scholars could overcome these anxieties by abandoning or suspending their unspoken cultural or aesthetic evaluations. I would suggest such an approach could only take

¹⁴⁴ Kohlke, “Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein”, 30.

¹⁴⁵ Carroll, “Putting the ‘Neo’ Back into Neo-Victorianism”, 189.

¹⁴⁶ Eckart Voigts-Virchow, “In-yer-Victorian-face: A Subcultural Hermeneutics of Neo-Victorianism”, *Literature Interpretation Theory* 20, no. 1-2 (2009): 114.

¹⁴⁷ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 182.

¹⁴⁸ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 23.

us so far and could not adequately address works like *The Brontë Project*. As Vandever's novel illustrates, some neo-Victorian works exhibit a preoccupation with their place in the cultural hierarchy and this preoccupation should be subject to further analysis. Earlier in this section, I mentioned that I am not automatically labelling all neo-Victorian works as middlebrow. Yet the term does possess a useful flexibility that draws attention to and prompts further thought about the—near inescapable—process of cultural evaluation. As such, the concept can benefit neo-Victorian studies by encouraging greater explicitness about and analysis of its cultural judgments.

Of course, such judgments exist awkwardly alongside attempts to conceptualise neo-Victorianism as a postmodern phenomenon. For a long time, scholarly efforts to study neo-Victorian fiction drew from Hutcheon's conceptualisation of postmodern "historiographic metafiction" and the field continues to invoke her ideas even when advocating the need for new critical approaches.¹⁴⁹ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon advances that historiographic metafiction serves to show that both "history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time".¹⁵⁰ These fictions, therefore, position "the texts of the past within their own complex textuality" and point out their status as literary constructs.¹⁵¹ Following Hutcheon's example, critics such as Heilmann and Llewellyn continue to emphasise the self-consciousness and metatextuality of neo-Victorian fiction and culture. Hutcheon is also one of the theorists who proposed that postmodernism erases the distinction "between high and low

¹⁴⁹ See Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, "Introduction", in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*, ed. Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xi-xii; Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

¹⁵⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 105.

¹⁵¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 105.

art forms”.¹⁵² Consequently, neo-Victorianism tends to be understood as a postmodern phenomenon not only because of its “historiographic metafictional disturbance of the traditional history/fiction binary, but also in its deconstruction of metanarratives such as ‘Culture’, resulting in a breakdown of distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature, erudite art and popular culture”.¹⁵³ Despite the putative erasure of these distinctions, many neo-Victorian critics and commentators have been making cultural evaluations when differentiating between the neo-Victorian and the non-neo-Victorian. Whilst a growing number of voices have challenged this tendency, enthusiasm for expanding or deconstructing the “neo-Victorian” canon indicate that neo-Victorian scholars still feel reluctant to make overt cultural judgments because of the influence of postmodernism.

Because neo-Victorian fiction’s postmodern status is mostly undisputed,¹⁵⁴ neo-Victorian studies has had to participate in a broader conversation over whether postmodernism consists solely of meaningless pastiche. The chief proponent of this view is Fredric Jameson, who pronounces pastiche to be “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” and “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs”.¹⁵⁵ In contradistinction to Jameson, Hutcheon rejects the idea that postmodern culture engages with the past on a stylistically superficial level, arguing that postmodernism deploys parody to advance effective political or ideological commentary. She proclaims that postmodern parody “signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference.”¹⁵⁶ Responding to this debate, several neo-Victorian critics have subjected the genre’s postmodernism to sustained

¹⁵² Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 44.

¹⁵³ Kohlke, “Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein”, 29.

¹⁵⁴ For Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “neo-Victorianism has moved beyond postmodern concerns such as intertextuality, self-reflexivity or metafiction.” Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “Introduction”, 1.

¹⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2001), 17.

¹⁵⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 89.

critique. For Gutleben, “the undeniable presence of pastiche” means that neo-Victorian fiction frequently demonstrates the historical deafness of postmodernism.¹⁵⁷ Likewise, Kate Mitchell raises the question of whether neo-Victorian fiction equates the past “with superficial detail; an accumulation of references to clothing, furniture, décor and the like, that produces the past in terms of its objects, as a series of clichés”.¹⁵⁸

Somewhat paradoxically, efforts to reinterpret the genre’s postmodernism more positively often aim to elevate neo-Victorianism culturally. Heilmann and Llewellyn, for example, are implicitly foregrounding the postmodernity of neo-Victorianism when they claim that self-consciousness is one of its necessary features. To refute the many intellectual or aesthetic reservations expressed about the genre, Carroll advises greater recognition of neo-Victorianism’s postmodernity. According to her,

[i]f declamations on the neo-Victorian novel range from the nostalgic sycophant of a venerated past to the venomous heretic that dishonours that memory, the heretical portion is the postmodern – the innovative insights produced by the collision of the Victorian with the postmodern present.¹⁵⁹

As this comment exemplifies, many defenders of neo-Victorianism have deployed the association with postmodernism to distinguish the genre from more “mediocre”, or middlebrow, reimaginings of the Victorian period.

At this point, I want to suggest that we can gain insight into neo-Victorianism’s perceived cultural status and its recycling of the historical past from a prior generation of theorists and commentators. Returning to earlier writings about the middlebrow, furthermore, reveals much about the foundations of the concern regarding neo-Victorian fiction’s derivative and belated “‘theft’ (read appropriation) of the structural fabric and textual characteristics from the

¹⁵⁷ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 9.

¹⁵⁸ Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory*, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Carroll, “Putting the ‘Neo’ Back into Neo-Victorianism”, 181.

‘original’ nineteenth-century novel.”¹⁶⁰ Previously in this chapter, I mentioned that the slur “middlebrow” tended to be applied to works that were seen as failing to meet the interwar modernists’ standards for experimentation and innovation. As already noted, Leavis condemned the “middling” novelists whose work amounted to “echoes of the Best People of the past”.¹⁶¹ Advancing the same point in her essay “Middlebrow”, Woolf characterises the middlebrow’s relationship to the past as superficial and heavily commodified. Woolf asks

what are the things that middlebrows always buy? Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive); first editions of dead writers—always the worst; pictures, or reproductions of pictures, by dead painters; houses in what is called the “Georgian style”—but never anything new, never a picture by a living painter, or a chair by a living carpenter, or books by living writers, for to buy living art requires living taste.¹⁶²

Woolf’s mockery coheres with Bourdieu’s observation that middlebrow consumers revere “everything which looks as if it might be culture and uncritically venerate the aristocratic traditions of the past”.¹⁶³ Excoriating the middlebrow for being retrograde, Woolf identifies a tendency to turn away from the experimental and innovative. Her point concerning “living taste” encapsulates the suspicion that returning to a previous era is artistically tepid and invariably commercial.

In this passage, Woolf anticipates critics of neo-Victorianism who argue that the genre mostly constitutes a shallow pastiche of the Victorian novel and/or postmodernism. Critics of postmodernism and neo-Victorianism echo prior critics who decried the middlebrow as an indiscriminate bricolage of items from the past. For this reason, much neo-Victorian scholarship has aimed to refute the prejudices against recycling the past expressed by figures such as Jameson and Woolf. To construe neo-Victorian fiction as more than counterfeit

¹⁶⁰ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, 17.

¹⁶¹ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 36.

¹⁶² Woolf, “Middlebrow”, 118.

¹⁶³ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 323.

versions of nineteenth-century novels, neo-Victorian studies has consistently emphasised the genre's status as postmodern historiographic metafiction. Even if we adopt a positive perspective on postmodernism, we need to examine the assumptions made about the relationship between postmodernism and neo-Victorianism. Though much neo-Victorian fiction is undoubtedly postmodern and metafictional, does this fact automatically mean that its reinterpretations of the Victorians are pioneering and innovative? In his study, Gutleben posits that many of the genre's postmodern characteristics were "common practice among modernist writers" and that "what was revolutionary for the modernists is not at all so fifty years later".¹⁶⁴ Additionally, the modernists themselves lag behind Victorian authors' capacity to question and test the limits of their period's literary conventions.¹⁶⁵ Kaplan points out, for example, that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* famously provides alternative conclusions to its narrative but a similar double ending also occurs in CB's *Villette*.¹⁶⁶ Such analyses clarify the belatedness of neo-Victorian fiction that borrows from its nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literary predecessors.

I would extend this argument to propose that neo-Victorianism frequently constitutes not only a tardy but also a *middlebrow* version of postmodernism. Additionally, I want to suggest that neo-Victorian fiction provides middlebrow versions of canonical literature and literary theory. Many examples of the genre cohere with Bourdieu's description of middlebrow entertainment as didactically offering both adaptations of "classic" culture and "accessible versions of avant-garde experiments or what pass for avant-garde experiments".¹⁶⁷ Consequently, he maintains the view that middlebrow culture is "entirely organized to give the impression of

¹⁶⁴ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 157, 159.

¹⁶⁵ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 165-7.

¹⁶⁶ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 97.

¹⁶⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 323.

bringing legitimate [or highbrow] culture within the reach of all”.¹⁶⁸ Achieving a similar coup, neo-Victorianism has been subject to criticism for the same reason. Through pastiche, neo-Victorianism improves the supposed “non-professionalized” or “general” reader’s tastes by explaining or providing greater familiarity with the canonical culture of the past and the seemingly avant-garde of the present. For Gutleben, neo-Victorian fiction “manages to appear neither extremely conservative nor radically avant-garde, both innovative and in continuity with tradition, a clever compromise which aptly seems to define British contemporary postmodernism”.¹⁶⁹ In effect, he attacks the features that allow neo-Victorianism to appeal to a large readership. Gutleben is perturbed by neo-Victorian fiction’s hybridity in a similar way to earlier cultural commentators who were perturbed by the “betwixt and between” quality of the middlebrow. Ultimately, Gutleben construes neo-Victorianism as putting “into practice a form of fiction more accessible to a British readership—which in any case, was never fond of the international avant-garde”.¹⁷⁰ This statement implicitly judges neo-Victorianism to be a middlebrow genre and a by-product of British anti-intellectualism.

Despite his sweeping generalisations about British culture, Gutleben raises the relevant issue of whether neo-Victorian fiction or the middlebrow are nationally specific phenomena. Like many early neo-Victorian critics, Gutleben primarily addresses British fiction and the field has consciously tried to expand beyond these national confines.¹⁷¹ Meanwhile, much middlebrow scholarship has concentrated upon British or American culture but efforts have been made to examine the middlebrow in other national contexts.¹⁷² The question of

¹⁶⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 323.

¹⁶⁹ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 161.

¹⁷⁰ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 161.

¹⁷¹ See for example, Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, ed. “Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation: Transnational Dissemination of Nineteenth-Century Cultural Texts”, Special Issue, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁷² On January 17-8th 2014, the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts hosted a conference entitled *European Middlebrow Cultures, 1880-1950: Reception, Translation, Circulation* in Brussels.

nationality also arises in relation to the fact that this thesis focuses upon adaptations of the Brontës' novels made by the BBC. The BBC has been historically regarded as a middlebrow cultural institution in Britain whilst serving as one of the main disseminators of British culture in other national contexts. Nevertheless, the BBC and British culture often possess different cultural status when at home and when abroad.¹⁷³ I am unable to address this matter adequately within the scope of this thesis due to the primary concern with the relationship between the middlebrow and gender. Before returning to this issue, this chapter will examine more closely the connections between the middlebrow and adaptation. The next section, therefore, considers the cultural status of adaptations more broadly and discusses the growth of adaptation studies as a field. I will suggest that adaptations have a long-running association with middlebrow culture that can be partly attributed to attitudes that emerged during the interwar period.

Adaptation and the Middlebrow

Thus far, I have discussed the interwar critics who reacted unfavourably to the profusion of popular fiction during these years and many of them often also voiced doubts about the cultural value of cinema. One of the most vitriolic attacks came from Woolf who wrote her essay "The Cinema" (1926) after seeing a film version of *Anna Karenina*.¹⁷⁴ Woolf's polemic appears to be an unreserved attack upon lowbrow culture, referring to film spectators as "the savages of the twentieth century" and claiming that "at first sight the art of the cinema seems simple, even stupid."¹⁷⁵ Yet Woolf also perceives "intimations" of the form's potential for

¹⁷³ An ex-chairman of the BBC, Michael Grade, observes that what is deemed "popular programming" in Britain often counts as "upmarket upscale programming" in the United States. Quoted in Simone Knox, "Masterpiece Theatre and British Drama Imports on US Television: Discourses of Tension", *Critical Studies in Television* 7, no. 1 (2012): 40.

¹⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema", in *Collected Essays: Volume II*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 262-72.

¹⁷⁵ Woolf, "The Cinema", 268.

abstraction and high-art status.¹⁷⁶ Woolf does not castigate the medium itself but rather its transformation of “the most famous novels of the world” into “the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy” for the benefit of lowbrow consumers.¹⁷⁷ Though denigrating lowbrow audiences, Woolf’s complaints recall her subsequent objection to the middlebrow as a pastiche of highbrow culture.

Exploring the relationship between the middlebrow and literary adaptations, this section also examines the relatively recent growth of adaptation studies. According to Whelehan and Deborah Cartmell, adaptations “while popular at the box office, have been, for literary and film critics, among the most despised forms of entertainment”.¹⁷⁸ This fact is already apparent in Woolf’s essay “The Cinema”. But if Woolf construed film as a “parasite” on literature,¹⁷⁹ more recent defenders of the cinematic medium have taken the approach that “the only way to avoid making film seem belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior is to devalue straightforward, high-cultural adaptation.”¹⁸⁰ Because of the lingering prejudices of literary and film studies alike, adaptation studies took a long time to establish itself as a critical and scholarly field. For Collins, adaptation studies used to be undertaken with

all the subtlety of a professional wrestling match in which Jane Austen battles Vulgar Adaptation in a steel-cage death match, and we all know it’s going to be Jane who will be spinning her opponent around over her head before she slams him to the mat of legitimate literary culture.¹⁸¹

The divisions between “high” and “low” culture, therefore, had to be challenged before adaptation studies could establish itself as a field. From Thomas Leitch’s perspective,

¹⁷⁶ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 272, 270.

¹⁷⁷ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 270.

¹⁷⁸ Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 8.

¹⁷⁹ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 270.

¹⁸⁰ James Naremore, “Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation”, in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone, 2000), 6.

¹⁸¹ Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 122.

adaptation studies had to legitimise itself by eschewing its default liberal humanist position and desisting from using “literary aesthetics as its touchstone and canonical works and authors as its organizing principle.”¹⁸² Leitch and others have encouraged the field’s now frequent resistance to the “evaluative impulse to insist that originals are always touchstones of value for their adaptations”.¹⁸³ Once these cultural hierarchies were disrupted, adaptation studies produced a number of significant theoretical insights that have guided my consideration of adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*. Even so, I want to suggest that the concept of the middlebrow can still be applied to and usefully illuminate some adaptations.

To begin, I want to consider Woolf’s essays for insight into the modernist period’s suspicion of adaptations. In “The Cinema”, Woolf voices criticisms that anticipate her later attack on middlebrow culture. Deriding cinematic and middlebrow consumers for similar reasons, Woolf reveals that she associates popularity with “a necessary appeal to the lowest social/intellectual denominator” and “cultural impoverishment.”¹⁸⁴ She also decries how the adaptation that she saw transforms *Anna Karenina* into a series of haphazard images. To Woolf’s dismay, Leo Tolstoy’s novel was apparently reduced to:

A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls...All the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet. Then ‘Anna falls in love with Vronsky’—that is to say, the lady in black velvet falls into the arms of a gentleman in uniform and they kiss with enormous succulence, great deliberation, and infinite gesticulation, on a sofa in an extremely well-appointed library, while a gardener incidentally mows the lawn... A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of Christ* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁸³ Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, 6.

¹⁸⁴ Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation*, 42.

¹⁸⁵ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 269-70.

She also complains that all the cinematic imagery is “hubble-bubble, swarm and chaos.”¹⁸⁶ The manner in which she disparages the film as a disconnected hodgepodge resembles her scorn when she compiles a list of “the things that middlebrows always buy” in “Middlebrow”.¹⁸⁷ In both cases, Woolf excoriates contemporary culture’s excess and overstimulation to anticipate and recall the Leavises’ warnings about mass culture’s lack of discrimination. Beneath her fears about the lack of discernment, moreover, lie Woolf’s concerns that cinematic adaptation and middlebrow culture misunderstand and arbitrarily borrow from highbrow sources, implying that neither amounts to anything more than a pastiche of “genuine” culture. In these two essays, Woolf betrays her contempt for those lowbrow and middlebrow consumers who confuse the counterfeit for the “authentically” highbrow.

Such reservations are based, in part, upon the whiff of commerce that surrounds literary adaptation and middlebrow culture alike. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how middlebrow culture’s commodification of highbrow culture for a mass public often provokes concern and, occasionally, outrage. Equally suspicious of financial motivations, Woolf’s two essays evince a shared discomfort with the display of purchasable items like pearls, velvet, Queen Anne furniture or the works of dead painters. Yet Woolf was correct about the fact that an economic impetus frequently drove middlebrow culture and film adaptors. From its earliest days, the film industry turned to making adaptations to maximise profits; in this era and beyond, filmmakers often chose to rework canonical texts that were in the public domain and could be made without infringing copyright. Filmmakers, furthermore, have long known that the wide circulation of canonical texts “would to some extent sell [adaptations] in advance to exhibitors and audiences, who would both have preexisting knowledge of the subject

¹⁸⁶ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 268.

¹⁸⁷ Woolf, “Middlebrow”, 118.

matter.”¹⁸⁸ An undercurrent of dislike for such commodification runs throughout Woolf’s “The Cinema” and would later be expressed more explicitly when she accused middlebrow culture of being interested in “neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.”¹⁸⁹

A similar concern about indistinguishable mixing is expressed in “The Cinema” where Woolf proclaims that cinema’s desire to elevate itself leads to a retrogressive emulation of literature. She states, for example, that the cinema “fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim.”¹⁹⁰ Her scenario elucidates the modernist fear of formal dilution that has meant that screen adaptations have frequently been “referred to as ‘mixed cinema’ or even more damning, ‘impure’ film, implying that film and literature when combined are mutually contaminating or polluting of each other.”¹⁹¹ Throughout “The Cinema”, Woolf positions literature as the superior form but she also voices the view that once “we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book” we can perceive “what cinema might do if left to its own devices.”¹⁹² In this respect, Woolf voices a recurrent anxiety that film has to divorce itself from literature to develop into a high art form. Later proponents of this position would include the French New Wave filmmakers who sought to “break with traditional movie criticism and establish a truly modernist (as well as somewhat Arnoldian) film criticism by launching an attack on what [François] Truffaut called a ‘Tradition of Quality’ made up of respectable literary adaptations.”¹⁹³ As Cartmell and Whelehan summarise, literature on screen was rejected by “the ‘defenders’ of literature who

¹⁸⁸ William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 49.

¹⁸⁹ Woolf, “Middlebrow”, 115.

¹⁹⁰ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 278.

¹⁹¹ Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation*, 8.

¹⁹² Woolf, “The Cinema”, 270.

¹⁹³ Naremore, “Introduction”, 6. François Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema”, in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology, Vol. I*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 232-33.

felt it contributed to a decline in reading and thinking but, more subtly and persuasively, these movies were spurned by filmmakers and film enthusiasts who wanted film to have an identity of all its own.”¹⁹⁴

In comparison with these purist positions, middlebrow culture has persistently embraced the adulteration and mixing of forms that adaptation often necessitates. “Adaptability and adaptation”, argues Lawrence Napper, “are the key features of the middlebrow audience and culture.”¹⁹⁵ He further proposes that middlebrow culture did not share modernism’s desire for “formal purity and experimentation” but rather was “engaged in blurring the boundaries of its media. Traditional modes of representation—realism, pictorialism, theatricality and literary narration—were transferred to new media[.]”¹⁹⁶ The desire to adapt pre-existing literary texts into new forms reflects that—in contradistinction to the highbrow—the middlebrow remains less concerned with unsullied artistic innovation and seeks continuities, rather than radical breaks, with prior ages. As discussed, Woolf objected to middlebrow culture due to its reverence for tradition and the past whilst her essays on the middlebrow and cinema exemplify the type of modernist “protest” directed “at the ease with which middlebrow texts and taste handled the transition between old and new forms.”¹⁹⁷ Woolf and other modernists’ prejudices against literary adaptation derived from a distinct cultural milieu, but they continued to exert a hold that has only now begun to loosen.

One indication of this influence is the length of time that passed before adaptation studies became a critical field. Until recently, adaptations studies could be said to exist within a “disciplinary twilight zone” between literary and film studies, regarded by both “as an area

¹⁹⁴ Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation*, 33.

¹⁹⁵ Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, 9.

¹⁹⁷ Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, 9.

unworthy of academic study.”¹⁹⁸ Notable exceptions exist, such as George Bluestone’s *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (1957).¹⁹⁹ Yet in 2003, Leitch still maintained that adaptation theory has “never been undertaken with conviction or theoretical rigour.”²⁰⁰ Since then, much theorizing has occurred and a variety of critical works have challenged the intellectual divisions that promulgated the undervaluation of adaptations. One sign of the field’s new respectability is the growing number of articles, monographs and edited collections on the subject of adaptation and the launch of the journal *Adaptation* in 2008. I now want to consider some of the key insights that have emerged from the burgeoning of adaptation studies and that have influenced this thesis.

That said, I agree with the recent scholarship that argues that the critical discourse needs to re-orientate itself away from the task of attempting to formulate overarching theoretical metanarratives. Brett Westbrook, for example, claims that “a grand unifying theory for adaptation studies” is impossible and that “the sheer volume of everything involved in a discussion of film adaptation is virtually immeasurable, which means that no one single theory has the capacity to encompass every aspect of an adaptation.”²⁰¹ Calling for an end to dogmatic applications of theory, Kamilla Elliott argues that rather than adaptations being made to adapt to theories, theories need to adapt to adaptations. From her perspective, adaptations

teach us that theories cannot predict or account for adaptations in all times and places, not only because the field is too large, but also because adaptations are always changing and adapting. Any theory of adaptation must therefore *itself* incorporate

¹⁹⁸ Deborah Cartmell, Timothy Corrigan and Imelda Whelehan, “Introduction to *Adaptation*”, *Adaptation* 1, no. 1 (2008): 1.

¹⁹⁹ George Bluestone, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

²⁰⁰ Thomas Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory”, *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003): 149.

²⁰¹ Brett Westbrook, “Being Adaptation: The Resistance to Theory”, in *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, ed. Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Ray Cutchins (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2010), 42.

process and change. Adaptations admonish us to move continually beyond our present ideas and methodologies.²⁰²

With this warning in mind, I want to discuss some of the principles that have shaped and guided this thesis's examination of different adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*.

In the third and fourth chapters, I will be primarily discussing *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*'s transformations into different media but I am aware that the interplay between a "source" and its "adaptation" is considerably more complex. As Leitch points out, adaptations are never merely "*adapting exactly one text apiece*" and "each individual adaptation invokes many precursor texts beside the one whose title it usually borrows."²⁰³ For this reason, the third and fourth chapters will consider more than just how individual screen versions rework CB or AB's novels. Rather, I will also be examining the relationships between the different adaptations and other sources, such as portraits of the Brontë family. I am also interested in how costume drama adaptations of these novels draw upon other examples of the genre. My approach reflects that adaptation studies now transcends (or at least aspires to transcend) its once predominant concentration upon canonical novels made for the screen. In her attempt to theorise adaptation, Hutcheon proclaims that the Victorians adapted almost "everything—and in every possible direction; the stories of poems, novels, plays, operas, paintings, songs, dances, and *tableaux vivants* were constantly being adapted from one medium to another and then back again."²⁰⁴ She then notes that in the postmodern era, we have "not only film, television and radio, and the various electronic media of course, but also theme parks, historical enactments and virtual reality experiments" before concluding that adaptations have

²⁰² Kamilla Elliott, "Theorizing Adaptations/Adapting Theories", in *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, ed. Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 34.

²⁰³ Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies", 164.

²⁰⁴ Linda Hutcheon, "Preface to the First Edition" to Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), xiii.

“run amok.”²⁰⁵ This changing view of adaptations reflects the field’s enthusiastic embrace of intertextuality, particularly in the wake of work by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo.²⁰⁶ At the same time, this broadening of parameters has also led to an ongoing debate about what does and does not constitute an adaptation—or even if the question is a relevant one.²⁰⁷

Though no consensus exists on that matter, the field generally agrees on the necessity of forgoing the assessment of an adaptation’s fidelity to a singular source work as the only (or even primary) approach when studying an adaptation. For Leitch, fidelity is “undesirable, unattainable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense” and adaptations “will always reveal their sources’ superiority because, whatever their faults, the source texts will always be better at being themselves.”²⁰⁸ Stam also makes the pertinent observation that fidelity is an “essentialist” concept that

assumes that a novel “contains” an extractable “essence”, a kind of “heart of the artichoke” hidden “underneath” the surface details of style...it is assumed there is an originary core, a kernel of meaning or nucleus of events that can be “delivered” by an adaptation. But in fact there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings.²⁰⁹

In a related point, Stam notes that the discourse of fidelity “has often been profoundly moralistic, awash in terms such as *infidelity*, *betrayal*, *deformation*, *violation*, *vulgarization*, and *deseccration*.”²¹⁰ Developing this realisation, Shelley Cobb elucidates that the fidelity discourse “employs a metaphor of heterosexual love and marriage to maintain gendered

²⁰⁵ Hutcheon, “Preface”, xiii.

²⁰⁶ Robert Stam, *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, ed. *A Companion to Literature and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, ed. *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

²⁰⁷ Thomas Leitch, “Adaptation and Intertextuality, or What Isn’t an Adaptation and What Does it Matter?”, in *A Companion to Literature, Film, Adaptation*, ed. Deborah Cartmell (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 87-104.

²⁰⁸ Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies”, 161.

²⁰⁹ Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: A Dialogics of Adaptation”, in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone, 2000), 57.

²¹⁰ Stam, “Beyond Fidelity”, 54.

language and hierarchies.”²¹¹ She observes that often “the language of fidelity constructs a gendered possession of authority and paternity for the source text within adaptation: the film as faithful wife to the novel as paternal husband.”²¹² Bearing these analyses in mind, the following chapters will still discuss different adaptations’ divergences from *Jane Eyre* or *Wildfell Hall*. I will, however, avoid critiquing these adaptations purely because they “deviate” from their source material.

In my consideration of these adaptations, furthermore, I am careful not to make essentialist assumptions about medium specificity. In the fourth chapter, for example, I will argue that *Wildfell Hall* discourages its own adaptation for film and television whilst noting the possibilities demonstrated by a radio adaptation of the same work. I am not, however, accepting the premise that each medium or art form possesses “its own domain of expression and exploration.”²¹³ As Noël Carroll explains, the “medium specificity thesis” understands each art form to “have some range of effects that it discharges best or uniquely as a result of the structure of its physical medium.”²¹⁴ Accordingly, the “medium specificity thesis” demands that each art form “should be limited to exploiting this range of effects, which the nature of the medium dictates.”²¹⁵ Such a proposition is faulty in a number of respects. Most crucially, the medium-specificity argument overlooks the fact that our judgments about a particular medium’s success “are grounded in the history of fashion, taste and analysis rather than in specific technical properties”.²¹⁶ Though screen media and novels appear to have “essentially distinctive properties, those properties are functions of their historical moments

²¹¹ Shelley Cobb, “Adaptation, Fidelity, and Gendered Discourses”, *Adaptation* 4, no. 1 (2010): 28.

²¹² Cobb, “Adaptation, Fidelity, and Gendered Discourses”, 30.

²¹³ Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

²¹⁴ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 26.

²¹⁵ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 26.

²¹⁶ Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies”, 152.

and not of the media themselves.”²¹⁷ Because of this important point, I do not suggest that *Wildfell Hall*’s properties as a literary work mean that AB’s novel cannot be adapted for the screen. Rather, the fourth chapter argues that AB’s novel tends not to be remade because of its failure to comply with the—culturally determined—generic features of costume drama adaptations.

As well as developing these insights, adaptation studies consistently challenges the cultural hierarchies that—for the most part—privilege literature over cinema, television and other media. In its inaugural issue, the journal *Adaptation* lists various assumptions that needed to be dismantled before adaptation studies could become a field. These assumptions include the view that adaptations are “abominations, crude usurpations of literary masterpieces that threatened both literacy and the book itself.”²¹⁸ Moving beyond this position allowed the field to broaden its scope and “dethrone” arbitrary aesthetic evaluation “as the unmarked or central activity of adaptation studies.”²¹⁹ Yet the concept of the middlebrow continues to be implicitly and explicitly used to describe certain types of adaptation. Some critics confer middlebrow status upon adaptations that appear to be “faithful” to their literary sources and established cultural values. Though never using the label “middlebrow”, Leitch applies MacDonald’s term “midcult” to the producer David O. Selznick for cultivating a brand as a “faithful” adaptor of literary texts.²²⁰ Leitch, furthermore, classifies the BBC as another adaptor who trades upon “what might be called a negative cachet, a guarantee that they will protect the audience from the shock of experiencing any new thoughts or feelings that would

²¹⁷ Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies”, 153.

²¹⁸ Cartmell, Corrigan and Whelehan, “Introduction to *Adaptation*”, 1.

²¹⁹ Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, 21.

²²⁰ Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, 154.

not have been provoked by their source texts.”²²¹ Leitch underscores how the BBC has secured a reputation as a maker of “faithful” adaptations.

The BBC has acquired this reputation because its adaptations frequently confirm “the cultural value of the classic literary text” that calls to mind the middlebrow’s liberal humanist reverence for the literary canon and the culture of the past.²²² In this respect, the BBC and its adaptations appear to uphold many of the cultural values that adaptation studies has questioned and sought to overturn.²²³ Cultivating the appearance of being “faithful” versions of “canonical” works, BBC classic serials tend to be regarded as “formulaic, commercially driven commodities that are aesthetically unimaginative, conservative, and nostalgic.”²²⁴ Many of these qualities have been associated with the middlebrow. In the next section, I want to consider how the BBC gained this reputation and argue that its association with “fidelity and authenticity” is “rooted in the BBC’s status as public service broadcaster and as a transmitter of knowledge and information”.²²⁵ The Corporation maintains this status in spite of the fact that—as we shall see in subsequent chapters—its costume drama adaptations frequently diverge from their announced literary sources.

The BBC, Costume Drama Adaptations and the Middlebrow

²²¹ Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, 6.

²²² Iris Kleinecke-Bates, *The Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 54. For further discussion of middlebrow reverence, see Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 21-3.

²²³ Of course, the process is more complex. Leitch notes that the serialization of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) conferred “classic” status on Evelyn Waugh’s “best-selling, middlebrow 1945 novel”. Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, 174. Though his analysis is valuable, Leitch misattributes this production to the BBC even though the fact that ITV made *Brideshead Revisited* had a significant effect upon the British television landscape. For further discussion, see Charlotte Brunsdon, “Problems with Quality”, *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 67-90.

²²⁴ Richard Butt, “The Classic Novel on British Television”, in *A Companion to Literature, Film, Adaptation*, ed. Deborah Cartmell (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 160.

²²⁵ Kleinecke-Bates, *The Victorians on Screen*, 52.

Founded in and offering radio services from 1922, the BBC is one of the most prolific and well-known adaptors of the Brontës' novels. By 1930 and 1931 respectively, the organisation had already broadcast readings from and an adaptation of *Jane Eyre* on radio and has continued to produce regular adaptations of the Brontë sisters' novels for this medium.²²⁶ From 1936, the BBC had a regular television broadcasting service and, by 1937, had transmitted scenes from a theatrical production of Helen Jerome's *Jane Eyre* (1936), showing the same play again in 1946 and 1948.²²⁷ In 1956, the organisation commissioned a six-part serial based on CB's novel that was recast and remade once more in 1963.²²⁸ Thereafter, the Corporation screened one five-part serial and then an eleven-part serial in, respectively, 1973 and 1983.²²⁹ After a gap of twenty-six years, the BBC made a four-part serialisation of *Jane Eyre* in 2006. The many BBC versions of *Jane Eyre* contrast with the fact that the organisation has commissioned just two television productions of *Wildfell Hall*, which were shown in Britain in 1968-9 and 1996. Nonetheless, these adaptations are the only instances in which AB's novel has been reworked for the screen. In this section, I wish to connect the BBC's unusual degree of investment in the Brontës for source material with its status as a middlebrow cultural institution.

But first, I want to explore the cultural status of costume drama adaptations more generally. Several alternative terms exist—such as “period”, “historical” or “heritage”—but I have chosen to use “costume drama” because it connotes “a refusal of historical or literary authenticity” and “the pleasures and possibilities of masquerade”.²³⁰ In the third chapter, I

²²⁶ Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), 267.

²²⁷ Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 270, 274.

²²⁸ Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 275, 277.

²²⁹ Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 281, 283.

²³⁰ Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 4. See also Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 9-10.

will discuss how a number of feminist critics have argued that the genre's many "historical travesties" not only expose history as a "masquerade" but also represent the "feminisation of history itself."²³¹ Because of these qualities, however, costume drama has tended to be regarded as a feminised low- or middlebrow form of entertainment. This point has often arisen in relation to the cycle of costume drama films made by Gainsborough Studios in the years 1942-50. As Sue Harper and Pam Cook have noted, the critical opprobrium directed at Gainsborough's films was often aimed at their "low-status audience" of "working-class females".²³²

Critics continued to disparage costume dramas' assumed viewership from a more consciously ideological perspective during the debates surrounding "heritage" culture. For a period, "quality" film and television were frequently lambasted for addressing "a middlebrow spectator lost" in a depoliticised "fantasy of class mobility and cultural consumerism."²³³ The discussions concerning "heritage" remain outside the scope of this thesis but I agree with Claire Monk, who argues that the label "heritage" unifies a diverse collection of films under a clumsy umbrella term.²³⁴ I am, however, interested in the way that discourse surrounding "heritage" cinema located these productions in a "betwixt and between" cultural space. For Andrew Higson, the genre exists at the "culturally respectable, quality end of the market" and "straddles the traditional art-house circuit and the mainstream commercial cinemas in Britain."²³⁵ Higson's work asserts that such works ignore modernity in favour of "a traditional conservative pastoral Englishness; they turn away, too, from the high-tech aesthetics of

²³¹ Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 77.

²³² Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 122.

²³³ Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 18.

²³⁴ Claire Monk, "The British Cinema Debate Revisited", in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), 176-98.

²³⁵ Andrew Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film", in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (London: UCL Press, 1993), 110.

mainstream popular cinema” and are “fascinated by the private property, the culture and values of a *particular* class.”²³⁶ Such contentions recall Woolf’s essay when she denigrated the middlebrow as “neither one thing nor the other” as well as being aesthetically retrograde and undeniably commercial.²³⁷ Additionally, Higson’s work postulates that the representation of the past becomes a “visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films”.²³⁸ Higson’s assessment contains an inherent critique of a number of assumptions about the responses of the films’ spectators. A few years later, Higson would acknowledge that he failed to “deal with questions of reception” and more recent scholarship has explored the diversity of responses demonstrated by audiences of “heritage” films.²³⁹

Even before this work on reception was undertaken, feminist critics challenged the view that the genre offered a straightforwardly nostalgic and politically retrograde vision of the past. Crucially, these critics point out that the discussion of costume drama often exhibited an unconscious bias against femininity and feminine pleasures that left elitist and patriarchal assumptions about women’s entertainment un-interrogated. From Julianne Pidduck’s perspective, “[g]endered accounts of historical significance, taste and quality” have ensured that costume drama is “perceived as a woman’s genre” and led to its cultural devaluation.²⁴⁰

Making a similar point, Monk claims that the

gender-blindness of the dominant British critical approach to heritage cinema is sufficiently strange as to seem almost wilful, given the historical associations of femininity with a (culturally constructed) disposition towards the pleasures of

²³⁶ Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past”, 112-3, 114.

²³⁷ Woolf, “Middlebrow”, 115.

²³⁸ Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past”, 109.

²³⁹ Andrew Higson, “The Heritage Film and British Cinema”, in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), 246.

For work on reception, see Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Claire Monk, “Heritage Film Audiences 2.0: Period Film Audiences and Online Fan Cultures”, *Participations* 8, no. 2 (2011): 431-77.

²⁴⁰ Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, 5.

the (popular and literary) novel; the costume film; female-centred narratives and ‘female’ genres such as romance and melodrama; and, last but not least, the pleasures of consumption.²⁴¹

As Vidal remarks, the “heritage-film debates have pointed out a history of devaluation of the popular period drama on the grounds of its allegedly feminine mode of address”.²⁴² Her comment underscores that the close relationship between the middlebrow and femininity has shaped perceptions of costume drama.

Because I have not undertaken work upon the reception of the costume dramas discussed in this thesis, I would not automatically classify every adaptation as middlebrow but I would argue that BBC classic serial adaptations do carry this association. As noted, these productions are often viewed differently in different national contexts whilst the cultural “hierarchy in which television is culturally and aesthetically inferior to film” also influences perceptions.²⁴³ In Britain anyway, the BBC classic serial has long been understood as occupying the cultural “middle” of the television landscape. In 1982, Paul Kerr argued that whilst the single play signified “Art” and the series signified “Entertainment”, the “serial” was the “middleground” of television with the classic serial being “the ‘middlebrow’” of this “middleground”.²⁴⁴ As already mentioned, Leitch implies that such BBC productions belong to a tradition of “faithful” middlebrow adaptations. More recently, Duncan Wu invoked the term in his review of Cary Fukunaga’s cinematic *Jane Eyre* (2011) for *The Times Higher Education*. After offering a generally positive response to Fukunaga’s film, Wu remarks that costume dramas are “easy to ridicule because they’re so incorrigibly middlebrow, and after watching the BBC ones it can seem that they contain the same actors, the same production

²⁴¹ Claire Monk, “The Heritage Film and Gendered Spectatorship”, *Close Up: The Electronic Journal of British Cinema* 1 (1996-7), accessed December 8, 2012, <http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/lc/closeup/monk.htm>.

²⁴² Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 24.

²⁴³ Hannah Andrews, *Television and British Cinema: Convergence and Divergence Since 1990* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6.

²⁴⁴ For further discussion, Paul Kerr, “Classic Serials: To Be Continued”, *Screen* 23, no. 1 (1982): 7.

values and the same general effect”.²⁴⁵ As well as these wider assumptions about its cultural status, the BBC can be understood as middlebrow because of the organisation’s history.

Founded during the interwar years, the BBC played—and perhaps more importantly was perceived as playing—an instrumental role in shaping the concept of and audiences for the middlebrow. In its most recent Royal Charter (2006), the BBC describes its core purposes to be to “inform, educate and entertain” its audience.²⁴⁶ This mission echoes the words of the organisation’s first Director General, John Reith, who “articulated and defended a notion of public service deeply rooted in the values of later nineteenth-century Britain.”²⁴⁷ Though Reith left the organisation in 1938 and before its television service was established, he had an undeniable effect upon the BBC’s concept of and status as a public service.²⁴⁸ Reith’s commitment to these ideals determined the transformation in 1927 of the private British Broadcasting Company into a public service that possessed a monopoly over the radio airwaves. The change in status happened because of the government’s belief that radio’s reach as mass medium meant that it should not be subject to commercial pressures.²⁴⁹ Napper argues the decision was driven by anxieties about radio being subsumed by “the kind of uncontrolled market exemplified by both the internationalist expansion of Hollywood, and the

²⁴⁵ Duncan Wu, review of *Jane Eyre* (Fukunaga, 2011), “Film Review: *Jane Eyre*”, *Times Higher Education*, September 8, 2011, accessed July 18, 2015, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/culture/film-review-jane-eyre/417336.article>.

Wu’s remark reflects that “the volume of classic serials produced by the BBC between the late 1950s and the late 1980s demanded relatively standardized production practices which inevitably manifested themselves in the consistencies of narrative structure and pacing, set design and iconography, that enabled the classic serial to function as a recognizable genre with a distinct set of conventions and audience expectations.” Butt, “The Classic Novel on British Television”, 162.

Additionally, Wu appears unaware that one of the main production companies for Fukunaga’s adaptation was BBC Films. For further discussion of public service broadcasters’ involvement in British film, see Andrews, *Television and British Cinema*.

²⁴⁶ Department for Media, Culture and Sport, *Copy of Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation* (London: TSO, 2006), 3.

²⁴⁷ James Thompson, “The BBC and the Victorians”, in *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*, ed. Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 150.

²⁴⁸ Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 9.

²⁴⁹ Paddy Scannell, “Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept”, in *British Television: A Reader*, ed. Edward Buscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.

development of American broadcasting.”²⁵⁰ By transforming the BBC into a public service, the government and the organisation’s management hoped that the Corporation would remain—to an extent—within the control of the state but also that decent cultural standards could be maintained.

In their commitment to these ideals, the BBC’s public service pioneers recognised that as well as being informing and educating, their broadcasts had to be accessible and entertaining. Reith stipulated that the “BBC must lead, not follow its listeners, but it must not lead at so great a distance as to shake off pursuit.”²⁵¹ Furthermore, the BBC had to justify its non-commercial status “by providing entertainment which, while appropriate to a mass medium, was nevertheless discernibly different from the market-driven services to be found in (for example) America.”²⁵² The need for such a balancing act reflects how the BBC was envisioned as occupying a middlebrow cultural position from its very inception. Recognising this fact, Woolf quipped that the organisation’s initials stood for the “Betwixt and Between Company”.²⁵³

Though perhaps not identified as middlebrow by Reith or other members of the organisation, the Corporation did address and construct a cultural middlebrow in its efforts to create a unified national audience with upwardly mobile tastes. To satisfy its various roles, the BBC offered a varied range of programmes meant to entertain whilst being morally and culturally improving. Napper observes that the BBC maintained a “careful balance” between the popular and the edifying that “sought to develop the public’s cultural taste, rather than pander

²⁵⁰ Lawrence Napper, “British Cinema and the Middlebrow”, in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), 112.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Napper, “British Cinema and the Middlebrow”, 112.

²⁵² Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, 8.

²⁵³ Woolf, “The Middlebrow”, 118.

to it.”²⁵⁴ The BBC’s assorted programmes were conceived as a “kind of social cement binding people together in the shared idioms of a public, corporate, national life.”²⁵⁵ As Paddy Scannell notes, the organisation “brought into being a radically new kind of public—one commensurate with the whole of society.”²⁵⁶ On this basis, Napper argues that the BBC aimed to use new forms of mass communication in order to speak to a diverse populace whilst producing a common, middlebrow national culture.²⁵⁷ To construct this middlebrow audience, the BBC provided common admission to public events and ceremonies but also the nation’s past and culture. Adaptations on radio and television were an obvious way to acquaint the British with their literary and cultural heritage. The Corporation’s willingness to adapt the Victorian literary canon further underscores the BBC’s middlebrow allegiances. As James Thompson notes, the BBC in the 1940s “was arguably better disposed to the nineteenth century than to the world of Stracheyite Bloomsbury, though, precisely because of this, it may also have been more closely aligned to broader currents of public opinion than to the aesthetes of WC1.”²⁵⁸

The strategy of disseminating the literary canon continued when the BBC began to provide a television service. As Iris Kleinecke-Bates observes, “the classic novel adaptation, from the earliest days of British television onwards, has occupied an important role in public service broadcasting, with educational aspirations leading to a strong tradition of adaptations”.²⁵⁹ Yet acting as an introduction to the literary canon is not enough. These adaptations have also had to be popular enough to fulfil the BBC’s obligations to entertain the public and justify its licence fee. In Kleinecke-Bates’s view, these productions

²⁵⁴ Napper, “British Cinema and the Middlebrow”, 112.

²⁵⁵ Scannell, “Public Service Broadcasting”, 48.

²⁵⁶ Scannell, “Public Service Broadcasting”, 50.

²⁵⁷ Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, 4.

²⁵⁸ Thompson, “The BBC and the Victorians”, 163.

²⁵⁹ Iris Kleinecke-Bates, “Historicizing the Classic Novel Adaptation: *Bleak House* (1005) and British Television Contexts”, in *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*, ed. Rachel Carroll (London: Continuum, 2009), 111.

fulfil an important role within public service broadcasting by satisfying demands for respectability and quality demanded by the public service ethos, and the nineteenth-century novel in particular is frequently associated with notions of ‘culture’ and ‘quality’, while the continued popularity of these programmes shows their potential to offer the entertainment value which is necessary to draw in audiences.²⁶⁰

The necessity of making productions that are accessible and have wide appeal means that a selection of “popular” but also “classic” texts tend to be repeatedly adapted whilst others are marginalised. This point will receive further consideration in the fourth chapter of this thesis where I discuss the cultural afterlives of *Wildfell Hall*. In this last chapter, I shall acknowledge that the BBC’s role as a public service broadcaster has shifted considerably since its earliest days. But I will also argue that the BBC’s response to a changing media landscape means that the Corporation continues to occupy the cultural territory of the middlebrow.

Conclusion

This chapter’s discussion of adaptations of the Brontës’ novel and neo-Victorian fiction has sought to demonstrate the continued usefulness of the concept of the middlebrow for the contemporary period. Critical discussions of adaptations and neo-Victorianism often remain conscious of and continue to respond to the modernists’ preoccupation with innovation and discomfort with reproducing the past. In many cases, an anxiety exists that contemporary re-engagements with the past are not only aesthetically but also ideologically conservative. Higson, for example, understands “heritage” films as exemplifying wider trends in Thatcherite Britain. He argues that by “turning their backs on the industrialized, chaotic present, [these films] nostalgically reconstruct an imperialist and upper-class Britain”.²⁶¹ In his analysis, these adaptations construct a national past and reduce history into a “spectacle”

²⁶⁰ Kleinecke-Bates, *The Victorians on Screen*, 58.

²⁶¹ Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past”, 110.

that is “‘purged of political tension’ and so available for consumption as visual display”.²⁶² Similar concerns pervade Gutleben’s analysis of neo-Victorian fiction. He contends that the genre’s efforts to recover “ex-centric” figures might appear politically progressive but ultimately reflects prevailing notions of political correctness.²⁶³ In Gutleben’s view, “these politically correct perspectives, far from being subversive or innovative, become predictable, not to say redundant.”²⁶⁴ For Gutleben, the political correctness of neo-Victorian novels “seems to hinder the inclusion of a serious political dimension” and amounts to a “fashionable attitude, not an ideological battle.”²⁶⁵

In general, accusations of political emptiness or conservatism are often directed at middlebrow culture. According to Bourdieu, middlebrow culture engages wider audiences than highbrow culture but remains subject to the “self-censorship engendered by the vast industrial and bureaucratic organizations of industrial production”.²⁶⁶ As Warren Bareiss points out, these conditions mean that the middlebrow artist “is skilled at reaching a vast public, but careful not to rock the boat with controversial content.”²⁶⁷ He proposes that

middlebrow culture is a dynamic force that absorbs, tames and popularises material in ways that work within familiar codes and, therefore, domesticates possibly resistant highbrow and lowbrow culture for consumption by the masses in between.²⁶⁸

Other commentators argue that middlebrow literature and culture work to construct conservative ideologies and identities. Light, for example, claims that interwar women’s writing forges a “conservative modernity” that was a “deferral of modernity and yet it also

²⁶² Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past”, 113. Quoting Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 69.

²⁶³ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 167.

²⁶⁴ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 169.

²⁶⁵ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 169-70.

²⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods”, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randall Johnson, trans. R. Swyer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 126.

²⁶⁷ Warren Bareiss, “Middlebrow Knowingness in 1950s San Francisco: The Kingston Trio, Beat Counterculture, and the Production of ‘Authenticity’”, *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 1 (2010): 11.

²⁶⁸ Bareiss, “Middlebrow Knowingness”, 11.

demanded a different sort of conservatism from what had gone before.”²⁶⁹ Her discussion of the period’s changing femininities leads her to advocate a “reconsideration” of “what has been and continues to be conservative within feminism”.²⁷⁰ In the next chapter, I will be considering the feminism of several neo-Victorian novels in relation to their conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination. Many of these works draw upon the feminist literary discourse surrounding CB’s life and novels. I am interested in exploring the extent to which these middlebrow novels’ engagement with feminism is ideologically conservative.

The potential for conservatism derives from the middlebrow’s attachment to the past and—in some cases—the status quo. We can see this quality in *The Brontë Project*’s reverence for canonical literature, creative genius and liberal humanist values. *The Brontë Project*, furthermore, self-consciously typifies how the middlebrow maintains a separate sense of identity through its engagement with the “highbrow” and the “lowbrow”. Vandever’s novel construes academia and the film industry as equally incapable and unwilling to comprehend CB or her sisters’ creative genius. On the one hand, academia no longer wants to celebrate or recognise CB or her literary achievements. On the other, Hollywood merely wants to reconfigure the author’s life and art into hackneyed love stories that degrade the value of her work. Rebelling against both, *The Brontë Project* reaffirms the value of a “romantic ideology of the self” so that “its version of humanism is secured by the transcendence of the literary imagination which becomes at once a property of the self and the work of art.”²⁷¹ An emblematic work in many ways, *The Brontë Project* exemplifies how middlebrow culture remains fixated on and—in some cases—positions itself as uniquely able to appreciate creative genius. I will explore this proposition further in the next chapter.

²⁶⁹ Light, *Forever England*, 10.

²⁷⁰ Light, *Forever England*, 14.

²⁷¹ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 50.

Chapter 2

Readerly Pleasure and the Feminine Creative Imagination:

Neo-Victorian Representations of Charlotte Brontë

One of the most mythologised events in CB's life occurred during 1846. Famously, CB began to write *Jane Eyre* in Manchester as she cared for her father whilst he recuperated from an eye operation. As part of his treatment, he and his daughter's lodgings had to have "utter privation of light" and these legendary conditions inspired Sheila Kohler's neo-Victorian biofictional work *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009).¹ An early scene in Kohler's novel depicts a fictionalised Charlotte as she begins "writing rapidly, seeing it all vividly, the shadowy picture emerging fast from the darkness of her mind" and she invents "with a kind of urgency she has never known before".² Reconstructing the moment of *Jane Eyre*'s conception, Kohler's novel emphasises the lack of light to represent the writer's creative imagination as a source of illumination and pleasure in her outwardly uneventful life. The imagery, moreover, calls attention to the internalised nature of her genius in accordance with Romantic theories of creativity. This neo-Victorian account of CB's life exemplifies an ongoing desire in contemporary middlebrow culture to portray, reflect upon and even venerate the Brontës for their feminine creative imaginations.

This chapter will examine the significance of CB's life and literary works for neo-Victorian conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination. The inquiry begins with a consideration of Kohler's biofictional novel *Becoming Jane Eyre* before exploring the depictions of feminine creativity in Justine Picardie's *Daphne* (2008)³ and D.M. Thomas's

¹ Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, rev. ed. (London: Virago, 2008), 167.

² Sheila Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre* (London: Corsair, 2011), 23.

³ Justine Picardie, *Daphne* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

Charlotte (2000).⁴ Though all three consider CB's creative imagination, the novels differ in their interpretation of her genius and her effect upon subsequent women and feminine writers. By examining these works in conjunction, I aim to explore the diverse ways in which neo-Victorian fiction conceptualises CB's creative imagination and the feminine creative imagination more generally.

Concurrently, further light will be shed on the way that contemporary middlebrow culture conceptualises the feminine creative imagination by drawing from the work of second-wave feminist literary scholars. As Imelda Whelehan observes, this "period of emergent feminist criticism has been crucial to the development of academic feminism" and led many second-wave feminist theorists to return "to one textual site much visited later by the neo-Victorian novelist—that of *Jane Eyre*."⁵ Significant examples of feminist scholarship that engaged with *Jane Eyre* include Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (1972);⁶ Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976);⁷ Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977)⁸ and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).⁹

I am particularly interested in Gilbert and Gubar's influence upon neo-Victorian fiction for several reasons. First and foremost, *The Madwoman in the Attic* advanced a landmark reading of *Jane Eyre* that underpinned their influential theoretical paradigm for the feminine creative

⁴ D.M. Thomas, *Charlotte* (London: Duckbacks, 2001).

⁵ Imelda Whelehan, "The New Angels in the House? Feminists as New Victorians", *Literature Interpretation Theory* 20, no. 1-2 (2009): 73.

⁶ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976).

⁷ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1978).

⁸ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, exp. ed. (London: Virago, 2009).

⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000).

imagination. Additionally, Gilbert and Gubar's scholarship has attained an unusual degree of renown outside the academy. In 1979 and 1980, respectively, they were finalists for a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. When the National Book Critics Circle awarded them a lifetime achievement award in 2013, *The Washington Post* reported their win and referred to Gilbert and Gubar as "giants of the feminist movement".¹⁰ This accolade lends support to Marlene Tromp's contention that *The Madwoman in the Attic* contributed to "widespread feminist debate about practice and content in both the academy and popular culture" and its authors' collaboration "elegantly embodied many of the central second-wave feminist concerns of the day, and became, in this way, a clarion call for the feminist revolution."¹¹ As Whelehan points out, this work of scholarship "has had a reach far beyond literary criticism".¹² In light of Gilbert and Gubar's fame, this chapter also explores the impact of their work upon neo-Victorian fiction for insight into the ways in which middlebrow culture engages with the legacies of second-wave feminism.

One of *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s overarching aims was to challenge and illustrate the effects of the "overwhelmingly and essentially male" Western literary canon upon women writers.¹³ As Susan Fraiman observes, Gilbert and Gubar "joined other American feminists in denaturizing the canon—historicizing its formation, questioning its terms of inclusion, and

¹⁰ Ron Charles, "Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar Win National Book Critics Circle Lifetime Achievement Award", *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2013, accessed June 20, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/sandra-gilbert-susan-gubar-win-national-book-critics-circle-lifetime-achievement-award/2013/01/14/73ef9fa8-5e80-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fecf_story.html.

¹¹ Marlene Tromp, "Modelling the *Madwoman*: Feminist Movements and the Academy", in *Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, ed. Annette R. Federico (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 37.

¹² Whelehan, "The New Angels in the House?", 73.

¹³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 48.

starting a process that would quickly encourage a broader study of cultural forms.”¹⁴

According to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, women writers

participate in a quite different literary subculture from that inhabited by male writers, a subculture which has its own literary traditions, even—though it defines itself *in relation to* the ‘main’, male-dominated, literary culture—a distinctive history.¹⁵

In their view, this literary tradition has a “distinctly feminine” aesthetic that conveyed “submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the more accessible, ‘public’ content of their works”.¹⁶ Similarly to Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter proposes that women constitute a “subculture” that has been “unified by values, conventions, experiences, behaviours”.¹⁷ As these examples illustrate, several prominent second-wave critics’ efforts to recover a tradition of women’s writing also led them to identify women writers as forging a unique feminine literary aesthetic. In many cases, these studies insist that individual women writers belong to a larger collective group and demonstrate a broader awareness of women’s position within a patriarchal culture.

A few years later, Showalter would categorise Gilbert and Gubar as amongst a growing number of feminist critics involved in the “study of women *as writers*” whose subjects included “the history, styles, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition.”¹⁸ Showalter entitled this mode of critical enquiry “gynocritics” which, she argued, recognised the “distinct” nature of and the “*difference*” of women’s writing.¹⁹ As early gynocritics, Gilbert and Gubar conceptualised a

¹⁴ Susan Fraiman, “After Gilbert and Gubar: Madwomen Inspired by *Madwoman*”, in *Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, ed. Annette R. Federico (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 28.

¹⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 50.

¹⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 72.

¹⁷ Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 9.

¹⁸ Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, *Critical Enquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 184-5.

¹⁹ Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, 185.

paradigm of feminine creativity that enabled them to situate nineteenth-century inspirational women writers—including the Brontës—as forerunners of the second-wave feminist movement.

In this respect, Gilbert and Gubar were participating in a much greater recovery project that was crucial for the second wave to define and establish itself. Of course, generations of aspiring women writers had turned to CB as an inspiration since the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. As Linda Peterson points out, Gaskell's account of CB's life portrayed an accessible and achievable trajectory for middle-class women hoping to have a literary career.²⁰ Yet CB's inspiring effect upon other women took on new meaning in the wake of second-wave feminism's sense of collective belonging and interest in its own past. Astrid Henry observes that by identifying "their historical roots [in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries], the feminists of the late 1960s created a generational structure between the two eras of feminism, classifying them as two moments in the same movement".²¹ We can see how the movement's ideals affected *The Madwoman in the Attic* in which Gilbert and Gubar also undertook a search for origins. As they stated, they hoped to rectify the fact that as "the daughter of too few mothers, today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging."²² For this generation of critics, conceptualising the feminine creative imagination was inextricable from the process of constructing alternative canons and both of these actions served important practical, political and theoretical purposes for the wider women's movement.

²⁰ Gaskell's biography of CB "locates the origins of literary genius in an ordinary parsonage in an isolated Yorkshire village; it shows its subject as an avid reader and scribbling adolescent who, with her sisters, writes romantic tales and secretly publishes a book of poems, even as she labors as a school-teacher; and it traces a meteoric rise to fame". Linda Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 149.

²¹ Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 53.

²² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 50.

I have chosen to examine second-wave feminism and middlebrow neo-Victorian fiction in conjunction due to the fact that both often contemplate the canonical status of the Brontës and their literary achievements. As I discussed in the last chapter, *The Brontë Project* indicates that much neo-Victorian fiction exhibits the characteristically middlebrow preoccupation with or awareness of cultural hierarchies. In a similar manner, *Daphne*, *Charlotte* and *Becoming Jane Eyre* consider CB and the feminine creative imagination whilst pondering many of the same questions as Gilbert and Gubar. Are women excluded from the literary canon? Did women's status as a culturally marginalised group lead them to construct an alternative literary tradition? Does this literary tradition allow for the development of a distinct feminine aesthetic? In addition to analysing how neo-Victorian novels engage with these issues, I want to examine these novels in relation to the trenchant objections directed at Gilbert and Gubar's feminism, intervention into the canon and their conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination.

I will begin by examining the different ways in which the historical CB's creative imagination has been feminised by considering her fictionalisation in *Becoming Jane Eyre*. The first section of this chapter explores how Kohler's novel engages with and endorses *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s interpretation of *Jane Eyre*. One of Gilbert and Gubar's core aims was to delineate a feminine literary tradition, and this chapter's second section focuses upon how Picardie's *Daphne* equally undertakes to recover a lost feminine literary lineage. The analysis of *Daphne*'s allusions to the Brontës will serve to situate these neo-Victorian fictions within a tradition of feminine middlebrow writing. In contrast to *Daphne* and *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Thomas's *Charlotte* conceptualises the feminine creative imagination for the purpose of denigrating CB's literary achievements. In its interpretation of CB's life and art, *Charlotte*

expresses considerable hostility towards second-wave feminist scholarship upon *Jane Eyre* as well as feminism more generally.

In contradistinction to *Charlotte*, the biofictional *Becoming Jane Eyre* champions the analyses and motivations of second-wave literary gynocritics to offer a celebratory depiction of CB. *Becoming Jane Eyre* is an example of neo-Victorian “celebrity biofiction”, a mode of lifewriting that, as Marie-Luise Kohlke argues, “speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets, and artists that may have been left out of surviving records”.²³ In the next section, I discuss the attempts in Kohler’s novel to delve into the recesses of CB’s mind to illuminate the mysterious workings of her feminine creative imagination.

Becoming Jane Eyre: Neo-Victorian Fiction and Second-Wave Feminism

The “spark” that motivated Kohler to write *Becoming Jane Eyre* came from the description of *Jane Eyre*’s genesis in Lyndall Gordon’s biography *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (1994).²⁴ In her account, Gordon posits that “[w]hat happened as [CB] sat with Papa in that darkened room in Boundary Street remains in shadow. All we know is the fact that she sat in darkness and silence, and from that darkness and silence there poured a voice” that would eventually relate the “revelation of a woman’s life.”²⁵ Borrowing Gordon’s imagery, *Becoming Jane Eyre* contrasts the darkness of Charlotte’s exterior with her inner light to characterise the writer as a Romantic genius. Yet she does not receive the inspiration for *Jane Eyre* wholly spontaneously. Charlotte’s imaginative breakthrough only occurs after she comes

²³ Marie-Luise Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special/Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus*”, *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 7.

²⁴ Kohler, acknowledgments to *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 226.

²⁵ Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 167.

to understand several publishers' rejection of her first novel, *The Professor* (1857).²⁶ Initially puzzled, she realises that her choice of a male narrator means that *The Professor* is fundamentally flawed. On the basis of this insight, she resolves that she will no longer "hide behind the persona of a man" and her words suddenly come—to quote John Keats—"as naturally as the Leaves to a tree".²⁷

As this representation of Charlotte's creative enlightenment reveals, *Becoming Jane Eyre* interprets the historical author as needing to align herself with and express a feminine view of her world before she could realise the full potential of her imaginative genius. This section will examine the different ways in which *Becoming Jane Eyre* suggests that Charlotte's creative imagination was bound up with her femininity. As mentioned, Kohler was inspired by Gordon's biography but she also draws upon second-wave literary gynocriticism, particularly *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Because of this influence, *Becoming Jane Eyre* replicates some of the more troubling aspects of Gilbert and Gubar's conceptualisation of feminine creativity. Despite being lauded as a ground-breaking feminist work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* has also come to be "reflexively repudiated as retrograde, biologically reductive, and exclusionary".²⁸ At the end of this section, therefore, I want to explore whether similar criticisms could be directed at Kohler's novel.

In its conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination, *Becoming Jane Eyre* reiterates *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s central conviction that women writers' works reflect their awareness of living in a patriarchal society. In their study, Gilbert and Gubar identify various

²⁶ The work was eventually published after her death.

²⁷ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 22. John Keats, letter to John Taylor, February 27, 1818, in *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 70.

²⁸ Annette R. Federico, "'Bursting all the Doors': *The Madwoman in the Attic* After Thirty Years", in *Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, ed. Annette R. Federico (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 9.

motifs—such as “[d]ramatizations of imprisonment and escape”—that they claim women writers deploy to explore the experience of patriarchal confinement.²⁹ One of Gilbert and Gubar’s chief examples is CB, who they argue portrayed female protagonists in situations analogous to her own as “trapped—even buried—in the architecture of a patriarchal society, and imagining, dreaming, or actually devising escape routes”.³⁰ Appropriating *The Madwoman in the Attic*’s imagery, *Becoming Jane Eyre* suggests that Charlotte’s creative imagination arose from and allowed her to evade patriarchal incarceration. As she begins *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte suffers from a literal and metaphorical patriarchal confinement in her role as a dutiful daughter. In these scenes, Charlotte nurses her father, Patrick, sitting “as though tied to her post” in their lodgings.³¹ As a means of alleviating her boredom, Charlotte amuses herself through “moments of escape into the world of the imagination” that she records in her notebook.³² In *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *The Madwoman in the Attic* alike, the feminine creative imagination appears shaped by masculine domination but is also a means by which the woman writer can escape from gendered oppression.

To emphasise the femininity of Charlotte’s creative imagination and give her malaise a greater resonance, this scene alludes to one of the most famous passages in *Jane Eyre*. In this incident, Jane recounts retreating to the third storey of Thornfield where she complains of the monotony and solitude of women’s lives. As a way of lessening her tedium, she muses upon the tales her “imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual experience.”³³ According to Heather Glen, Jane articulates an imaginative “restlessness” that looks back to “an era of high

²⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 85.

³⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 313.

³¹ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 9.

³² Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 7.

³³ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 93.

romanticism epitomized by the enormously popular writings of Byron and Scott.”³⁴ As Glen notes, Jane claims feelings primarily associated with men but her “voice is not, like Byron’s, arrogantly singular and self-dramatizing.”³⁵ Instead, she exhibits a wider feminist consciousness when she protests that:

It is in vain to say that human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they can find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions beside political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do[.]³⁶

In this passage, Jane utters what many commentators have identified as her most outspoken feminist statement in which she not only describes her personal frustration but also speaks for the “millions” of women in a similar position. Spacks, for instance, interprets this speech as Jane revealing that a “façade of womanly calm conceals the reality of womanly rage—directed at all who limit female opportunity.”³⁷ Jane’s complaint signals the larger significance of her individual circumstances to function as a broader critique of the enforced boredom and under-stimulation experienced by many women of her period. Referencing this passage from *Jane Eyre* enables Kohler’s novel to position Charlotte’s writing as elucidating the unspoken dimensions of Victorian women’s experience.

But before Kohler’s Charlotte can write about specifically feminine experiences from a feminine perspective, she must achieve artistic maturity by transcending masculine literary influence. In this respect, *Becoming Jane Eyre* borrows the suggestion put forth in Gordon’s biography that CB had to reject or surpass her male mentors to develop her unique voice as a

³⁴ Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 102.

³⁵ Glen, *Charlotte Brontë*, 104.

³⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 93.

³⁷ Spacks, *The Female Imagination*, 64.

writer.³⁸ Likewise, *Becoming Jane Eyre* portrays its heroine as needing to overcome her enthrallment with her brother Branwell and the Belgian headmaster Constantin Héger. In a key scene, Charlotte decides that she will no longer pen “pathetic, begging letters” to Héger and recalls her once-symbiotic creative partnership with her brother before pondering “[w]as that but practice for this moment?”³⁹ At this point, she resolves to write about her own and other women’s uniquely feminine existence in a moment that construes her writing as deploying a feminine aesthetic. This insistence on the femininity of Charlotte’s worldview signals *Becoming Jane Eyre*’s indebtedness to second-wave feminist gynocriticism.

Like many of these critics, *Becoming Jane Eyre* portrays Charlotte’s feminine aesthetic as partly emerging from her rage at patriarchal oppression. As Cora Kaplan observes, “anger becomes the ground of a radical new aesthetic. In retrospect we can see feminist criticism in this period developing a feminist aesthetics of anger”.⁴⁰ *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for example, perceives a “raging desire to escape male houses and male texts” in nineteenth-century women’s writing.⁴¹ In a similar manner, *Becoming Jane Eyre* portrays Charlotte’s feminine rage at patriarchal oppression as a driving force behind her creative output. When Charlotte invents the Lowood sections of *Jane Eyre*, she writes to avenge the mistreatment of herself and her sisters at Cowan Bridge School.⁴² Such a depiction of Charlotte’s writing process suggests that her femininity, anger and creative imagination are inseparable. *Becoming Jane Eyre* also references what *The Madwoman in the Attic* identified as a crucial symbol of nineteenth-century feminine writings’ angry aesthetic: the madwoman. For Gilbert and Gubar, the figure emblematises “the costly destructiveness” of women writers’ anger

³⁸ Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 41-7, 135.

³⁹ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 60.

⁴⁰ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 24.

⁴¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 85.

⁴² Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 74.

being “repressed until it can no longer be contained.”⁴³ One of their key examples was *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha Mason, the inspiration for the title of their study. In their view, Jane’s “confrontation, not with Rochester but with Rochester’s mad wife Bertha, is the book’s central confrontation” and this interpretation of Bertha directly influences *Becoming Jane Eyre*.⁴⁴ Consequently, Kohler’s novel portrays its central confrontation as occurring when Charlotte meets her father’s working-class nurse in an incident that portrays the nurse as the model for Bertha.

The two women’s relationship enables *Becoming Jane Eyre* to construct Charlotte’s creative imagination as anticipating the wider feminist consciousness of the second wave. Before their encounter, the nurse awakens, masturbates and then descends to the kitchen where she gnaws “ravenously” at a lamb bone.⁴⁵ The nurse’s behaviour implies her bestiality and resemblance to Bertha, who is likened to a “strange wild animal” in *Jane Eyre*.⁴⁶ Coming into the room, Charlotte interrupts the nurse with the result that the two women end up drinking porter companionably. The next morning, Charlotte vows that her writing will “reach other women, large numbers of them. She would like to entertain, to startle, to give voice to what they hold in secret in their hearts, to allow them to feel they are part of a larger community of sufferers.”⁴⁷ The meeting with the nurse is a creative turning point for Charlotte, encouraging her to formulate a new artistic agenda inspired by (and anticipating) the realisation articulated in *Jane Eyre* that “millions” of women are in “silent revolt” against their feminine stultification.⁴⁸ Her desire to “reach” other women construes Charlotte as wanting to raise women’s consciousness of their shared connections and solidarity in a similar way to the

⁴³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 85.

⁴⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 339.

⁴⁵ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 57.

⁴⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 250.

⁴⁷ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 60-1.

⁴⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 93.

second wave of the women's movement.⁴⁹ These ideals underpinned *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s argument that women writers developed a feminine literary tradition to communicate with other women about the experience of patriarchal oppression. Echoing this train of thought, *Becoming Jane Eyre* interprets the writer's creative imagination as not just feminine but also feminist.

To emphasise Charlotte's feminism, Kohler's novel portrays the dynamic between Charlotte and the nurse as analogous to *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s interpretation of Bertha and Jane's relationship. In their reading of CB's novel, Gilbert and Gubar claim that Bertha operates as Jane's "dark double" who enacts Jane's sensations of "hunger, rebellion and rage".⁵⁰ Likewise in *Becoming Jane Eyre*, the nurse represents Charlotte's "ferocious secret self" and acts upon the feelings that Charlotte suppresses.⁵¹ Initially, the women appear to be opposites, with the nurse embodying base physical instincts and Charlotte exemplifying cerebral intellect. Yet the nurse acknowledges and expresses the same physical appetites that cause a "flash of greed" in Charlotte's eye when she sees the lamb bone.⁵² Meeting the nurse enables Charlotte to indulge her repressed appetites by sharing a glass of porter with the other woman in an act that signifies their recognition of their similarities.

Such realisations allow Charlotte to develop a new creative purpose that indicates how *Becoming Jane Eyre* reiterates one of Gilbert and Gubar's most significant arguments. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar postulate that the nineteenth-century woman writer was trapped in patriarchal texts that "enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict

⁴⁹ Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second-Wave to "Post-Feminism"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 13.

⁵⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 359-60.

⁵¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 360.

⁵² Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 58.

with her own sense of her self—that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity.”⁵³ Gilbert and Gubar further theorise that for a woman writer to create, she “must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her.”⁵⁴ According to Gilbert and Gubar, women writers achieve this task by employing female doubles in their narratives to deconstruct crude patriarchal stereotypes and explore the fragmented feminine subjectivities that such stereotypes create. Influenced by Gilbert and Gubar, *Becoming Jane Eyre* suggests that Charlotte’s meeting with the nurse is crucial to the writer’s creative development. At first, Charlotte perceives the nurse as monstrous before understanding that the other woman personifies the aspects within herself that she been taught to subdue. As her creative vow the next morning demonstrates, the experience has prompted her to see beyond the reductive feminine stereotypes prevalent in her culture. Recognising women’s shared burden of patriarchal oppression, Charlotte decides her writing will “show them all what a woman feels: the boredom of a life confined to tedious domestic tasks.”⁵⁵

As such, *Becoming Jane Eyre* resonates with the second wave of the women’s movement’s efforts to nurture a sense of collective sisterhood amongst all women. According to Henry, in “its best intentions, the feminist argument that all women are sisters in a common struggle was an attempt to look beyond race and class divisions towards a definition of sisterhood that included all women.”⁵⁶ Driven by the movement’s ideals, second-wave literary critics offered analyses of texts that placed much emphasis on women’s capacity to support and comfort each other against their common oppression. Showalter, for example, states that “women novelists’ awareness of each other and of their female audience showed a kind of covert

⁵³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 48.

⁵⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 17.

⁵⁵ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 61.

⁵⁶ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 81.

solidarity that sometimes amounted to a genteel conspiracy.”⁵⁷ Analogous thinking underlies Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that the nineteenth-century and contemporary woman writer alike seek feminine literary precursors to overcome a gendered “anxiety of authorship” deriving from living in a patriarchal society and which “forms one of the unique bonds that link women in what we might call the secret sisterhood of their literary culture”.⁵⁸ As their statements demonstrate, Gilbert and Gubar construct the feminine creative imagination as evidence of solidarity amongst women writers.

Inspired by Gilbert and Gubar, *Becoming Jane Eyre* conceptualises CB’s feminine creative imagination as nurturing other women and represents women actively assisting each other in their literary endeavours. In one scene, we learn that the sisters gather in the kitchen at night to work on their novels and encourage each other as their oblivious father sleeps and their brother stays out drinking. According to their housekeeper Tabitha, the “three girls often disagree and sometimes dispute, but they are never unkind or petty in their comments”.⁵⁹ The episode, furthermore, implies that Charlotte modelled the supportive feminine relationship within her fiction upon various women in her life. As Charlotte struggles to develop *Jane Eyre*’s plot after Jane’s escape from Thornfield, she overcomes her writer’s block when she looks up to see her sisters and Tabitha sitting before her.⁶⁰ The moment intimates that these women were the basis of the next part of *Jane Eyre* when the heroine receives succour from the characters of Mary, Diana and Hannah. Portrayed in this way, the sisters exemplify the model of the secret female literary collective that Gilbert and Gubar theorised.

⁵⁷ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 13.

⁵⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 50.

⁵⁹ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 106.

⁶⁰ Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre*, 101-3.

Becoming Jane Eyre's extensive engagement with Gilbert and Gubar means that we have to examine whether the criticisms directed at *The Madwoman in the Attic* also apply to Kohler's novel. One significant objection to *The Madwoman in the Attic* is that Gilbert and Gubar advocate a universalising and essentialist paradigm of feminine creativity. Their attempts to elucidate feminine creativity using metaphors based upon female anatomy are particularly contentious. From an analysis of womb-like spaces in women's writing, Gilbert and Gubar extrapolate an all-encompassing parable of "the woman artist who enters the caverns of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition which might have generated that power."⁶¹ As their account clarifies, Gilbert and Gubar eschew the specific for the general to erase the uniqueness of individual women's literary inspiration. Even more dubiously, they focus upon male and female biological differences to diminish the importance of social or cultural factors. In many respects, their paradigm reiterates patriarchal Western culture's persistent conflation of femininity with the corporeal.⁶² For Janet Gezari, Gilbert and Gubar's "tyrannical" metanarrative represents a "reinscription of familiar stereotypes about women writers."⁶³ In contrast to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Becoming Jane Eyre* focuses on Charlotte's creative imagination and does not imply that the narrative of her creative development applies to all female authors. Additionally, Kohler's biofictional account does not use biological metaphors or explanations to emphasise Charlotte's sex but instead foregrounds the femininity of her perspective and subjectivity. As such, the novel avoids reiterating Gilbert and Gubar's "narrative of a mighty 'Ur-woman'."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 98.

⁶² As Jane Gallop describes, "female genitals" have often been "a realm normally considered to be at the antipodes of culture". Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 95.

⁶³ Janet Gezari, "Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*", *Essays in Criticism* 56, no. 3 (2006): 277.

⁶⁴ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 66.

Yet *Becoming Jane Eyre* fails to interrogate the other assumptions that underlie *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s interpretation of Bertha and Jane's relationship. As discussed earlier in this section, *The Madwoman in the Attic* posits that a sense of female kinship exists between the two women. Closer inspection of the text, however, reveals that the heroine of *Jane Eyre* never identifies or even sympathises with Bertha, but rather dehumanises the other woman by comparing her to an animal and a "beast".⁶⁵ That Jane asserts her difference from and denies Bertha's personhood is never acknowledged by Gilbert and Gubar. From Carl Plasa's perspective, Gilbert and Gubar overlook that *Jane Eyre* "articulates one story at the expense of another, with Jane's narrative driving Bertha's into silence."⁶⁶ For this reason, they ignore Bertha's "status as an autonomous subject" and reduce her character into "the metaphorical expression of Jane's own unconscious desires and discontents."⁶⁷

As their interpretation of Bertha indicates, Gilbert and Gubar fail to recognise the "disturbing discourse of race and empire [in *Jane Eyre*] that would concern critics only a few years later."⁶⁸ In Plasa's view, Gilbert and Gubar "might be said to collude with the text itself and its own historical evasions" due to the way that "the racial and cultural differences [that Bertha] embodies are effectively erased, together with their ambiguities" in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.⁶⁹ As Fraiman notes, "it would take additional readings of *Jane Eyre*—of which there have now been many—to bring out the meanings of race, nation, and class as they interact with gender in Brontë's novel."⁷⁰ Such critiques of Gilbert and Gubar correspond with other criticisms of second-wave feminism more generally. These criticisms will be further discussed in relation to Thomas's novel *Charlotte*, which foregrounds that the

⁶⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 250.

⁶⁶ Carl Plasa, *Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), xvi.

⁶⁷ Plasa, *Charlotte Brontë*, 80.

⁶⁸ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 24.

⁶⁹ Plasa, *Charlotte Brontë*, 80-1.

⁷⁰ Fraiman, "After Gilbert and Gubar", 31.

movement's attempts "to look beyond class and race divisions" tended not to be "accompanied by careful analysis of the differences between women, whether of class, race or sexuality."⁷¹

Such critiques of second-wave feminism have had limited effect upon *Becoming Jane Eyre*, which turns away from the question of CB's attitudes to race and, in turn, appears troublingly oblivious about class differences between women. We can see this obliviousness in *Becoming Jane Eyre*'s depiction of Charlotte and the nurse's relationship. Though most obviously based on Bertha, the nurse's profession simultaneously aligns her with Bertha's keeper, Grace Poole, and this composite character raises a number of dubious implications. Extending Gilbert and Gubar's argument that Jane identifies with Bertha, Kohler's novel gives the impression that Charlotte and Jane had similar feelings towards, respectively, the working-class nurse and Grace. By combining Grace and Bertha into the nurse character, *Becoming Jane Eyre* develops *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s analysis to portray Charlotte as constructing a feminist aesthetic that consciously transcends class difference. But in CB's novel, the two women rarely meet and Jane remains conscious of and anxious to maintain their dissimilarity. In their most lengthy conversation, Jane foregrounds Grace's working-class status by noting that Grace wears a "brown stuff gown" and is helping the other servants to repair the damage after Rochester's bed has been set on fire.⁷² As Jane inspects the other women, she ponders whether Grace and Rochester may have had a sexual relationship.⁷³ Rejecting the possibility on the basis that Grace "disgusted me. I compared myself with her, and found we were different", Jane never revises this opinion.⁷⁴ Rather, Jane uses the incident

⁷¹ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, 81.

⁷² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 130.

⁷³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 133.

⁷⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 133.

to confirm her own sense of gentility. Though seemingly an “ex-centric” figure, the nurse is the result of rather careless readings of *Jane Eyre* and *The Madwoman in the Attic* alike.

Like *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Becoming Jane Eyre* presupposes that Jane and CB were sympathetic to the plight of all women. Through an elision of the author and fictional character, *Becoming Jane Eyre* perpetuates CB’s feminist reputation but—like Gilbert and Gubar—avoids examining the attitudes towards race and class found in *Jane Eyre*. As a result, Kohler’s novel falls victim to a common issue in neo-Victorian celebrity biofictions. According to Kohlke, these fictions often feature “ex-centric” characters—such as the nurse—but are

not wholly—or even primarily—interested in the ex-centric figures themselves apart from the celebrities they serve to throw into relief. To some extent, our absorption in their life stories stems from the alternative, privileged, or skewed insights and revelations their narratives provide into the (more) noteworthy personalities.⁷⁵

Ultimately, the noteworthy personality in *Becoming Jane Eyre* is Charlotte. In the same way that Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of *Jane Eyre* has “the effect of reducing Bertha to little more than a facet of Jane’s mind”, *Becoming Jane Eyre*’s reading of *The Madwoman in the Attic* reduces the working-class woman into little more than a source for Charlotte’s creative genius.⁷⁶

The character of the nurse also exposes that *Becoming Jane Eyre* relies upon the reductive and “lazy” premise that CB’s art and life are mutually illuminating.⁷⁷ Ultimately, Kohler’s work and *The Madwoman in the Attic* remain mired in the Romantic conviction that Charlotte’s literary work constitutes an expression of herself. The chapter will return to

⁷⁵ Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Biofiction”, 11.

⁷⁶ Fraiman, “After Gilbert and Gubar”, 31.

⁷⁷ Patsy Stoneman, “Sex, Crimes and Secrets: Invention and Imbroglia in Recent Brontë Biographical Fiction”, *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 4 (2014): 343.

consider the charge that *The Madwoman in the Attic* is inadequately aware of the distinctions between CB's life and her literary works in relation to *Charlotte*. The issue of the class differences, however, arises in the next section's consideration of *Daphne*. Of all the neo-Victorian novels examined in this chapter, *Daphne* engages least explicitly with second-wave feminism or its literary criticism. Yet like *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Picardie's text remains concerned with the need to reconstruct a lost feminine literary tradition. Such a concern leads Picardie's novel to ponder the academy's power to confer cultural legitimacy on specific works. As in *The Brontë Project*, academia functions as the highbrow "other" that enables this neo-Victorian novel to demarcate and defend its middling cultural position.

Daphne: The Gendered Middlebrow and Creative Feminine Readers

Daphne not only exemplifies middlebrow culture's tendency to dispute and also position itself in relation to "high" culture, but also sustains this tension through two parallel plots set in different temporal periods. In its chronologically earlier sections, *Daphne* is another celebrity biofiction that was inspired by Picardie's research into the relationship between the middlebrow writer Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989) and the librarian J.A. Symington (1887-1964).⁷⁸ Told in the third person, these parts of the novel span the years between 1957 and 1960 and give a fictionalised account of the historical du Maurier's efforts to research and write *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* (1960), a biography calculated to restore the reputation of the Brontë brother.⁷⁹ Like the actual du Maurier, Picardie's Daphne approaches a character inspired by Symington from whom she procures several original Brontë manuscripts for her research on Branwell. In *Daphne*'s contemporary sections, the narrator

⁷⁸ Yvette Huddleston, "Between the Lines", *The Yorkshire Post*, November 26, 2008, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/main-topics/local-stories/between-the-lines-1-2326635>.

For further discussion of du Maurier's middlebrow cultural position, see Ina Haberman, *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestley, du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁷⁹ To distinguish between the historical writer and Picardie's fictionalised depiction of her, I will refer to the former as du Maurier and the latter as Daphne throughout this chapter.

Jane relates her search for the correspondence between Symington and du Maurier as background research for her PhD thesis about the Brontës. She is, however, connected to du Maurier in more intimate ways. Jane is married to Paul, an elitist academic whose cultural prejudices mean that he can accept his wife's research on the canonical Brontës but openly disdains her passion for du Maurier.

These two plots operate in tandem, establishing how generations of (usually female) readers forge links with each other through the Brontës. To this end, *Daphne*'s contemporary sections rework the themes and narrative of du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938)—itself a reimagining of *Jane Eyre*. Similarly to the narrator in *Rebecca*, *Daphne*'s Jane is younger than and socially inferior to her husband who also has an attractive and accomplished ex-wife. Throughout the narrative, Jane suffers from the knowledge that Paul's previous wife Rachel is considered "the most talented poet of her generation, as brilliant as she is beautiful, and an esteemed academic".⁸⁰ As part of its extended allusion to du Maurier's novel, *Daphne* deploys *Rebecca*'s famous strategy of leaving its narrator unnamed until the closing pages. At this juncture, *Daphne*'s narrator reveals that she is called Jane and, therefore, shares her name with *Jane Eyre*'s heroine and EB, whose middle name was Jane.⁸¹ This connection between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* is one of the many literary references that Picardie uses to emphasise how the Brontë family inspired the historical du Maurier throughout her writing career. Discerning these literary links becomes Jane's obsession and leads her to discover a mutual sympathy with Rachel. Like *Becoming Jane Eyre*, *Daphne* emphasises that the Brontës' works enable women to recognise their commonalities and build a sense of collective feminine identity.

⁸⁰ Picardie, *Daphne*, 80.

⁸¹ Picardie, *Daphne*, 381.

Daphne outlines these feminine connections whilst suggesting that the cultural establishment consistently ignores these significant literary links. Aware of her own cultural status, Daphne relates in a letter to Symington that she is “generally dismissed with a sneer as a best-seller, and either reviewed badly or not at all.”⁸² Throughout the novel, Daphne feels sympathy for Branwell as a writer also overlooked by literary scholars and critics. Her crusade to prove Branwell’s talent anticipates Jane’s fantasy about rescuing “Daphne from the misunderstandings of insensitive critics that had obscured her true worth”.⁸³ As mentioned, Jane secretly hopes that her PhD—despite being ostensibly about the Brontës—will demonstrate du Maurier’s value to a sceptical academy whose attitudes towards the writer are exemplified by Paul. A university lecturer, Paul is an expert on Henry James—an author renowned for his difficult literary experimentation—and this specialisation bestows upon him the veneer of legitimate high culture. An emblem of high culture and academia, Paul rages at his wife: “Why is it that adult women have this obsession with Daphne du Maurier? I can just about understand why an immature teenage girl might be fixated on her, but surely it’s time to grow out of her?”⁸⁴ In turn, Jane accuses him of “knee-jerk intellectual snobbery”.⁸⁵ Such exchanges foreground *Daphne*’s criticism of academia for continuing to exclude du Maurier from the literary canon.

In its contemporary sections, *Daphne* represents the academy and academics as the main players in the construction of literary canons. Indicatively, one of her tutors at the University of Cambridge informs Jane that the middlebrow du Maurier “is far too minor a figure in twentieth-century publishing to deserve very much academic attention”.⁸⁶ The fact that Jane attempts to challenge du Maurier’s exclusion through writing a PhD intimates that the

⁸² Picardie, *Daphne*, 254.

⁸³ Picardie, *Daphne*, 80.

⁸⁴ Picardie, *Daphne*, 43.

⁸⁵ Picardie, *Daphne*, 43.

⁸⁶ Picardie, *Daphne*, 33.

institutions that have previously marginalised du Maurier can also rehabilitate the writer's reputation. In this respect, *Daphne* echoes the insights of theorists who maintain that an individual's judgment has no bearing upon the process of canon formation "unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the *reproduction* of that work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers."⁸⁷ For many canon theorists, the most powerful institutions have been universities, whose academics have the capacity to compile canons through various methods, including the creation and teaching of syllabi and curricula.⁸⁸ This institutional power raises a number of issues relating to the fact that myriad commentators have argued that the literary canon enshrines a dominant group's values and functions as an "expression of social and political power".⁸⁹ For example, *The Madwoman in the Attic* proposes that women's historical exclusion from the literary canon constitutes a form of patriarchal oppression. As such, universities could be said to construct canons that collude with existing power structures and inequalities.

In its depiction of academia, *Daphne* implies that the process of canon formation is inextricable from class and gender oppression through the portrayal of Jane and Paul's relationship. Though their disagreements are supposedly about aesthetic taste, they engage in more subtle conflicts driven by their class and gender inequalities. Paul belongs to the upper-middle class and his character suggests the inextricability of social privilege and cultural legitimacy. His status becomes apparent as Jane muses upon their marital home and indicates her awareness of their class differences. She recounts that they live

in his house in Hampstead, not far from the rented flat where I grew up on the other side of the high street, in Frognal. Yes, he's got a whole house, handsome

⁸⁷ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 28.

⁸⁸ For example, see Frank Kermode, "The Institutional Control of Interpretation", in *The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 168-84.

⁸⁹ Robert von Hallberg, "Introduction", in *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

redbrick Victorian, on a quiet road that leads straight to the heath; though it's not paid for out of an academic's salary, this was his father's house, and he left it to Paul in his will, ten years ago.⁹⁰

Her reflections reveal her poorer family background, whilst emphasising that Paul's parents were part of the established upper-middle class who passed on a number of advantages to their son. Indeed, their home in an expensive and bohemian London neighbourhood continues to lend prestige to Paul in spite of his comparatively modest income. At several points, *Daphne* suggests that Paul's inherited social position provides him with an undeserved cultural authority that disguises his intellectual limitations. Jane suspects that her husband might be a deficient reader but she remains unable to contradict his interpretation of literary texts. Recalling their first meeting, she relates that she perceived his research to be "obscure and convoluted" but felt unable to challenge the tenuousness of his work.⁹¹ Paul's shortcomings suggest that the academy only incorporates texts into the literary canon if these texts explore the experiences, perspectives and tastes shared by upper-middle-class men. From this angle, Paul and the academy's refusal to sanction Jane's literary preferences constitutes an act of class and gender oppression.

As well as pointing out the role of class and gender oppression in canon formation, *Daphne* implies the arbitrariness and subjective nature of the distinction between canonical and non-canonical works. To support this view, Picardie's novel emphasises the connections and borrowings between canonical and popular literature. Repeatedly, Jane defends the sophistication of du Maurier's writing but also suggests that the Brontës, and even James, are indebted to genre fiction. Jane argues, for example, that *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* both contain gothic (and potentially supernatural) dimensions.⁹² Furthermore, she points to the presence of similar elements in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the only work by James that

⁹⁰ Picardie, *Daphne*, 40.

⁹¹ Picardie, *Daphne*, 37.

⁹² Picardie, *Daphne*, 46.

she recalls having “stayed up all night finishing” and one that Paul grudgingly describes as “James at his most unashamedly populist”.⁹³ The mention of *The Turn of the Screw* further unsettles the boundaries between popular and canonical fiction by serving as a reminder that James and du Maurier both adapted *Jane Eyre*. These intertextual relationships destabilise what Jane refers to as literary “league tables”, which are based upon the faulty premise that “you can measure literary excellence with precise instruments; as if there were a science of writing, governed by equations that reveal immutable truths.”⁹⁴ Her scepticism exposes canons as being compiled around shifting values and literary tastes. Yet Picardie’s novel does not attempt to discard the canon as a mere “construct”, but rather remains preoccupied with the fact that James and the Brontës have been admitted but du Maurier is still disbarred.

Picardie’s novel insinuates that canon formation is not only an arbitrary process but also one that favours male authors, thereby revealing a feminist consciousness of women’s wider lack of status. At several points, Paul reveals a covert antipathy towards female writers when he disparages Jane for her interest in du Maurier and just about manages to tolerate her research on the Brontës. Indeed, Jane is aware that Paul would prefer her to “give up on the Brontës altogether, and write a PhD on [Daphne du Maurier’s grandfather] George du Maurier and his relationship with Henry James”.⁹⁵ George du Maurier wrote the bestselling novel *Trilby* (1894), a mass culture phenomenon that spawned “marketing campaigns of new proportions: Trilby hats, Trilby sausages, a *Life Magazine* Trilby contest, even Trilby ice cream molded into the shape of her famous foot.”⁹⁶ When suggesting George du Maurier as Jane’s PhD topic, Paul proclaims that the writer is “almost certainly due for a comeback” and appears

⁹³ Picardie, *Daphne*, 34.

⁹⁴ Picardie, *Daphne*, 46.

⁹⁵ Picardie, *Daphne*, 46.

⁹⁶ Sarah Gracombe, “Converting Trilby: Du Maurier on Englishness, Jewishness, and Culture”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 58, no. 1 (2003): 77.

momentarily able to overcome his elitist literary preferences.⁹⁷ Jane observes that “even though George du Maurier is now dismissed as much more minor than James, he is not quite as minor in the literary canon as Daphne.”⁹⁸ Paul’s chief prejudice appears not to be against popular fiction but rather women writers and his views thereby create the impression that the academy is capable of rediscovering du Maurier’s grandfather but not du Maurier herself. His unfair dismissal of du Maurier implies that the academy still refuses to admit women writers into the canon (apart from the token Brontës).

In a further indictment of the academy’s masculine bias, *Daphne* portrays women as sharing an alternative set of aesthetic values that allow them to recognise the Brontës and the non-canonical du Maurier simultaneously. Jane’s tastes may separate her from her husband but her literary preferences unify her with other women. An anecdote that Jane tells about encountering *Wuthering Heights* and then *Jane Eyre* as a child relates that her mother encouraged her passion by taking her to the literary family’s home in Haworth. Jane describes how her mother “made it feel like an adventure, rather than an educational outing. That was her at her best—she could talk to me about the books and somehow through the books.”⁹⁹ This recollection suggests that Jane’s mother bestowed upon her daughter the ability to have an intensely imaginative and pleasurable relationship with literary texts that binds her into relationships with other women, including Rachel.

Initially, *Daphne* emphasises the women’s dissimilarities and draws attention to their class differences by contrasting their relationships to Paul’s Hampstead home. Though Rachel has departed to work at a North American university, her “image is stamped all over” Paul’s

⁹⁷ Picardie, *Daphne*, 46.

⁹⁸ Picardie, *Daphne*, 46.

⁹⁹ Picardie, *Daphne*, 206.

house in a subplot that contributes to *Daphne*'s drawn-out allusion to *Rebecca*.¹⁰⁰ As is the case in *Rebecca*, *Daphne*'s narrator feels entrapped by the omnipresent possessions and taste of her husband's first wife. At one point, she complains that Rachel's bedroom colour scheme is "too reminiscent of the nightmarish red room that Jane was locked up in as a child".¹⁰¹ Jane constructs her husband's home as an uncanny space, revealing a suspicion that she will literally never feel at home within its upper-middle-class environs. Though she depicts the household as possessed, Jane's descriptions make clear that she is haunted by signs of Rachel's superior class status rather than a supernatural presence. When Rachel returns to the house, she exhibits a self-confidence that Jane cannot achieve within the same space. As they drink tea together, Jane laments that it "was still her kitchen, really, she seemed entirely at home, more at ease than I was".¹⁰² Nonetheless, the two women's awkwardness dissolves and they begin to build a friendship once they embark upon a discussion of literature.

The depiction of Jane and Rachel's friendship implies that literature allows the women to recognise the similarities that arise from their femininity. In a previous meeting in the British Library, the two women realise that they share an appreciation for du Maurier and they consolidate their bond when Rachel returns to Paul's house. Rachel's visit to retrieve her prized Brontë texts leads her into a discussion with Jane in which they concur over the presence of a supernatural element within *Wuthering Heights*—an interpretation that Paul rejects.¹⁰³ The women's agreement adumbrates that they can adopt an imaginative perspective on literature that the seemingly more intellectual Paul will never understand. According to Jane, Paul "spends his working life reading books, picking them apart, and ferreting meaning

¹⁰⁰ Picardie, *Daphne*, 81.

¹⁰¹ Picardie, *Daphne*, 75.

¹⁰² Picardie, *Daphne*, 238.

¹⁰³ Picardie, *Daphne*, 241.

out of them”.¹⁰⁴ Paul’s analytical, laboured and intellectual reading leaves him unable to abandon himself to the pleasures of literature and he displays a masculine obtuseness to certain possibilities within texts. Contrastingly, the female characters engage in a pleasurable, superior form of reading that allows them to share an understanding that excludes Paul. This gendered representation of reading reveals that *Daphne* shares several of the assumptions that underlie *Becoming Jane Eyre*’s portrayal of second-wave feminists’ attempts to theorise the feminine creative imagination. As in Kohler’s novel and *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Daphne* suggests that women can derive a sense of solidarity from their feminine similarities that transcend other differences, including their class status. Jane and Rachel, furthermore, respond to literature in an explicitly gendered manner that implies the existence of a “distinctly feminine” aesthetic that sustains a subculture of feminine readers.¹⁰⁵

With its defence of readerly pleasure, *Daphne* advances an aesthetic that is simultaneously feminine and middlebrow. Middlebrow readers have often distinguished their literary tastes from those of the highbrow by emphasising their pursuit of imaginative stimulation and delight. The point is made in Janice Radway’s study of the Book-of-the-Month club where she argues that middlebrow consumers typically seek a specific type of readerly pleasure. This pleasure is not

the pleasure of achieving critical and analytical distance on one’s familiar world. Rather, this pleasure appeared to be more emotional and absorbing; it seemed to have something to do with the affective delights of transport, travel, and vicarious social interaction.¹⁰⁶

Exemplifying such attitudes, Jane discusses even canonical authors such as the Brontës in terms of the feelings that they arouse, recalling that their novels “totally enthralled” and

¹⁰⁴ Picardie, *Daphne*, 154.

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 72.

¹⁰⁶ Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 72.

“frightened” her when a child.¹⁰⁷ This emotional response to literature not only marks Jane out as a middlebrow reader, but signposts *Daphne*’s similarity with earlier feminine middlebrow writing.

I explored the gendering of the middlebrow in the first chapter of this thesis when I discussed the middlebrow women’s writing produced during the interwar and middle decades of the twentieth century. Many of these texts display a preoccupation with the feminine creative imagination and anticipate *Daphne* in a number of other ways, including recurrent references to the Brontës and other literary texts.¹⁰⁸ Nicola Humble points out that the relentless intertextuality of these middlebrow novels construes reading as “a source of deep, sensual satisfactions, a self-indulgent pleasure” that also “genders reading as a matter of course, repeatedly revealing men as inadequate readers.”¹⁰⁹ Obviously, these literary works were written during an earlier historical period than *Daphne* and I am conscious of this difference. But as in the first chapter’s discussion of *The Brontë Project*, I briefly want to consider *Daphne*’s similarities with earlier works of feminine middlebrow fiction to elucidate the Brontës’ continued significance for contemporary middlebrow culture.

Closer inspection reveals that the Brontës provide a paradigm for the type of reader that middlebrow fiction seeks to construct. Earlier examples of feminine middlebrow fiction frequently invoke the cultural prestige of the Brontës so that references to the literary sisters serve as markers of characters’ cultural distinction. As Humble observes, “such knowledge and interest in fact *defines* a certain sort of woman: middle-class, intellectually curious,

¹⁰⁷ Picardie, *Daphne*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Victoria Stewart, “The Woman Writer in Mid-Twentieth Century Middlebrow Fiction: Conceptualizing Creativity”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 1 (2011): 21-36.

¹⁰⁹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47, 51.

intimately engaged with her reading.”¹¹⁰ Consequently, the middlebrow reader enjoys a more intimate type of literary engagement that recalls (often in contradistinction to male reading) the reading associated with children and adolescents. Further entrenching this link, the Brontës’ novels are frequently first encountered in childhood and they retain their associations of literary beguilement when re-read in adulthood. Even if aware of the Brontës’ sophistication, many readers stay attuned to the double address of their texts. As Gilbert recounts, her readings of *Jane Eyre* with her eight-year old daughter were “rereadings and rememberings, hence recapturings, of experiences that I’d had when I myself was at least a *more* innocent reader.”¹¹¹ According to Humble, the “Brontës *represent* reading in some iconic sense, denoting the pleasurable excess of the ideal middlebrow woman reader over-identifying with what she reads.”¹¹² Humble’s comment pertains to an earlier tradition of feminine middlebrow writing but—as my reading of *Daphne* demonstrates—this insight also applies to texts written more recently.

Like this earlier tradition of fiction, *Daphne* defends reading the canonical Brontës in an imaginative and emotionally indulgent manner that defies the intellectual or highbrow abstraction associated with Paul and academia. As part of this defiance, *Daphne*’s representation of academia implies that cultural establishments continue to be dominated by men who marginalise women writers and feminine aesthetic tastes. To combat women’s cultural exclusion, *Daphne* forges links between itself, the Brontës, du Maurier and—to a lesser degree—several male writers. By delineating these authors’ relationships, *Daphne* builds a genealogy of female readers that runs from the Brontës through du Maurier to the novel’s contemporary female characters—Jane, Jane’s mother and Rachel. The novel’s

¹¹⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 178.

¹¹¹ Sandra M. Gilbert, “*Jane Eyre* and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 3 (1998): 352.

¹¹² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 178.

reclamation of a feminine literary tradition signals the oblique influence of second-wave literary feminism and its tactics to rectify women writers' absence from the literary canon. Like these second-wave critics, *Daphne* constructs an alternative feminine canon based on a pleasure-led feminine aesthetic that celebrates the creative imaginations of female readers and writers alike.

To portray pleasure-led and imaginative reading as an outlet for the feminine creative imagination, *Daphne* employs references to the Brontës. In this way, *Daphne* emphasises that du Maurier's fascination with the Brontës' lives and art was a source of creative inspiration throughout the writer's life. As well as alluding to *Jane Eyre*'s influence on *Rebecca*, *Daphne* points out that the line "[t]he loving spirit labours long" from Emily Brontë's poem "Self-Interrogation" (1846) provided du Maurier with the title of her first novel, *The Loving Spirit* (1931).¹¹³ The poem serves a similar purpose for Rachel, who borrows the title for her own poem and includes the phrase "long labours spirit loving"—a reversal of the same line from "Self-Interrogation" that du Maurier chose to quote.¹¹⁴ Rachel's reworking of these words draws attention to the active and inventive nature of her reading. Another voracious female reader, Jane may be struggling to write her thesis but as she relates her efforts to identify and construct different literary links, her narration bears witness to the creativity and productivity of her reading. This conceptualisation of women's reading constitutes another correspondence with the work of second-wave critics. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, stress that women writers were also readers who needed decipher how their literary foremothers "channeled their female concerns into secret or at least obscure corners."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Picardie, *Daphne*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Picardie, *Daphne*, 179.

¹¹⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 72.

The feminist model of the creative reader has further implications also explored in *Daphne*, which equates middlebrow women readers' reading with the Brontës' writing. The frequent references to the Brontës in *Daphne* imply that the literary sisters provided inspiration to generations of women authors. In light of this fact, Picardie's novel constructs the feminine middlebrow reader's own imaginative engagement with literature as a creative act. Indeed, Rachel explicitly draws attention to the inseparability of women's reading and writing when she tells Jane that she has been invited to give a lecture at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth on "the literary influence of Emily Brontë on subsequent female poets—Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and so on."¹¹⁶ The division between woman reader and writer also dissolves in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which argues that the woman writer needs to "reconstruct the shattered tradition that is her matrilineal heritage" and decode "its languages, its messages, its forms" before she can write.¹¹⁷ In further concordance with Gilbert and Gubar's gynocritical perspective, *Daphne* identifies an alternative tradition of women readers and writers that does not exclude or denigrate feminine experiences or culture.

By incorporating the Brontës into a separate feminine literary tradition, Picardie's novel not only follows the example of *The Madwoman in the Attic* but also deploys the strategies of earlier feminine middlebrow fiction. Of course, these novels' allusions to the Brontës are indicative of the fact that "veneration for elite culture underpins all the activities of the literary middlebrow."¹¹⁸ But Radway suggests that the middlebrow never "simply apes the values of high culture" but rather operates as "a kind of counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic

¹¹⁶ Picardie, *Daphne*, 242.

¹¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 98.

¹¹⁸ Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21.

English departments”.¹¹⁹ Resentful of academia, *Daphne* resembles the work of earlier feminine middlebrow novelists that lay claim to the Brontës as “antecedents, not aspirational signifiers.”¹²⁰ Erica Brown points out that the Brontës do not merely connote high literary status but also the shock and disturbance that their novels initially caused. As mentioned in the Introduction, Brown perceives that the feminine middlebrow novelist who invokes the sisters “is not so much staking a claim to establishment ‘mainstream’ literature’ as linking herself with an unsettling and distinctly feminine literature.”¹²¹ Picardie’s novel associates itself with this feminine tradition by bringing to the fore the dark undercurrents of the marriages depicted in the Brontës’ novels and du Maurier’s *Rebecca*.

Daphne’s disillusionment with romance constitutes not just an engagement with an “unsettling” feminine literary tradition but, more obliquely, with second-wave feminism itself. Second-wave feminism critiqued the inequality of heterosexual relationships and cultural representations of romance. As Stevi Jackson recalls, love

was seen as an ideology which justified our exploitation by men and simultaneously ensnared us into oppressive relationships with them. As the slogan put it: “It starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink.”¹²²

For this reason, many second-wave literary critics either condemned or sought to excuse the use of courtship plots in *Jane Eyre* and other women’s writing.¹²³ The comparatively less censorious Gilbert and Gubar argue that Jane and Rochester ultimately achieve an egalitarian

¹¹⁹ Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 9-10.

¹²⁰ Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 55.

¹²¹ Brown, *Comedy and Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 55.

¹²² Stevi Jackson, “Love and Romance as Objects of Feminist Knowledge”, in *Making Connections: Women’s Studies, Women’s Movements, Women’s Lives*, ed. Mary Kennedy, Cathy Lubelska and Val Walsh (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993), 40.

¹²³ Surveying the field in 1976, Zelda Austen noted that many critics were disgruntled with nineteenth-century women writers’ persistent employment of the marriage plot. Zelda Austen, “Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot”, *College English* 36, no. 6 (1976): 549-61.

relationship but that the equality of their marriage depends upon Rochester being maimed.¹²⁴ Such an interpretation was indicative of many second-wave feminists' efforts to downplay the significance of *Jane Eyre's* romance.

Responding to second-wave discourses, *Daphne* reveals a wider feminist consciousness by construing the Brontës' courtship plots as encouraging women readers to entrap themselves within damaging heterosexual relationships. Describing her first meeting with Paul, Jane confesses "when I looked at him, I thought of Heathcliff and Mr Rochester and Maxim de Winter...and how could I not, when I had been waiting for them to step out of the pages of the books I loved[?]"¹²⁵ Jane admits to confusing Paul with heroes from the Brontë sisters' novels, but fails to perceive that her husband's name connects him with Paul Emanuel in CB's *Villette* (1853). Though *Villette's* Lucy Snowe falls in love with M. Emanuel, she remains unmarried and the novel's ending hints that he probably died in a shipwreck before he could return to her. The parallels between *Villette* and *Daphne* imply that the Brontës may have experimented with other narratives but readers like Jane fixate upon romance plots and fail to look for alternatives to marriage when planning their lives.¹²⁶ The effect of the Brontës' romance plots upon women readers and writers' creative imaginations will be examined in the next section's consideration of Thomas's *Charlotte*. The discussion of *Charlotte* will also enable me to explore the darker possibilities of the feminine creative imagination only hinted at in *Daphne*.

Occasionally, *Daphne* taps into wider cultural anxieties about the feminine creative imagination and acknowledges that the female characters' tendency to construct elaborate

¹²⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 368-71.

¹²⁵ Picardie, *Daphne*, 37-8.

¹²⁶ A similar point is made in *The Brontë Project*. The novel's heroine, Sara, also has a relationship with a man called Paul but persists in thinking of herself as Jane in *Jane Eyre* rather than recognising her similarities with *Villette's* Lucy.

fantasies has disarming similarities with mental illness. Jane admits that the most “vivid scenes” of her childhood relate to her reading and that her recollection of actual events is troublingly hazy.¹²⁷ Similarly, Daphne suffers from paranoid delusions relating to her husband’s affairs. Such characterisations reflect what Showalter identifies as “a cultural tradition that represents ‘woman’ as madness” so that “madness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady.”¹²⁸ Showalter also points out that there is an ingrained association between female creativity and madness, noting that insanity is often portrayed as “the price women have to pay for their exercise of creativity in a male dominated culture”.¹²⁹ For Showalter, this belief is responsible for the feminist canonisation of suicidal female writers like Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.¹³⁰

Yet *Daphne* reworks these cultural associations to challenge the link between feminine creative expression and insanity whilst construing madness as a male malady. The female characters use their creativity to escape developing mental health problems in ways that are denied to the male characters. Symington, for example, spends increasing amounts of time thinking about Branwell in favour of dealing with his mounting financial problems. His obsession is a symptom of his worrying detachment from reality but he never writes his intended biography of the Brontës’ brother. Branwell, too, emerges as a figure who squandered his talent by indulging his childhood fantasies into adulthood but never created any noteworthy works before becoming an alcoholic and opium addict. The possibility that Branwell “was not as talented as his sisters” haunts Daphne, who remains unable to uncover

¹²⁷ Picardie, *Daphne*, 284.

¹²⁸ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 4.

¹²⁹ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 4.

¹³⁰ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 4.

evidence to the contrary.¹³¹ Nevertheless, Daphne manages to write *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* and the short story collection *The Breaking Point* (1959) in spite of her recurrent nervous disturbances. Her achievements suggest that women have the capacity to transform their imaginative reading into creative work, their productivity frequently contrasting with the arrested writing of the male characters. But if *Daphne* ultimately reaffirms the Brontës and du Maurier's genius, other neo-Victorian novels offer a more concerted critique of the feminine creative imagination. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss how Thomas's *Charlotte* construes the feminine creative imagination as addled by romantic delusions, dishonest and psychotic.

Charlotte: Waves of Feminist Lies

In Thomas's *Charlotte* (2000), the main character, Miranda Stevenson, is a jaded academic who attends a conference in Martinique. At this conference, she delivers a paper in which she pronounces that CB "was an extraordinary liar".¹³² A liar and a trickster figure herself, she adopts new identities throughout the novel and even exploits a clerical error that leads to her being known as "Charlotte Brontë" at the conference. Her actions exemplify the novel's main proposition: the feminine creative imagination is innately duplicitous. *Charlotte* shares many of the same concerns expressed in but also substantially differs from *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne*. In contrast with these works, Thomas's novel explicitly parodies second-wave feminism and its conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination to imply feminism's contemporary irrelevance. As part of this attack, Thomas's novel undermines the feminist reputation of CB and her novel by engaging with influential postcolonial critiques of Gilbert and Gubar's reading of *Jane Eyre*.

¹³¹ Picardie, *Daphne*, 247.

¹³² Thomas, *Charlotte*, 137.

Although a concerted attack on *Jane Eyre* and CB, *Charlotte* employs a structure that emphasises the possibility of authorial fabrication to construe the creative imagination as inherently deceitful. At the beginning, the novel purports to be a sequel to *Jane Eyre* that contradicts the epilogue of CB's novel. In this alternative account, "Rochester" dies shortly after his wedding to "Jane" but "Jane" learns from "Grace Poole" that "Rochester" and "Bertha" left a son in Martinique.¹³³ Consequently, "Jane" decides to seek out this lost man. The Caribbean location and the revelations about "Bertha" signal an engagement with Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as well as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-1).¹³⁴ The next section of the novel details Miranda's adventures at an academic conference in contemporary Martinique and concentrates upon her sexual escapades with Caribbean men during which she uses the name "Charlotte Brontë". The connection with the previous part of the novel remains unclear until Miranda admits that she wrote the alternative ending to *Jane Eyre* when she was a teenager for her father, Ben.

The third section introduces further textual flux and professes to be the diary of Miranda's Prospero-like father, Ben, who lives in Cornwall surrounded by a library of Victorian literature. Visiting Ben, Miranda announces her intention to return and write alternative endings to other nineteenth-century novels. In Cornwall, Miranda contradicts and revises her previous account of her visit to Martinique to suggest that the earlier section of the novel is an already written manuscript. Now she states that her previous account does not mention sleeping with an elderly white man as she "thought that three men was already at the limit of credibility, in a week."¹³⁵ Additionally, Ben asks Miranda to edit his diaries posthumously

¹³³ The chapter will use quotation marks to distinguish between characters in CB's and Thomas's novel. For example, the latter text portrays "Jane", "Rochester" and "Grace Poole".

¹³⁴ In particular, the relationship between Miranda and her father, Ben, mirrors that of *The Tempest's* Miranda with her father, Prospero. However, these intertextual links do not devolve into an attack on Shakespeare's literary duplicity in contrast with the treatment of CB's creative imagination.

¹³⁵ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 182.

and his request suggests that Miranda may have interfered in his journal. The last section is Miranda's continuation of her *Jane Eyre* sequel, which adopts the form of a letter from "Rochester's" son, "Robert", to "Maria Ashford", formerly "Miss Temple" at Lowood and "Jane's" confidante. In the letter, "Robert" recounts that he is a genetic throwback to an illicit match made by "Bertha's" grandmother, but his dark appearance caused "Rochester" to question his wife's fidelity and he abandoned his son in the Caribbean. According to "Robert", "Jane" arrived in Martinique, they fell in love and then lived together until she died from a tropical fever.

With the exception of "Robert's" letter to "Maria", the different sections of *Charlotte* repeatedly contradict and misattribute their provenance to different authors. Hence, the novel's first section purports to be CB's amendments to *Jane Eyre* but Miranda admits midway through her stay in Martinique that she wrote this sequel as a teenager to regain Ben's attention from another woman, Judith.¹³⁶ Miranda recalls that Judith accused her of having produced only a counterfeit but Ben believes the document's authenticity even after he reads Miranda's confession. Indeed, Miranda assures him that Judith's allegations merely inspired her to claim to have written the alternative ending to *Jane Eyre*.¹³⁷ As such, *Charlotte* displays a contradictory form of honesty by calling attention to its constant deceptions so that, on a metafictional level, the shifting names and personas illustrate the rupture between teller and tale. In the process, *Charlotte* confuses the names and writings of Miranda and CB to construct the two writers as similar tricksters and to portray their creative imaginations as intrinsically fraudulent.

¹³⁶ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 126.

¹³⁷ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 182.

Even so, *Charlotte* suggests that CB was a particularly deceptive liar through a parody of *Jane Eyre* that exposes the novel's direct address to the reader as a false guise of truthfulness. "Jane" begins her narrative by stating "Reader, I married him" to imply that she is continuing and then correcting the epilogue of CB's novel.¹³⁸ As "Jane" notes, literature usually halts "when the most interesting narrative begins: *after* the wedding ceremony" and she offers the observation that "a gloomy, muffled romance by one of the Miss Brontës" can never be "more than a feeble echo of what actually occurs to one of us".¹³⁹ As Christian Gutleben observes, "Jane" commits an "ontological provocation" that undermines "Victorian conventions from within the Victorian narrative".¹⁴⁰ The character intimates that the exchange is a tête-à-tête with the reader that signals the textual nature of her address whilst instigating a new openness. Such a pose contrasts with the repressive tone of CB's novel until subsequent revelations reveal "Jane" and CB to be equally duplicitous.

Cultivating a façade of confidential disclosure, "Jane" gives conflicting accounts that reveal her fraudulence. Her description of her wedding night states:

Reader, you will expect me to draw a veil over the intimacies which transpired between a man and his wife. I am sorry to disappoint and offend you. I will tell you that everything seemed blissful to me; it was bliss to lie down side by side with Edward; to feel his passionate embrace and kisses; to feel my entire soul and being given up to him. The only surprise was the absence of anything that a married woman, except she were of the most puritanical disposition, could find displeasing or disturbing. There were a few moments of pain as I was deflowered—strange word, for something that seemed like the flowering of my womanhood.¹⁴¹

Her direct address supports the impression of her truthfulness until she subsequently discusses her failure to conceive with "Maria". During their conversation, "Jane" comes to understand that "Rochester" suffers from impotence but conned her into thinking she had lost her

¹³⁸ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 9.

¹³⁹ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 21, 43.

¹⁴⁰ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 180.

¹⁴¹ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 17-8.

virginity by penetrating her with his finger.¹⁴² Her disclosure prompts a return to her original claims to clarify that her initial description managed to obscure what had occurred through the use of vague, romantic clichés.

Charlotte debunks *Jane Eyre*'s representation of sexual relationships and accuses CB of founding a tradition of deceitful women's writing that is "complicitous with a normalisation of heterosexual romance, which has repressed the history of the seamier side of sex".¹⁴³ As such, "Jane" appears frank when she portrays her "deflowering" but the evasiveness of her language becomes apparent when she later admits that "Rochester" remained flaccid throughout the act. *Charlotte* not only blames romance for providing women like "Jane" with an imperfect understanding of intercourse but also implies that generic clichés allow such victims to perpetuate and hide their ignorance. Retrospectively, her original account can be understood as deploying misleading language but that such obfuscation remains difficult to perceive due to our habituation to romantic conventions. As Heta Pyrönen observes, "Jane" claims to dread her marriage "rites" but her repeated return to the subject reflects her gleeful anticipation.¹⁴⁴ Ultimately, *Charlotte* eviscerates *Jane Eyre* as the prototype for a tradition of women's writing that encourages the hypocritical expression of feminine readers' lust.¹⁴⁵

Charlotte's representation of feminine readers and writers can be critiqued for several reasons. Most obviously, *Charlotte* depicts women as reading solely for sexual titillation and denies the creative possibilities of feminine reading represented in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne*. These three works appear comparatively uninterested

¹⁴² Thomas, *Charlotte*, 49-50.

¹⁴³ Sue Thomas, "Pathologies of Sexuality, Empire and Slavery: D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte*", in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre*, ed. Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 105.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 13-4. Heta Pyrönen, *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 152-3.

¹⁴⁵ Pyrönen, *Bluebeard Gothic*, 153.

in the constraints placed upon women's sexuality and, instead, identify other forms of patriarchal oppression. As I argued earlier, second-wave critics, *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne* chiefly call attention to women's creative or intellectual confinement and the denial of their cultural legitimacy. Yet *Charlotte* offers a blinkered analysis that concentrates solely on women's sexuality and ignores other forms of discrimination against women. Ultimately, Thomas's novel proclaims that women should stop de-sexualising their desires by reading romances and liberate themselves from their self-imposed repression. Such a manoeuvre absolves men from being responsible for female oppression.

As well as blaming women for their own oppression, *Charlotte* offers a critique of the romance genre that becomes an excoriation of not just female readers but feminine literary influences and traditions. In this respect, Thomas's novel fails to appreciate that *Jane Eyre* and many other examples of women's writing express ambivalence towards the conventions of the genre.¹⁴⁶ A similar rejection of the clichés of romance can be seen in the neo-Victorian novels previously considered in this chapter, both of which undermine the significance of *Jane Eyre*'s courtship plot. *Becoming Jane Eyre*, for example, emphasises that the fictional Charlotte had to overcome her infatuation with Héger and become more attentive to the plight of other women before she could produce any works of lasting literary value. Likewise, the portrayal of Jane's marriage in *Daphne* implies that *Jane Eyre*'s love story entraps women in dangerous illusions about love and marriage. Yet *Charlotte* represents women readers and writers as never questioning or resisting CB's courtship plot. In this sense, *Charlotte* undermines *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s attempt to rectify women's exclusion from the literary canon by constructing a feminine literary tradition that positions all women's writing—including the canonical *Jane Eyre*—within a tradition of generic, lowbrow pulp.

¹⁴⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 198. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 160.

As well as devaluing women's writing, *Charlotte*'s depiction of feminine literary traditions attacks second-wave feminist criticism. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how Gilbert and Gubar identified a supportive distaff subculture that enabled women writers to transcend masculine constructions of femininity. As in Gilbert and Gubar's paradigm, Miranda deciphers and gains inspiration from CB but she also derides her forerunner in a parody of *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s model of a mutually nurturing literary sisterhood. Thomas's novel reconfigures female literary inspiration as a process that encourages women writers to subvert and attack each other.

In a further mockery of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Charlotte* features a number of enraged or mentally ill women and undermines the larger efforts of second-wave critics to demonstrate "how, in a particular cultural context, notions of gender influence the definition and, consequently, the treatment of mental disorder."¹⁴⁷ Accordingly, Miranda is in recovery from a nervous breakdown and her mother suffered from bipolar disorder.¹⁴⁸ In some respects, this depiction of Miranda's creativity constitutes a more overt expression of an anxiety expressed in *Daphne* that an overactive imagination is alarmingly similar to psychosis. Yet the madwomen in *Charlotte* also invoke the figure in the title of Gilbert and Gubar's study. Gilbert and Gubar interpreted Bertha as CB's response to "debilitating" male constructions of femininity that women were unable to protest against as dissent would confirm their monstrosity, a point that I discussed in relation to *Becoming Jane Eyre*.¹⁴⁹ For this reason, Gilbert and Gubar proposed that female authors projected their suppressed feelings onto deranged or rebellious versions of themselves in their fiction. *Charlotte*

¹⁴⁷ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas, "Pathologies of Sexuality, Empire and Slavery", 101.

¹⁴⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 53.

undercuts *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s paradigm by representing female madness not as a culturally constructed female malady but as genuine derangement.

Though delivering an explicitly anti-feminist reading of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Thomas's novel does foreground problematic aspects of Gilbert and Gubar's theory. As mentioned, *The Madwoman in the Attic* construed *Jane Eyre*'s heroine as a version of the novel's author so their claim that Bertha is Jane's "truest and darkest double" applies equally to the historical CB.¹⁵⁰ *Becoming Jane Eyre* also depicts Jane as CB's alter-ego, but *Charlotte* launches a sustained attack on this conflation. Mocking Gilbert and Gubar, Miranda presents a conference paper that discusses "the different characters as aspects of Charlotte".¹⁵¹ Of these characters, Bertha functions as a symbol of "the hysteria and madness produced by the impossible conflict" between CB's competing identities.¹⁵² Yet as her internal monologue reveals, Miranda treats her paper with a detached sarcasm that underlines, again, the distinction between creator and creation. Her cynicism construes second-wave feminism's attempts to delineate the links between life and literary inspiration as facile and insufficiently nuanced. In Pyrönen's view, *Charlotte* challenges "Gilbert and Gubar's notion of literary characters as personal extensions of authors, instead of imaginative creations".¹⁵³

Paradoxically, *Charlotte* corroborates the relationship between authors' art and life to vilify Gilbert and Gubar further. At the conference, Miranda argues that authors "lie",

in the sense that their material and subject are their own lives, their own emotions. But they distort them, twist them, partly to make a fiction, partly because they themselves are half-unconscious of the personal realities that the launch of a *roman*, a romance, allows them to explore.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 360.

¹⁵¹ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 138.

¹⁵² Thomas, *Charlotte*, 139.

¹⁵³ Pyrönen, *Bluebeard Gothic*, 156.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 137-8.

Here, Miranda postulates the inseparability of creation from creator, but her words accentuate the warping effect of the writer's mind. Though Miranda's statement suggests that she exceeds most authors in *conscious* duplicity, she portrays the creative process as individualistic and non-linear. She implies that the imagination defies universals and the straightforward transposition of life into art that Gilbert and Gubar theorised. Her behaviour reiterates the criticism that *The Madwoman in the Attic* failed to acknowledge women writers' individuality or differences.

Charlotte may advance relevant criticism of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, but the novel's ultimate goal is to denigrate CB's literary talents and humiliate her on the basis of her sexuality. When Miranda adopts the persona of CB, she borrows and sexualises incidents from the author's life. Hence, she claims that she began smoking because a "professor from Belgian" would fill her desk with cigar smoke and "when I came back and opened my desk I would breathe in his presence and almost faint with longing. In fact, that's how I had my first orgasm."¹⁵⁵ Such anecdotes emphasise the uneventful nature of this author's life and caricature her as a repressed spinster who sublimated her sexual frustration into literary creation. Later, Miranda imagines the family in Yorkshire with the sisters "quietly embroidering their brief lives" to imply that CB's inspiration derived from her (lack of) sexual experience that prompted her to take refuge in fantasy.¹⁵⁶ Contrastingly, *Becoming Jane Eyre* represents Charlotte as erotically drawn to Héger but also benefitting from his literary guidance. As well as calling attention to the inertia of Charlotte's life, *Becoming Jane Eyre* also suggests that the writer's boredom inspired her creatively and developed her feminist consciousness. Contrastingly, *Charlotte* excludes all other facets of feminine experience to consider women only in relation to their sexuality.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 104.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 83.

Though the mockery of CB reflects that the main target is Anglo-American feminism, Thomas's novel satirises French feminism for the purpose of further sexualising feminine creativity. At one point, Miranda prattles in her mother's Cornish dialect whilst tape recording her sexual encounters with the men of Martinique. Narrating sex with a cane worker, Miranda announces

a strange flopping motion, a giant morpho fell and rose again in front of my face, it was blue falling like brightness from the sky and all I could think of was the bright blue of the first cot I brought to the nursery when I was big and round and David's hand on my belly was warm. And—it'd sound crazy, I know—but that blue somehow filled me and I felt that I could take off with it and float in the fog and land on the leaves, like I'm a leaf, suckin' water from the roots and dropping easily to the ground... Just like I'm floating now: oh yes! That's so good...¹⁵⁷

Miranda's words parody *écriture féminine*, a crucial concept for French feminism that first appeared in Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975).¹⁵⁸ This polemical essay construes women's voices, writing and self-expression as a bodily process and associates female creativity with masturbation, pregnancy, birth, breast milk and motherhood.¹⁵⁹ Cixous's symbolic description of *écriture féminine* as "a lively combination of flying colours, leaves, and, rivers plunging into the sea we feed" is rendered absurd by Miranda's babble.¹⁶⁰ Miranda expresses her creativity through vocal expression of her embodiment, sexuality and her relationship with her mother whilst demonstrating, as in Cixous's model, a defiance of linear logic or simplicity.¹⁶¹ Miranda continues at length, incorporating nonsensical liquid and soaring imagery in a further mimicry of the essay's poetic register, which depicts women's writing as ocean-like or a form of flying.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 96.

¹⁵⁸ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93.

¹⁵⁹ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 880-2.

¹⁶⁰ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 889.

¹⁶¹ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 881.

¹⁶² Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 887-89.

Charlotte engages with “The Laugh of the Medusa” to misread and misrepresent Cixous and offer an essentialist view of the feminine creative imagination. Consequently, Miranda’s tape-recorded “writing” appears to be meaningless gibberish without any intellectual component and her creativity becomes inextricable from her body and sexuality. Such references to French feminism enable *Charlotte* to equate Miranda’s creativity with her maternal desires. Prior to coming to Martinique, Miranda’s husband put her under pressure to terminate a pregnancy and her guilt causes her to hallucinate visions of fetuses whilst on the island.¹⁶³ We further realise the effect of this abortion when Miranda explains to her father that she had unprotected sex and knowingly risked contracting AIDS to outwit her husband’s insistence on birth control and refusal to have another child.¹⁶⁴ In light of this revelation, Miranda appears less sexually liberated than maternally frustrated. As she tries to conceive, Miranda speaks in pastiche *écriture féminine* that contains repeated references to procreativity so that her creativity becomes inextricable from her fixation on breeding.¹⁶⁵ The connections between Miranda’s different desires are literal in comparison to Cixous’s metaphorical analogies between feminine creativity and maternity.

To equate women’s artistry with a biological by-product that remains in thrall to masculine power, *Charlotte* portrays Miranda as fixated with male ejaculate. In one incident, she lies on her hotel bed, playing with “the long egg-white-like semen” from inside herself and later spends her last day in Martinique having unprotected intercourse and recounts enjoying the feeling of “the spunk of the two islanders mixed up together in my cunt”.¹⁶⁶ Her preoccupation with white male bodily secretions mockingly references Cixous’s claim that

¹⁶³ Thomas, *Charlotte* 93, 149.

¹⁶⁴ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 173-4.

¹⁶⁵ Contrastingly, Cixous contends that either “you want a kid or you don’t—*that’s your business*”. Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, 890.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 85, 156.

the woman author has “always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink”.¹⁶⁷ In *Charlotte*’s inversion of Cixous’s model, Miranda exploits the Martiniquian men because she needs them for her creative and procreative purposes. This depiction not only implies that feminine creativity is reliant upon the male body, but that the creative woman is a passive vessel in both acts of reproduction and creation. The Martiniquian men enable her to produce the tapes that she gives to Ben, revealing her willingness to exploit weaker masculinities but also her preparedness to capitulate to patriarchal authority.

Charlotte attempts to discredit feminism further by implying that the women’s movement is rooted in and continues to uphold neo-colonialism. To advance this point, *Charlotte* draws upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal article “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985). As Spivak influentially noted and I briefly mentioned when discussing *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Jane does not feel a sense of kinship with but rather views Bertha as a monstrous “other”. As Plasa explains, Spivak perceives *Jane Eyre* as “encouraging, or perhaps even coercing its readers to identify with its eponymous narrator-heroine by representing her colonial other in purely negative terms: English is to white Creole, Jane to Bertha, the text implies, as human is to bestial/monstrous.”¹⁶⁸ Like many other works of second-wave literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic* does not register that CB’s heroine only attains individualist success at the expense of the colonised woman. According to Spivak, this failure to interrogate the colonial discourse of *Jane Eyre* reflects that “the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism”.¹⁶⁹ For this

¹⁶⁷ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, 881.

¹⁶⁸ Plasa, *Charlotte Brontë*, xi.

¹⁶⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 243.

reason, Spivak argues that *Jane Eyre*'s status as the "cult text of feminism" is indicative of the movement's neo-colonialist tendencies.¹⁷⁰

Appropriating Spivak's insights, *Charlotte* caricatures Western feminists as compliant with the ongoing oppression of seemingly postcolonial countries.¹⁷¹ As Sue Thomas notes, the novel portrays "contemporary Martinicans contemptuously as existing in a condition of mental slavery produced by the 'soft life' of continuing French colonialism, understood as the European 'state's benevolence'".¹⁷² Conscious of this situation, Miranda refers to the Martiniquians as "slaves" and uses the men she meets upon the island to serve her sexually.¹⁷³ Through this portrayal, *Charlotte* attributes Miranda's awareness of and ability to exploit the Martiniquians to the legacy of feminism. Though she is disdainful of second-wave feminism and its literary totem *Jane Eyre*, Miranda's personal and professional existence remains enmeshed with both.

If Spivak accused second-wave feminists of overlooking the colonised woman, *Charlotte*, however, construes contemporary Western women as abusing neo-colonised men. Miranda's behaviour implies that patriarchal oppression is an illusion and that feminism provides a screen for white women's neo-colonialism. To portray feminism as a form of neo-colonialism, *Charlotte* alludes to the Martinique-born Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).¹⁷⁴ As Sue Thomas foregrounds, *Charlotte* pilfers from Fanon's analysis of interracial sexual intercourse and applies it as a metaphor for second-wave feminism's relationship with the colonised black male whilst being "unaware of the substantial body of

¹⁷⁰ Spivak, "Three Women's Texts", 244.

¹⁷¹ For a critique of the "post" in the term "post-colonialism", see Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the term 'Post-colonialism'", *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98.

¹⁷² Thomas, "Pathologies of Sexuality, Empire and Slavery", 107.

¹⁷³ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 83-6, 96-8, 123-4.

¹⁷⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1968).

feminist critique of Fanon's argument."¹⁷⁵ The title of Fanon's work is directly referenced during a scene in which the closeted black homosexual Juan masquerades as Miranda by dressing in drag and wearing "heavy white face-powder".¹⁷⁶ Miranda has previously had sex with Juan and their encounters allude to Fanon's consideration of René Maran's novel *Un Homme Pareil aux Autres* (1947). Juan and Maran's protagonist Jean Veneuse resemble each other in a number of ways, including the fact that their Western educations have alienated them from their black peers and they embark on relationships with white women.¹⁷⁷ Juan exemplifies and even surpasses Maran's racial self-hatred as he suppresses his sexual orientation to secure his sense of self through sex with Miranda. Their interactions allow the novel to suggest that Miranda belongs to a trend in which rich Western female tourists embark on "pussy-flights" to Martinique, where they sexually exploit the still colonised men of the island.¹⁷⁸

As a sexually aggressive beneficiary of second-wave feminism, Miranda behaves in a way that reveals her to be a parody of a third-wave feminist. The term third wave is most often used to refer to feminists born between 1961 and 1981 after an earlier vanguard of feminist activism had established the battle for gender parity.¹⁷⁹ As part of their efforts to distinguish themselves as a movement, many third wavers have critiqued the second wave for a variety of reasons. One of their recurrent accusations is that second-wave feminism does not accommodate third wavers' greater desire for individual choice. As I discussed in relation to *Becoming Jane Eyre*, the second wave placed much emphasis on the need for women's sense of solidarity and collectiveness. For many critics, third-wave feminism's willingness to challenge "the perceived dogmatism of second-wave feminism" has resulted in an

¹⁷⁵ Thomas, "Pathologies of Sexuality, Empire and Slavery", 108.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 146.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 104 and Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 63-4.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas, *Charlotte*, 89.

¹⁷⁹ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, 5.

overarching stress on “individuality and individual definitions of feminism.”¹⁸⁰ This emphasis on individual expression has drawn further censure for being myopically concerned with issues of female sexuality.¹⁸¹ Another consistent objection is that third wavers take feminism for granted without adequately acknowledging their debt to second wave. In a striking paradox, many third-wave feminists position themselves as rebelling against the supposedly puritanical second wave whilst also acknowledging that “it is precisely because of the feminism that came before them—the one that championed female sexual agency—that they are able to construct their own pro-sex platform”.¹⁸² Many of these characteristics apply to *Charlotte*’s Miranda, who is not only hostile towards the second wave but is an individualistic sexual predator only too happy to benefit from the legacy of earlier feminist movements.

As well as misrepresenting third-wave feminism as wholly opportunistic, *Charlotte* suggests the arrival of a postfeminist epoch through its portrayal of Miranda. Miranda’s actions imply that gender inequality no longer exists but that the self-interested third wave maintain “feminism” for self-serving purposes. To underline this point, Miranda is given a more secure position than the precarious Juan. When Juan is discovered in drag by Miranda, he escorts her home but her drunken hysteria causes him to crash into another vehicle. In the aftermath, Juan faces the threat of rape from the other drivers and spends the night in jail whilst the exposure of his sexual orientation results in his probable job dismissal. Contrastingly, Miranda escapes the island unscathed. The difference between their two fates implies that Miranda exists in a postfeminist world where “the gains forged by previous generations of women have so completely pervaded all tiers of our social existence that those still ‘harping’ about women’s

¹⁸⁰ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 43.

¹⁸¹ Ann Heilmann, “Gender and Essentialism: Feminist Debates in the Twenty-First Century”, *Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2011): 78.

¹⁸² Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 101.

victim status are embarrassingly out of touch”.¹⁸³ *Charlotte* not only construes feminism as irrelevant but its representation of Miranda’s feminine creative imagination also implies that the women’s movement is an ongoing con trick.

Conclusion

In a number of ways, *Charlotte* constitutes the exception that proves the rule of what this chapter has argued about the conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination in neo-Victorian and middlebrow fiction. As I have demonstrated, *Daphne* and *Becoming Jane Eyre* seek to emphasise how acts of reading and writing connect women with each other through the pleasures afforded by the creative feminine imagination. In the process, the two novels display a wider feminist awareness of women’s inequality in a patriarchal culture. Contrastingly, *Charlotte* might also emphasise the correspondences between the acts of reading and writing but portrays Miranda’s reinterpretation of *Jane Eyre* as dividing her from other women. Such a negative portrayal of women’s creativity underscores the novel’s contention that women are no longer dominated and have become the dominators.

In a further difference from *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne*, Thomas’s novel mocks the concept of a feminine literary tradition or aesthetic by depicting a woman author who relies on the male body to create and, moreover, writes on the behalf of men. At the end, Miranda continues her *Jane Eyre* sequel so that “Jane” and “Robert” unite in order to rectify feminism’s oppression of the colonised male subject. For the most part, though, Miranda has written to arouse her father and her writings construe the feminine creative imagination as little more than an outlet for female sexual frustration. Ultimately, *Charlotte* may castigate the essentialism of second-wave feminists’ attempts to construct a separate feminine literary

¹⁸³ Deborah L. Siegal, “Reading between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a “Postfeminist Moment”, in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, ed. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 75.

tradition but offers a considerably more essentialist conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination than *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Charlotte's attack on *Jane Eyre* and *The Madwoman in the Attic* also amounts to an attack on feminine pleasure that includes the pleasures of middlebrow reading. In contrast to Thomas's novel, *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne* provide a more complex view of the feminine creative imagination even whilst displaying some anxieties about the pleasures of women's reading and writing. The concerns expressed differ in each novel but underscore the significance of pleasure to the middlebrow's attempts to position itself culturally. This celebration of readerly pleasure constitutes further evidence that these neo-Victorian fictions belong to an existing tradition of middlebrow fiction. As I discussed in relation to *Daphne*, neo-Victorian novels often foreground certain forms of literary pleasure to contest but also defend their position in relation to highbrow culture in a characteristically middlebrow manner. These shared pleasures allow middlebrow culture to situate its consumers within a larger community of (often female) readers in an inclusive gesture that constructs the highbrow as elitist and exclusionary.

Yet these neo-Victorian texts do contain a number of oversights. *Daphne* engages with the politics of canon formation to suggest that male academics have compiled a literary canon that refuses to acknowledge the significance of feminine pleasures. This representation of academia belies the lack of theoretical consensus regarding how canon formation occurs. A number of critics have noted that the academy's importance can be overestimated in this area. John Guillory, for instance, has proposed that schools are the arena where canonical "works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries."¹⁸⁴ As

¹⁸⁴ Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, vii.

Lise Jaillant also observes, trade publishers also play a significant role and the field of book history has witnessed “a renewal of interest in uniform series of classics and their role in shaping the literary canon”.¹⁸⁵ *Daphne* also appears unaware of the significant amount of contemporary scholarship that considers women’s writing or the voluminous criticism directed at *The Madwoman in the Attic*’s mission to construct a feminine literary tradition. As Toril Moi pinpoints, second-wave Anglo-American feminists’ goal was to create “a separate canon of women’s writings, not to abolish all canons. But a new canon would not be intrinsically less oppressive than the old.”¹⁸⁶ Yet *Daphne* attempts to compile an alternative canon or literary tradition without considering its potential to be another instrument of oppression.

Though *Daphne* and *Becoming Jane Eyre* borrow from second-wave feminism, neither novel considers the movement’s frequent failure “to address the very real differences that divided women and complicated any monolithic definition of ‘woman’—or feminism itself.”¹⁸⁷ We can see this issue in the way that the two novels treat culturally marginalised groups other than women. In *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Charlotte overcomes her class prejudices against her father’s nurse and her recognition of their shared gender oppression leads her to attempt to connect with a much larger group of women. Yet Kohler’s text never references the postcolonial scholarship that has deconstructed the assumptions of *Jane Eyre*, *The Madwoman in the Attic* and second-wave feminism. In contradistinction to *Becoming Jane Eyre*, *Daphne* acknowledges more fully the effects of class oppression but this analysis is never fully developed. Rather, Picardie’s work suggests that women can transcend their class status through their common love of literature. Of the texts examined in this chapter,

¹⁸⁵ Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 6.

¹⁸⁶ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 77.

¹⁸⁷ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 81.

Charlotte is the sole example to recognise the existence of racial oppression. In this respect, the works reveal that, like *Jane Eyre* and second-wave feminism, neo-Victorian allusions to the Brontës' lives and works often recreate the "axioms of imperialism" and other forms of oppressive discourse.¹⁸⁸

Daphne and *Becoming Jane Eyre*'s shortcomings reflect that feminism often takes more conservative forms when appropriated by middlebrow culture. The conservatism of these novels' feminism becomes apparent from their engagement with second-wave feminism through Gilbert and Gubar. For Kaplan, *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *A Literature of Their Own* "occupy a middle ground" and neither represents "the radical arm of feminist thought".¹⁸⁹ This criticism makes sense if we bear in mind their understanding of *Jane Eyre*'s "happy heterosexual resolution as a harbinger of the new equality between sexes that the women's movement would bring about in the late twentieth century."¹⁹⁰ Unlike Gilbert and Gubar, other strands of second-wave feminism have articulated greater "unease with the heterosexual economy".¹⁹¹ From this unease arose the idea of political lesbianism based upon "a sense that the boundaries of male/female sexual relationships could not be redrawn without a cessation or pause."¹⁹² Hinting at an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality, *Daphne* implies a sexual attraction between Jane and Rachel that alludes to the lesbian subtext of *Rebecca*.¹⁹³ Yet this subtext remains undeveloped and unpoliticised. This turning away indicates that *Daphne* resists the more radical propositions of the second wave.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁸ Spivak, "Three Women's Texts", 243.

¹⁸⁹ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 24.

¹⁹⁰ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, 24.

¹⁹¹ Whelehan, "The New Angels in the House?", 69.

¹⁹² Whelehan, "The New Angels in the House?", 69.

¹⁹³ Throughout the novel, Jane describes and acknowledges a fascination with Rachel's body. Additionally, emails between Paul and Rachel reveal that he suspected her of having an affair with another woman. Picardie, *Daphne*, 175-7. See Nicky Hallet "Did Mrs Danvers Warm Rebecca's Pearls? Significant Exchanges and the Extension of Lesbian Space and Time in Literature", *Feminist Review* 74 (2003): 35-49.

¹⁹⁴ Whelehan, "The New Angels in the House?", 69.

We can perceive the limitations of *Daphne* and *Becoming Jane Eyre*'s feminism further if we consider their portrayal of the feminine creative imagination. In both cases, the novels emphasise that a feminine aesthetic connects feminine readers and writers together into their separate community and culture. Even so, the works continue to celebrate individual women writers in a way that construes their writing as the expression of selfhood to reinscribe—albeit also feminising—familiar Romantic theories of creativity. As such, *Daphne* and *Becoming Jane Eyre* demonstrate my contention in the first chapter that middlebrow culture retains a transhistorical, transcultural, liberal humanist perspective on the creative imagination. This Romantic paradigm, moreover, could not be entirely abandoned by Gilbert and Gubar, who deconstructed neither the concept of the canon nor the concept of creative genius. Of course, *Jane Eyre* itself draws upon Romantic discourses to conceptualise the heroine's creative imagination. By returning to the established "cult text" of second-wave feminism, *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne* bypass more radical aspects of the movement without challenging preconceived notions of the feminine creative imagination.

Does this mean that we should discard the legacy of second-wave feminism's engagement with *Jane Eyre*? Many relevant criticisms of Gilbert and Gubar are raised in *Charlotte*, which perhaps offers a more theorised understanding of women's writing than either *Becoming Jane Eyre* or *Daphne*. Yet *Charlotte* employs this knowledge to offer a reductive conceptualisation of feminine creativity as part of its efforts to portray the arrival of a postfeminist era. *Charlotte*'s excoriation of second-wave feminist scholarship leads to a thorough denigration of feminine literary traditions, pleasures, aesthetics and creative imaginations. The discrediting of femininity in *Charlotte* reveals the continuing political significance of defending the feminine. We might object to Gilbert and Gubar's intervention into the literary canon and criticise their assumptions about the purpose and stability of the concept on

theoretical grounds. Even so, the continuing necessity of *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s endeavour becomes apparent in light of *Charlotte*'s efforts to re-exclude *Jane Eyre* from the canon.

Charlotte is not alone in disparaging feminine cultures or pleasures. One persistently denigrated cultural form associated with femininity has been costume drama adaptations for film and television. As Belén Vidal relates, the "classic adaptation has been often dismissed as conservative, middlebrow cinema on the grounds of the picturesque realism of the costume film and its association with past traditions of quality cinema."¹⁹⁵ As mentioned in the previous chapter, defenders often note that disparagement of the genre relates to its association with feminine spectators and feminised pleasures. To engage with this issue and develop the insights raised in this consideration of neo-Victorian fiction, the next chapter turns to consider the feminine pleasures and aesthetics of screen adaptations of *Jane Eyre*.

¹⁹⁵ Belén Vidal, "Playing in a Minor Key: The Literary Past through the Feminist Imagination", in *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*, ed. Mireia Aragay (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 263.

Chapter 3

Jane Eyre on Screen:

Postfeminist Pleasures and the Feminine Creative Imagination

During the first episode of the 2006 BBC *Jane Eyre* serial, an early scene depicts Mrs Reed (Tara Fitzgerald) of Gateshead and her offspring posing to be painted together (Figure 1).¹ When the foregrounded painter inquires why the young orphan Jane (Georgie Henley) is not included in the picture, he receives the pointed reply that Jane is “not part of the family”. In the last scene of the final, fourth episode, we see that Jane has overcome her childhood exclusion as the adult heroine (Ruth Wilson) gathers her household and extended family for another portrait (Figure 2).² In contrast to the prior tableau, the painter is much less conspicuous and Jane takes a central role in arranging the group before sitting in the middle with Rochester (Toby Stephens) and her children. As the camera pulls out for the final shot, a border of flora and fauna materialises that recalls the subject and style of the sketches and watercolours that Jane has produced throughout the serial. The frame’s appearance consolidates the overall impression that Jane is the work’s architect and artist.

¹ “Episode 1”, *Jane Eyre*, BBC 1, September 24, 2006, television broadcast.

² “Episode 4”, *Jane Eyre*, BBC1, October 15, 2006, television broadcast.

Figure 1. A point-of-view shot as seen by the excluded Jane, who watches as an artist paints Mrs Reed and her cousins. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

Figure 2. Just before the credits, the production's final image demonstrates the triumph of Jane's artistic empowerment and her inclusive attitude to family. Episode 4, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

In this ending to the BBC serial, Jane's creative imagination becomes an indication of her agency and empowerment. Like this BBC version, many other recent costume drama adaptations of *Jane Eyre* prominently feature and feminise the heroine's creativity. In this chapter, I will compare the gendering of the heroine's creative activities and desires in the four most recent screen versions of *Jane Eyre*. In chronological order, these adaptations include: *Jane Eyre* (feature film, Franco Zeffirelli, 1996); *Jane Eyre* (telefilm, ITV, 1997)³; *Jane Eyre* (television serial, BBC, 2006) and *Jane Eyre* (feature film, Cary Fukunaga, 2011). Central to this chapter will be an examination of the productions' interpretations of the literary *Jane Eyre*'s representation of feminine artistic genius. As part of this analysis, I aim to continue with the previous chapter's exploration of the influence of second-wave feminism on contemporary middlebrow culture. This strand of inquiry means that I will also engage more fully with a concept that was introduced in relation to the neo-Victorian novel *Charlotte*: postfeminism.

In its broadest sense, postfeminism can be summarised as the assumption that gender equality has been achieved and that "encouraging women to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices" can be a replacement for feminism.⁴ Although competing definitions of postfeminist exist, most commentators do not perceive postfeminism to be a theoretical position or a coherent or systematic challenge to feminism.⁵ For Diane Negra, postfeminism offers "commonsensically true" objections to feminism that lack clarity whilst maintaining

³ *Jane Eyre*, ITV, March 9, 1997, television broadcast.

⁴ Shelley Budgeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and 'New Femininities'", in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 281.

⁵ Ann Brooks is a dissenting voice who asserts we should align the label "postfeminism" with postmodernism and postcolonialism but her proposed use of this term has not been widely adopted. Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997). For an example of another significantly different use of the term, see Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

contradictory ideas simultaneously.⁶ For this reason, Rosalind Gill proposes that it is unhelpful to conceive of postfeminism as “an epistemological perspective”, “historical shift” or as “a backlash in which its meanings are pre-specified”.⁷ Rather, she counsels that postfeminism should be viewed as a “critical object—a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire—rather than an analytic perspective.”⁸ According to Gill, this phenomenon manifests in contemporary culture as a “sensibility” that displays several “relatively stable features”.⁹ In her view, the most significant feature that differentiates postfeminism from pre-feminism or antifeminism is the “articulation or suture between feminist and antifeminist ideas”.¹⁰ Not all of the features identified by Gill apply to the *Jane Eyre* adaptations discussed in this chapter.¹¹ Indeed, the family-orientated BBC serial appears to be an exception and resistant to the “extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality amongst all media forms.”¹² But as Negra remarks, “one of the most striking features of the postfeminist epoch has been the simultaneous rise of a self-proclaimed family values culture and a culture in which the sex industry is flourishing”.¹³

Endorsing what is often termed “raunch” culture alongside an emphasis upon “family values”, postfeminist culture maintains a steady emphasis upon women’s choice and empowerment in

⁶ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 4.

⁷ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 148.

⁸ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 148.

⁹ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 149.

¹⁰ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 162.

¹¹ Other features of this sensibility include: “the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation in culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender.” Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 149.

¹² Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 150.

¹³ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 99.

determining the direction of their own lives.¹⁴ As Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon explain, second-wave feminism and postfeminism both promote but also differently envisage female empowerment and agency. In their reckoning, “second wave notions of collective, activist struggle are replaced with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule” within a postfeminist culture.¹⁵ Gill observes that this emphasis on choice has resulted in a new stereotype of the “sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever ‘up for it’.”¹⁶ Yet the same individualistic discourse of choice and empowerment pervades the discussion of the “opt-out revolution”. This phrase refers to the perceived phenomenon that increasing numbers of “heterosexual women are forsaking the contemporary role of working mother, which is associated with economic independence, self-reliance, and self-actualization, to return to the more traditional, economically dependent role of full-time-stay-at-home mom.”¹⁷ The media has consistently reported this “revolution” since the 1980s, supporting Negra’s view that “one of postfeminism’s master narratives is that of ‘retreatism’, which operates as a powerful device for shepherding women out of the public sphere.”¹⁸ For the most part, postfeminist culture reinterprets female empowerment as an individualistic concept that validates “conservative norms as the ultimate ‘best choices’ in women’s lives”.¹⁹ We can perceive this postfeminist celebration of “female empowerment and agency (in certain realms)” alongside “neo-traditionalist definitions of femininity” in the final shot of the BBC *Jane Eyre*.²⁰ In this scene, the representation of the heroine’s creativity portrays her agency as inextricable from her fulfilment as a wife, mother and homemaker.

¹⁴ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket, 2006).

¹⁵ Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, 24.

¹⁶ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 151.

¹⁷ Arielle Kuperberg and Pamela Stone, “The Media Depiction of Women Who Opt Out”, *Gender and Society* 22, no. 4 (2008): 498.

¹⁸ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 5.

¹⁹ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 4.

²⁰ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 109.

As the recent *Jane Eyre* adaptations reveal, the “neo-traditionalist” strands of postfeminism enthusiastically recycle femininities from a pre-feminist past. In Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters’ view, popular culture has “become a site where nostalgic and highly stylized images of traditional femininity are endlessly reproduced.”²¹ One of their key contentions is that contemporary popular culture revives an “old-style domestic femininity” that reinvigorates the “feminine mystique” deconstructed by second-wave feminists to perpetuate a “postfeminist mystique”.²² To an extent, postfeminism merely glances backwards in order to remember a period prior to feminism and, thereby, enable feminism to be forgotten. Indeed, Munford and Waters interpret “amnesia as a pre-eminent postfeminist modality” but they also draw attention to the anachronistic nature of postfeminism.²³ This anachronistic nature becomes apparent in the manner that postfeminist culture reconfigures the feminine mystique and retro-femininities as “in some way cognizant of feminism.”²⁴

We can find ample evidence for Munford and Waters’s argument in the costume drama adaptations that have appeared in cinemas and on television since the 1990s. As Iris Kleinecke-Bates points out, television adaptations now require “feisty female leads” who satisfy contemporary audiences’ expectation “to both admire and identify with central characters.”²⁵ Writing on the cycle of Austen adaptations that began in the 1990s, Christine Geraghty notes that these productions frequently updated “the classic adaptation’s traditional emphasis on costume, landscape, and a familiar plot with a new exploration of a more modern

²¹ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 10.

²² Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 77. Also, see Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2001).

²³ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 14.

²⁴ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 77.

²⁵ Iris Kleinecke-Bates, *The Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 64.

sensibility—that of an independent young woman facing choices in her personal life.”²⁶ One of the best examples is Patricia Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* (feature film, 1999), an adaptation portraying Fanny Price (Frances O’Connor) as a rebellious aspiring writer. This protofeminist Fanny speaks out against patriarchal oppression in sharp contrast with the same character’s behaviour in Austen’s 1814 novel. In Gilbert and Gubar’s view, Fanny is a “virtually parentless” poor relation who “can only assert herself through silence, reserve, recalcitrance, and even cunning.”²⁷ By re-envisioning the character as candid and rebellious, Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* reveals how postfeminism reanimates pre-feminist femininities that “incorporate elements of second wave [sic] feminism, primarily by co-opting the signifiers of choice and empowerment with which it is now associated.”²⁸

One signifier that costume drama adaptations frequently co-opt is the feminine creative imagination. As the last chapter discussed, Gilbert and Gubar celebrated nineteenth-century women writers’ expression of their “rebellious feminism” through their creative works.²⁹ Influenced by this discourse, screen adaptations often feature heroines who pursue creative expression (or even careers) to exemplify a characteristically postfeminist “entanglement of feminist and antifeminist themes”.³⁰ In the case of Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*, Fanny embodies an anachronistic form of empowerment that is symbolised and achieved through her desire to be a writer. As Sonia Haiduc observes, “Fanny the writer is offered full command of ‘herstory’ as well as the pleasures of rewriting history and toying with the language and conventions of romance in a self-conscious exercise in genre critique.”³¹ At the end of the

²⁶ Christine Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 33.

²⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 164, 165.

²⁸ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 79.

²⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 338.

³⁰ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 149.

³¹ Sonia Haiduc, “‘Here is the Story of my Career...’: the Woman Writer on Film”, in *The Writer On Film: Screening Literary Authorships*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 59.

film, Fanny seems to be upon the verge of a career as author and this outcome occludes how the meeker literary character struggles to express herself, creatively or otherwise, due to her status as a poor, socially inferior woman. With these changes, Rozema's *Mansfield Park* coheres with Liora Brosh's argument that costume drama adaptations frequently "give women characters a dominant, empowered narrative voice at the expense of the sort of feminist critique women's voicelessness enabled in the novels."³² In a similar manner, the BBC adaptation of *Jane Eyre* ends with an image of the heroine's artwork to indicate her happy domestic situation alongside her creative freedom and control. Consequently, the serial effaces the ambiguities that many second-wave critics perceived in the conclusion to *Jane Eyre*'s courtship.

As the BBC serial demonstrates, costume drama adaptations frequently foreground Jane's creative imagination but also selectively bury the insights of second-wave literary critics when representing the resolution of *Jane Eyre*'s courtship plot. As Munford and Waters observe, if second-wave feminism "engaged in an enormous feat of remembering" then "postfeminism might often seem to partake in the countervailing work of both disremembering and forgetting."³³ We can observe this "disremembering" in the final scene of the BBC serial in which Jane's artwork depicts her family standing before a cheerful home that contrasts with the gloomy Ferndean where she initially reunited with Rochester. Unlike the adaptation, the novel portrays Jane and Rochester as remaining in the ambiguous location of the "dank" and "desolate" Ferndean after their marriage.³⁴ In their interpretation of *Jane Eyre*'s ending, Gilbert and Gubar offer a more generous reading of *Jane Eyre*'s romance than other second-wave critics. Even so, they argue that Ferndean implies that the characters'

³² Liora Brosh, *Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 130.

³³ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 29.

³⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 366-7.

“egalitarian relationship” would be “rare, if not impossible” in nineteenth-century society and indicates CB’s failure to “envision viable solutions to the problem of patriarchal oppression.”³⁵ Like other second-wave literary critics, Gilbert and Gubar argued that CB’s inability to escape the conventions of the courtship plot revealed the limitations of her feminism.

As well as revealing the shortcomings of the novel’s feminism, *Jane Eyre*’s romance also exposes the shortcomings of its conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination. As Juliette Wells pinpoints, CB’s novel “establishes both a tension and interdependence between the narrative of Jane and Rochester’s evolving romance and the narrative of Jane’s development as an artist.”³⁶ In the Introduction to this thesis, I noted that the literary Jane attracts Rochester’s erotic attention through the unusual watercolours in her portfolio. Because of the heroine’s keen interest in looking at and creating art, *Jane Eyre* constitutes a feminine *Künstlerroman* in many respects. Yet once “the obstacles to Jane and Rochester’s marriage have been overcome...her drawing disappears from the novel.”³⁷ Jane never envisions becoming a professional artist and remains an accomplished amateur in contrast to Helen Huntingdon, who pursues a career as a painter in AB’s *Wildfell Hall*. *Jane Eyre*’s inability to transcend the courtship plot raises questions not just about the novel but also about its afterlives within a postfeminist cultural context. What are the limitations in the literary *Jane Eyre*’s conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination? How are these limitations handled in costume drama adaptations? Do the costume drama adaptations expose the literary *Jane Eyre*’s affinity with postfeminist concerns and preoccupations?

³⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 369.

³⁶ Juliette Wells, “‘Some of Your Accomplishments Are Not Ordinary’: The Limits of Artistry in *Jane Eyre*”, in *The Brontës in the World of the Arts*, ed. Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 78.

³⁷ Wells, “‘Some of Your Accomplishments Are Not Ordinary’”, 78.

To answer these questions, I will examine each adaptation of *Jane Eyre* separately but also reflect upon the representation of the feminine creative imagination in CB's novel throughout this chapter. First, I want to investigate how these screen versions contribute to CB's myth and her reputation as a visual artist through an analysis of the different productions' costumes. This inquiry will be followed by a section that explores the concept of postfeminism through a consideration of the ITV telefilm. Of all the adaptations discussed in this chapter, this *Jane Eyre* displays the least thematic concern with the heroine's creative imagination. In contrast to the ITV production, Zeffirelli's film seeks to empower the heroine through her creativity and engages with the feminist discourse surrounding CB's novel. Even so, I want to suggest that this adaptation elucidates the complexity of the relationship between feminism and postfeminism. Thereafter, the chapter turns its attention to the conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination in Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre*. Like the novel itself, Fukunaga's screen version privileges the courtship plot over the narrative of the heroine's artistic development but also offers insight into the pleasures and possibilities of costume drama. Bearing these aspects of the genre in mind, the last section re-examines how the BBC serial responds to a number of postfeminist anxieties and interprets the novel's characterisation of Jane as "neither artist nor accomplished woman, but suspended between these identities."³⁸

Throughout this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the different adaptations handle the tension between the novel's courtship plot and the narrative of Jane's creative development. At the same time, I want to draw upon feminist scholarship that challenges the prevailing prejudices against costume drama as a trivial, feminised, low- or middlebrow genre. According to Stella Bruzzi, costume drama allows women filmmakers to return to the past to "liberate the female imagination and sexuality as well as to help them make sense of the

³⁸ Wells, "Some of Your Accomplishments Are Not Ordinary", 69.

present.”³⁹ In a similar vein, Julianne Pidduck proposes that the genre portrays the “‘feminine’ intimate sphere of literary adaptation, romance and historical biography” that contrasts with the “broader tableau of heroic action” in more epic, masculine historical films.⁴⁰ From Pidduck’s perspective, the genre constitutes a “limited theatre of action that amplifies a nuanced boudoir politics, and an oblique narrative economy of detail often associated with femininity.”⁴¹ For Pam Cook, costume drama “creates a feminised world in which spectacular display predominates, captivating the eye and luring it away from the concerns of narrative and dialogue.”⁴² These analyses reposition costume drama adaptations as constructing and appealing to a feminine aesthetic that privileges feminine fantasy and imaginations. For this reason, Belén Vidal proposes that “strategies of feminist criticism need to be adapted to address the various responses offered by the contemporary imagination of period drama to our enduring fascination with both visual pleasure and narrative cinema.”⁴³

With such insights in mind, I aim to develop this thesis’s earlier discussion of the cultural confusion between CB and the heroine of *Jane Eyre*. In the Introduction to this thesis, I mentioned that such elisions are not unique to CB but also occur in relation to Austen. Screen adaptations of Austen’s novels frequently emphasise or, in some instances, invent correspondences between the heroines and the writer. In many instances, these adaptations allude to the author’s life to portray the heroines as similarly creative and engaged in the process of authoring their own narratives. Indicatively, Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* not only portrays Fanny as a writer but also heightens her resemblance to Austen by having the

³⁹ Stella Bruzzi, “Jane Campion: Costume Drama and Reclaiming Women’s Past”, in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet, 1993), 233.

⁴⁰ Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 6.

⁴¹ Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, 6.

⁴² Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Identity and Costume in British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 77.

⁴³ Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 160.

fictional character read out Austen's juvenilia as her own writing. Though crucial differences exist between how adaptations elide Austen and CB with their heroines, these works influence middlebrow and popular culture's conceptualisation of the heroines and the authors' creative imaginations. To explore the issue in greater depth, I now want to consider how contemporary costume dramas encourage the conflation between the authorial CB and the fictional Jane through the use of costume.

Costuming *Jane Eyre*

Like many prior adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, the BBC serial fashioned its heroine so that her appearance recalled iconic imagery of CB. Throughout the four-episode serial, Jane wears a "governess" dress made from grey silk that was dyed with a reddish tone and accessorised with a red necktie (Figure 3). The heroine's appearance was the result of the production's costume designer Andrea Galer's efforts to bring J.H. Thompson's portrait of CB "to life" (Figure 4).⁴⁴ Another significant painting for Galer was *The Brontë Sisters* (1833-4), BB's well-known depiction of his sisters that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery (Figure 5). In BB's portrait, AB and EB wear shawls that also provided inspiration for the costumes of Mary (Emma Lowndes) and Diana Rivers (Annabel Scholey) in the BBC serial (Figure 6).⁴⁵ Galer's designs perpetuate the assumption also made in *Becoming Jane Eyre* that the Rivers sisters were based upon AB and EB, further blurring the already uncertain distinction between Jane and CB.

⁴⁴ Catherine Paula Han, "Bringing Portraits Alive: Catherine Paula Han Interviews Andrea Galer, the Costume Designer for *Jane Eyre* (2006)", *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 3 (2014): 215-7.

⁴⁵ Han, "Bringing Portraits Alive", 218.

Figure 3. Costume choices draw clear analogies between Jane (Ruth Wilson) and well-known representations of CB. Episode 2, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).



Figure 4. Probably posthumously painted portrait of CB by J.H. Thompson that inspired the 2006 BBC serial *Jane Eyre*. © Brontë Society, Haworth.

Figure 5. *The Brontë Sisters* (1833-4) is BB's iconic representation of his sisters. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 6. In episode 4 of *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006), Mary (Emma Lowndes) and Diana Rivers (Annabel Scholey) were costumed to emphasise their resemblance to AB and EB in BB's *The Brontë Sisters*.

In this respect, the BBC production and other *Jane Eyre* adaptations merely compound the established confusion between CB's life and art by evoking famous imagery of the Brontë

sisters. The painting that inspired Galer's governess dress was based upon an earlier sketch drawn by George Richmond that CB sat for in 1850. Richmond's portrait has become the visual template for the heroines' appearance in many film and television adaptations of *Jane Eyre* (Figure 7). In numerous screen versions, the heroines have worn low chignons with centre partings that recall CB's hairstyle in Richmond's work (Figures 7-11). To heighten the resemblance, many of the productions also portray their heroines wearing either a necktie or bow that refers to the ribbon CB wore in Richmond's portrait.

Figure 7. George Richmond's portrait of CB, drawn from life in 1850. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 8. In Robert Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* (1944), costume and hair design also accentuate the similarities between the fictional heroine and the historical CB.

Figure 9. The Victorian fashion in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre* (1996) heightens the heroine's (Charlotte Gainsborough) likeness to Richmond's portrait of CB.

Figure 10. Starring Samantha Morton as the titular heroine, *Jane Eyre* (ITV, 1997) continues the trend of using costumes that date from the 1830s and 1840s to conflate character and creator.

Figure 11. In one scene, *Jane Eyre's* (Fukunaga, 2011) palette means that the heroine's (Mia Wasikowska) portrayal recreates the tones of the coloured chalks of George Richmond's portrait of CB.

To emphasise the resemblance between CB and Jane further, screen versions encourage the prevailing impression—albeit with varying degrees of period accuracy—that *Jane Eyre* is set at some point during the 1830-40s. In screen adaptations, costumes and other period signifiers contradict the fact that the literary *Jane Eyre* situates itself during the late years of or immediately after the Regency period (1811-20).⁴⁶ When designing costumes for the BBC *Jane Eyre*, Galer admits that she dressed Rochester's rich houseguests in "outfits from around 1835" but that Jane's costumes were based on the fashions of "the late 1840s."⁴⁷ By alluding to these decades, screen versions imply one of two possibilities; either the eighteen-year-old heroine was born around the same time as CB in 1816 or she is living in the period of *Jane Eyre*'s initial publication in 1847. Strikingly, the 2006 BBC adaptation suggests both of these time frames simultaneously. By consistently invoking the Victorian period, the screen adaptations sustain the heroine's popular conflation with CB whilst reworking not just CB's novel but also each other. As Sarah Cardwell observes, successive adaptations "can be regarded as points on a continuum, as parts of the extended development of a singular, infinite meta-text: a valuable story or myth that is constantly growing and developing, being retold, reinterpreted and reassessed."⁴⁸ Part of this meta-text, screen adaptations reflect and contribute to the fact that *Jane Eyre* has come to include CB's myth.

In addition to perpetuating the cultural conflation between CB and Jane, costumes serve the occasionally contradictory functions of being "one of the primary methods of character revelation" whilst also providing visual pleasure.⁴⁹ Costumes must appeal to contemporary

⁴⁶ In one of the novel's more specific references to its period, the heroine describes Walter Scott's poem "Marmion" (1808) as a recent publication. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 316.

⁴⁷ Han, "Bringing Portraits Alive", 221.

⁴⁸ Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 25.

⁴⁹ Pamela Church Gibson and Tamar Jeffers McDonald, "Costume and Adaptation", in *A Companion to Literature, Film, Adaptation*, ed. Deborah Cartmell (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 295.

tastes and Galer emphasises that “clothing should flow, not jar, on the modern viewer”.⁵⁰ Her remark supports Cook’s observation that “costume has to reflect contemporary fashion as well as suggest period. In fact, the situation is generally even more complicated, since aesthetic concerns often demand considerable period slippage.”⁵¹ As Cook also notes, costume, hair and décor serve as “symbolic carriers of period detail” but “are notoriously slippery and anachronistic. They are intertextual sign systems with their own logic which constantly threatens to disrupt the concerns of narrative and dialogue.”⁵² Evidence for this insight can be seen in Galer’s costumes, which support but simultaneously interrupt the BBC adaptation’s narrative. On one level, the contrast between Jane’s plain governess dress and the luxurious costumes of Rochester’s houseguests reinforces the heroine’s humble status as a governess. Hence, Blanche Ingram’s (Christina Cole) costuming and hairstyle nominally coheres with her position as the richer and more beautiful woman (Figure 12). Yet her ornate fashion means that she is more closely aligned with her era and, consequently, appears more outmoded than Jane, who is actually more “fashion-forward” than Rochester’s houseguests.⁵³ Jane’s simpler, comparatively modern appearance means that she does not connote a particular period and remains more appealing to contemporary tastes.

⁵⁰ Han, “Bringing Portraits Alive”, 221.

⁵¹ Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 75.

⁵² Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 67.

⁵³ Han, “Bringing Portraits Alive”, 221.

Figure 12. In episode 2 of *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006), Blanche Ingram's (Christina Cole) ornate clothing and hair denote a specific period more strongly than Jane's styling to construct the production's heroine as the more contemporary character.

Because of its ability to counter narrative and dialogue, costume has frequently attracted the attention of feminist critics interested in contesting the low- or middlebrow status of costume drama. These feminist re-evaluations have frequently defended the value of feminine pleasures whilst suggesting that the genre displays a feminine (or feminised) aesthetic. Often emphasising women's capacity to decode a buried discourse, these critics echo *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s argument that nineteenth-century women were alert to the embedded symbolism of their literary sub-culture. Sue Harper, for example, has discussed the cycle of costume films made by Gainsborough Studios between 1942-50 and argues that their "historical clothes signalled an entry into a world of fantasy where freedom and pleasure were coterminous."⁵⁴ In Harper's view, costume and other visual elements introduced an alternative sensuality that foreground female desires that were otherwise in tension with the

⁵⁴ Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 131.

narratives' conservative sexual mores.⁵⁵ According to Cook, Gainsborough costume dramas represent the past through feminine visual codes to constitute "the feminisation of history itself."⁵⁶ She perceives this feminisation as "evident in the focus upon female desire", the "intimate and domestic settings" and the "fashion, hairstyles and interior decoration which are an essential factor" in audience appeal.⁵⁷ Adopting a similarly imaginative approach to the past, screen versions of *Jane Eyre* frequently collapse the boundary between CB's life and fiction whilst foregrounding her pleasure in her own creativity.

To heighten the resemblance, these heroines share not just physical similarities with CB but also her passion for looking at and creating visual art. Of course, these portrayals merely bring one of *Jane Eyre*'s most clearly autobiographical elements to the fore. In Christine Alexander's view, "*Jane Eyre* represents the author's own spiritual growth to maturity, not least her experience as an amateur artist."⁵⁸ Like Jane, CB had a passion for visual art and her interest has been part of the Brontë myth since *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in which Gaskell revealed that the young CB had "the notion of making her living as an artist".⁵⁹ Additionally, the Brontë Society has displayed her and her siblings' artworks since opening its first museum in 1895.⁶⁰ Because of the increased interest in the Brontës as visual as well as literary artists, Alexander and Jane Sellars published a full-scale study and catalogue of all known Brontë illustrations in 1995.⁶¹ Alluding to these illustrations, a number of *Jane Eyre* adaptations feature scenes where the heroines create sketches and paintings similar in style and subject matter to those produced by CB. During the second episode, for example, the BBC adaptation

⁵⁵ Harper, *Picturing the Past*, 132.

⁵⁶ Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 77.

⁵⁷ Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 77.

⁵⁸ Christine Alexander, "Educating 'The Artist's Eye': Charlotte Brontë and the Pictorial Image", in *The Brontës in the World of the Arts*, ed. Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 11.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 154-5.

⁶⁰ Photographs show that the Brontë siblings' art was on display in the Penny Bank Museum that opened in Haworth in 1895. "Penny Bank Museum", Stock Book 2163, Picture Library, Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth.

⁶¹ Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

portrays Jane making a watercolour portrait of Blanche (Figure 13) that calls attention to the similarity between Jane's artwork and the copies that CB made of images of fashionable ladies (Figure 14).⁶²

Figure 13. When Jane produces this portrait of Blanche, the picture draws attention to Blanche's dated appearance and is painted in a style similar to the copies that CB made of engravings from annuals. Episode 2, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

⁶² "Episode 2", *Jane Eyre*, BBC1, October 1, 2006, television broadcast.

Figure 14. CB's watercolour "French Brunette" painted in 1833. This image is probably a copy of an engraving of a fashionable society beauty from an annual.

By portraying their heroines as artists, screen versions of *Jane Eyre* draw from but also contribute to the wider cultural conceptualisation of CB's creative imagination. Characterising Jane as taking pleasure and enjoyment in her artworks, these adaptations counter how CB's artistic trajectory is often understood as a process of disillusionment and disappointment. As Alexander explains, CB hoped to become a professional miniaturist but abandoned this ambition when she realised that her "method of training was faulty" and that she "had weakened her already poor eyesight with minute drawing".⁶³ Such an outcome reflects that CB underwent what was the standard art education of a Victorian woman but this experience equipped her to work, at best, as "a second-rate miniaturist, a watercolour copyist,

⁶³ Alexander, "Educating 'The Artist's Eye'", 26.

or botanical painter.”⁶⁴ In contradistinction to this narrative of failure, the BBC adaptation does not dismiss the heroine or, by extension, CB for lack of their lack of professionalism but celebrates their creative work anyway. Yet the feminine creative imagination often serves as a problematic signifier of women’s agency and empowerment within a postfeminist context. For further insight into this matter, the next section investigates the postfeminist co-option of *Jane Eyre* by examining the ITV screen version. As mentioned, this telefilm displays limited interest in the subject of Jane’s (Samantha Morton) creative imagination or her identity as an artist. The cursory portrayal reflects that Jane’s artistry becomes subsumed by the production’s greater interest in representing the relationship between Jane and Rochester (Ciarán Hinds).

Jane Eyre (ITV, telefilm, 1997): Postfeminist Individualism

Because of its greater concern with Jane’s romance plot, this adaptation rarely features the heroine undertaking any form of creative expression. In one brief scene, we do see Jane supervising Adèle (Timia Bartomé) during a watercolour lesson. Strikingly, the camera shows neither the teacher nor the student’s canvas but instead concentrates upon their facial expressions to emphasise their shared frustration. When Adèle fumbles with her equipment in exasperation, Jane remains more composed but casts a sympathetic glance at the young girl. Her voice-over relates that “life at Thornfield was tranquil, too tranquil”, paraphrasing the literary heroine’s protestation against the expectation that women “ought to be satisfied with tranquillity”.⁶⁵ The set-up associates Jane’s work as a visual artist with the enforced indolence of nineteenth-century women’s lives. To reinforce this impression, an extreme close-up depicts her rinsing her paintbrush aggressively in a bottle of water to introduce a suppressed sense of turbulence, dynamism and even violence into the moment. Suddenly, a match cut

⁶⁴ Alexander, “Educating ‘The Artist’s Eye’”, 23.

⁶⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 93.

transforms the swirling paint water into a churning river through which Rochester gallops upon horseback. With this transition between the two scenes, the production makes clear that Rochester will provide all the excitement and fulfilment that Jane craves.

The ITV *Jane Eyre* interprets Jane and Rochester's romance in ways that reveal a selective engagement with second-wave feminism. At the beginning, the telefilm foregrounds the inequalities in their relationship but she eventually gains the upper hand over the course of their courtship. In their first formal meeting, Rochester dominates the discussion during a conversation that reinforces her youth and status as his paid employee. In contrast with this early scene, the ending emphasises that Rochester has become a meeker man after being wounded during Thornfield's fire. When he reunites with Jane, Rochester depends upon her to propose marriage and his hesitation signals his emasculation as well as her triumph. As Brosh notes, the ITV production portrays Jane's romance "as a struggle for mastery and control" that she ultimately wins when she transforms the brutish Rochester into an ideal partner.⁶⁶ This conclusion brings to mind Gilbert and Gubar's argument that the injuries suffered by Rochester enable him and Jane to achieve a form of equality not possible "when both were physically whole".⁶⁷ Yet the adaptation overlooks that Gilbert and Gubar understand Jane and Rochester as "equals" who "can afford to depend upon each other with no fear of exploiting the other."⁶⁸

The partial engagement with second-wave feminism becomes further apparent in the brief moments that foreground Jane's madness and anger. For Sarah Wootton, the portrayal of Jane's anger indicates that the screenplay has a "gynocentric bias" and displays an obvious

⁶⁶ Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 132.

⁶⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 368.

⁶⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 369.

debt to *The Madwoman in the Attic*.⁶⁹ As the previous chapter discussed, second-wave literary critics celebrated literary Jane's outcry against women's enforced "tranquillity" as well as women's anger generally. Their influences can be perceived in the way that the adaptation implies Jane's submerged rage as she washes her paintbrush during Adèle's painting lesson. Indeed, the scene invokes the sentiments at the end of the literary heroine's speech where she rebukes those who counsel women "to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags."⁷⁰ Even so, the telefilm never engages with *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s argument that nineteenth-century women expressed their hidden anger through their creative expression.

Rather, the adaptation associates Jane's creativity with her oppression as a woman and Rochester's employee. When Jane and Rochester meet for the first time in the drawing room, Rochester does not request to see her portfolio and merely commands her to play the instrument. In spite of the fact that he does not listen to her, he insists that she continue to perform and his behaviour reminds us of her youthful, feminine and subordinate status. In another rare instance during which Jane creates an artwork, her self-expression reinforces the connection between feminine creativity and feminine powerlessness. In a series of tableaux, we perceive that an already vulnerable Jane experiences intense humiliation during the glamorous Blanche's (Abigail Cruttenden) visit to Thornfield. As the guests amuse themselves in the drawing room over successive evenings, Jane sits in the corner suffering as Rochester openly courts Blanche. Meanwhile, Blanche takes centre stage with Rochester to flirt before the rest of the company whilst playing charades and performing a piano duet together. Throughout this series of vignettes, Blanche and Rochester stand in similar positions that draw analogies between Blanche's musical and dramatic efforts and her artificial,

⁶⁹ Sarah Wootton, "'Picturing in Me a Hero of Romance': The Legacy of *Jane Eyre*'s Byronic Hero", in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre*, ed. Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 238.

⁷⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 93.

performed sexuality (Figures 15 and 16). At the end of the sequence, Jane draws Blanche from afar to emphasise her status as a marginalised observer unlikely to capture Rochester's love. In this way, the adaptation transforms feminine creativity into a symbol of either feminine subjugation or dishonesty.

Figure 15. In *Jane Eyre* (ITV, 1997), Blanche Ingram (Abigail Cruttenden) plays the piano and sings a duet with Rochester (Ciarán Hinds).

Figure 16. During a game of charades, Blanche and Rochester mime the phrase “happy couple”. Their arrangement recalls their earlier duet to imply the similarities between Blanche’s performance of music and feminine wiles. *Jane Eyre* (ITV, 1997).

As the portrayal of feminine creativity reveals, the adaptation consistently emphasises Jane’s disempowerment to amplify her eventual triumph over Rochester. To this end, the production introduces a major change to render the heroine even more vulnerable than her novelistic counterpart. The literary Jane is a penniless orphan for most of her life but experiences a dramatic change in circumstances when she inherits a large fortune from an unknown uncle. With this legacy, Jane receives a range of benefits that include: financial independence; freedom of movement; and new identities as her uncle’s niece and cousin of the Rivers. Her money and relationships reintegrate her into a society that marginalised poverty-stricken female orphans. Such a change in circumstances allows Jane to enter into a newly equal relationship with Rochester. In contrast to the novel, the ITV heroine does not inherit a fortune after leaving Rochester but still wins his heart as a poor woman. One of the adaptation’s executive producers justified these changes on the basis that Jane “doesn’t need

the money” to become Rochester’s equal.⁷¹ As Brosh points out, the production interprets Jane as “empowered because she can reform a masterful man and make him into a satisfying and unthreatening erotic object.”⁷² In the process, the adaptation implies that Jane’s only form of power is erotic and echoes the novel *Charlotte*’s tactic of understanding women’s empowerment as merely a matter of their sexual liberation. As Thomas’s novel and the adaptation foreground, postfeminist discourse tends to be paradoxically and singularly focused upon women’s sexuality. With its emphasis upon Jane’s erotic power, this version of *Jane Eyre* also reveals that costume drama adaptations may be less overt but still belong within the broader sweep of postfeminist culture’s “pervasive sexualisation”.⁷³

As this adaption also elucidates, postfeminism frequently exploits but fails to engage with the wider implications of feminist thought. The focus upon Jane’s erotic power allows the production to overlook the effects of material and social disadvantages on nineteenth-century women. By failing to acknowledge these disadvantages, the production reveals its postfeminist sensibility. For Negra, postfeminism “withdraws from the contemplation of structural inequities fostered by feminism, putting forward diagnostics of femininity that take the place of analyses of political or economic culture.”⁷⁴ Oblivious about such matters, this adaptation neglects to position Jane’s disempowerment within a wider cultural, social or historical context. Indicatively, the production portrays Blanche merely as Jane’s rival in love without taking their shared oppression into account. To this end, the production includes an invented episode where a newly engaged Jane and Rochester inform a piqued Blanche about their upcoming marriage. In addition to foregrounding that Jane has won the battle for Rochester’s love, the incident obfuscates that Blanche too is a victim of a patriarchal culture.

⁷¹ Online interview no longer available but quoted in Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 133.

⁷² Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 132.

⁷³ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 150.

⁷⁴ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 5.

Though unlikeable, Blanche behaves like a coquette because she too needs a husband for social and financial security. The production's priorities reveal how postfeminism promotes a version of female empowerment that lacks feminism's wider social and political awareness.

Because of this lack of awareness, the ITV adaptation offers an individualistic representation of female success that corresponds with postfeminist culture's emphasis on exceptional women. As many commentators have noted, postfeminist culture uses examples of young, educated, usually white women whose successes demonstrate the arrival of gender parity and supply evidence that feminism is no longer required.⁷⁵ As Negra notes, the "options, opportunities, and rewards experienced by women in postfeminist media are consistently those that accrue to an elite minority in possession of considerable educational, social, and financial capital."⁷⁶ We can see how such a manoeuvre works in *Charlotte*, which construes feminism as redundant by emphasising the sexually voracious Miranda's many privileges. In a similar fashion, the ITV *Jane Eyre* solely focuses upon Jane's romantic success and ignores women's wider oppression. For example, the character of Bertha (Sophie Reissner) appears so briefly and monstrosly that few questions arise about her imprisonment by Rochester in Thornfield's attic. Such an interpretation of the character ignores that "as a Creole, Bertha's presence in the text is intriguingly equivocal."⁷⁷ By obscuring Bertha, this adaptation enacts the postfeminist strategy of obscuring women who experience marginalisation not only as a consequence of their gender but also because of (and not limited to) race, class, age, sexual orientation and disability.

With its postfeminist sensibility, the production concentrates upon Jane's erotic empowerment but never considers how the literary heroine uses her creativity to transcend her

⁷⁵ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), 15.

⁷⁶ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 10.

⁷⁷ Carl Plasa, *Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 80.

position as a penniless governess. Contrastingly, Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre* portrays the possibility of women using their creativity to undermine male dominance. The next section will explore how Zeffirelli's version acknowledges the heroine's creative desire and agency in relation to each other. At the same time, I will consider more fully postfeminism's confused engagement with the legacies of second-wave feminism and the co-option of feminine creativity as a symbol of feminine empowerment.

Jane Eyre (Franco Zeffirelli, 1996): Creative (Dis)Empowerment

In comparison to the ITV telefilm, Zeffirelli's cinematic adaptation attributes much significance to the heroine's (Charlotte Gainsborough) creative imagination. Even as a child, Jane's (Anna Paquin) art is an expression of her assertive character that enables her to defy masculine authority in the oppressive Lowood school. In an incident not included in the novel, Jane proposes to draw a portrait of her friend Helen Burns (Leanne Rowe) and cajoles the other girl into removing her bonnet. They are interrupted by the entry of Mr. Brocklehurst (John Wood) who instructs a teacher to cut off Helen's bounteous tresses in a moment inspired by the 1944 adaptation of *Jane Eyre*.⁷⁸ Introducing a further change from the novel, Zeffirelli's film depicts a rebellious Jane protesting and then stepping forward to have her hair also scissored away in a gesture of solidarity. Sparked off by Jane's wish to draw, the scene connects her impetus for creativity with her refusal to capitulate to male domination. This section considers how this film uses the heroine's creative imagination to suggest her feminine agency and empowerment. Yet this production offers a contradictory portrayal of feminine creativity that reflects postfeminist culture's frequently incoherent appropriation of feminism. Before discussing this matter in more depth, I first want to consider the representation of the heroine's artistic identity and desires in CB's novel.

⁷⁸ In the novel, Brocklehurst demands that another pupil be shorn of her curls but the 1944 film has Brocklehurst (Henry Daniell) publicly cut off Helen's (Elizabeth Taylor) hair. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 54.

In the literary *Jane Eyre*, Jane has a remarkable imagination but she also undergoes the standard art training of most Victorian women. During her time at Lowood, Jane's few pleasures include drawing lessons and she comforts herself against her deprivation with fantasies of

freely pencilled houses and trees, picturesque rocks and ruins, Cuyp-like groups of cattle, sweet paintings of butterflies hovering over overblown roses, of birds picking at ripe cherries, of wrens' nests enclosing pearl-like eggs, wreathed about with young ivy sprays.⁷⁹

As Jane's vocabulary and subjects demonstrate, her visualisations “are neither spontaneous nor original” but “copies from prescribed manuals for young ladies”.⁸⁰ Jane learns to draw from copying prints and etchings of famous paintings in a similar way to CB, who was able to produce skilful copies in the amateur media of pencil and watercolour. During the period, a female art pupil might be allowed to draw from life only after years of replicating well-known art works and she would still be restricted to depicting only subjects thought to be appropriate for her gender.⁸¹ These subjects included “[s]till lifes, detailed nature paintings, portraits of children or animals, and domestic scenes” but “large-scale history paintings, nudes, and imaginative art of any sort were unacceptable”.⁸²

Yet the adult Jane refuses to capitulate to the prevailing view that women “were not capable of being great artists. They could only manage, at best, so-called ‘female’ subjects.”⁸³ As I began to explore in the Introduction to this thesis, the heroine's creative genius becomes clear during her first formal meeting with Rochester. When he questions her about her portfolio,

⁷⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 63.

⁸⁰ Alexander, “Educating ‘The Artist's Eye’”, 18.

⁸¹ Hence, John Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing* (1857) advised that a female student beginning to depict from nature should “painstakingly draw a rock for weeks at a time”. Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 107.

⁸² Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 108.

⁸³ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth-Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 47.

Jane makes clear that she worked independently without the help of a drawing master or copies. Significantly, she took inspiration from within her own head and her three works indicate the strange, disconcerting nature of her interiority. In the first watercolour, she portrays a shipwreck in a stormy sea and a cormorant that has snatched a gold bracelet from a drowned corpse floating in the water. Her second watercolour contains a landscape at night presided over by a large, ethereal woman wearing starlight, whilst the final illustration details a massive iceberg against which rests a “colossal” head.⁸⁴ With these bizarre visions, Jane signals her exceptional originality and refusal to be restricted to conventionally feminine subjects.

As a result, Jane’s watercolours have an unsettling effect upon Rochester and enable her to undermine their expected balance of power. Later in the novel, Rochester confesses that he had already examined and been unnerved by her works before meeting her in drawing room.⁸⁵ Yet Rochester ostentatiously scrutinises Jane’s portfolio in an exercise designed to reassert his mastery. Even so, Jane manages to perturb her employer with her curious paintings that repeatedly “gesture toward things below the surface”, such as a dead body of which “a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible” or the iceberg.⁸⁶ As Antonia Losano points out, Jane’s watercolours hint at and provide Rochester with tantalising glimpses into her intriguing but hidden interior.⁸⁷ Because Jane’s attractions cannot be seen, she exercises a more disturbing form of erotic power that contrasts with the obvious appeal of beauties such as Blanche. The fascinated Rochester questions her about her self-absorption as she painted, dwelling on her withdrawal into the inaccessible territory of her imagination. As Rochester’s response reveals,

⁸⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

⁸⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 106.

⁸⁶ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 104. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

⁸⁷ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 107.

he enjoys knowing about her ability to escape his patriarchal control and her creative imagination's capacity to challenge his dominance.

How are the complex ramifications of the literary Jane's creative imagination conveyed in Zeffirelli's adaptation of *Jane Eyre*? The cinematic Rochester (William Hurt) does not review Jane's portfolio during their first formal meeting in Thornfield's drawing room but he examines her work in another episode that retains much of the novel's dialogue to establish the unusualness of Jane's artistry. Like the literary character, this Rochester is impressed but he remains in control throughout their interaction whilst adopting the pose of an indulgent father. Offering praise, Rochester draws timid smiles from Jane until he proposes that she had the assistance of a drawing master. At this point, Jane insists that "no one helped me, Sir!" but the unruffled Rochester just raises his brows and remarks "ah, that wounds your pride". His nonchalance is unsurprising when we consider the representation of Jane's paintings. Though Zeffirelli's film features shots of Jane's watercolours, her works are painted in one rusty colour instead of the varied tints used by the literary heroine (Figure 17). Consequently, the images are difficult to differentiate between and disguise the strangeness and latent power of Jane's imagination. Towards the end of the scene, Rochester posits that she "may have insufficient technique but the thoughts are magical" and he closes the portfolio to indicate the finality of his judgment. Then he commands a compliant Jane to put Adèle to bed. As well as reinforcing Rochester's authority, this exchange foregrounds her passivity and her work's lack of effect upon him.

Figure 17. In the adaptation, Jane's paintings are in monochrome and difficult to differentiate with the effect that their bizarre subject matter becomes less apparent. *Jane Eyre* (Zeffirelli, 1996).

At other points, the adaptation raises the possibility that Jane's art can give her an unexpected power over Rochester. After Rochester inspects her watercolours, the next scene shows Jane teaching Adèle (Joséphine Serre) to draw and the child asks Jane to make a portrait of Rochester. In this invented scene, an affable Rochester asks to see Jane's work but his mood changes abruptly upon seeing how he has been portrayed. He mutters "you have me utterly", then summons Jane to accompany him as he storms away. Before following him, Jane instructs Adèle to continue sketching with the advice to "remember, the shadows are as important as the light." Once Jane has caught up with Rochester, he demands to know whether she believes that "the shadows are as important as the light". As he reiterates her comment, the exchange suggests that Jane's work reveals her perception of his "dark" character and renders him vulnerable.

This moment clarifies that Zeffirelli's production attempts to suggest the heroine's empowerment through the representation of her art but inadvertently circumscribes her creative imagination. Though Jane submits Rochester to her gaze, she sketches whilst swelling music plays to suggest her admiring and romantic feelings towards Rochester, not her penetrating insight. Eventually, she produces a craggy browed profile with a gruff appearance but the image's menace is made apparent primarily by Rochester's response (Figure 18). Rochester's first glimpse of the drawing precipitates a tonal shift and the soundtrack's suddenly sinister music allows his adverse reaction to dominate the rest of the scene. Though Rochester claims that the portrait captures the "vicious" aspect of his personality, his interaction with Jane foregrounds his interpretation rather than her conscious artistry. Similarly to when he examines her portfolio, this scene once again places the emphasis not on Jane's works but upon Rochester's capacity to evaluate her work. As these incidents demonstrate, Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre* represents Jane's artistry in ways that often throw the passivity of her character into relief.

Figure 18. Jane's disturbing portrayal of Rochester. *Jane Eyre* (Zeffirelli, 1996).

The depiction of her creative imagination underscores that the adaptation characterises Jane as a docile and somewhat lacklustre romantic heroine. Jane's most explicit articulations of female equality are omitted, substantially truncated or framed as the outpouring of romantic feeling. She never complains about the "tranquillity" of Thornfield, though she does paraphrase one of the literary Jane's most famous speeches to proclaim "I'm a free human being, independent, with a will of my own" to Rochester.⁸⁸ Yet her language lacks impact because of the amorous soundtrack. Meanwhile, the shot shows the back of Jane's head whilst focusing upon Rochester's face and reaction. In Brosh's view, Zeffirelli's film "remains largely oblivious to the feminist discourses incorporated in other contemporary adaptations, [but] tries to cash in on the popularity of the nineteenth-century novel in the 1990s."⁸⁹ If it is

⁸⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 216.

⁸⁹ Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 131.

oblivious to feminism, however, why does the adaptation periodically attempt to suggest Jane's independence and agency through the representation of her creative imagination?

Though I largely agree with Brosh, I would suggest that this *Jane Eyre* occasionally alludes to and ineptly “tries to cash in on” the iconic feminist status of CB's novel. When promoting the film, Zeffirelli indicated his awareness of *Jane Eyre*'s feminist reputation. “Woman”, he hyperbolically declared in one broadsheet, “was something before Jane Eyre, and something else after.”⁹⁰ Of all the adaptations discussed in this chapter, Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre* makes the most overt reference to the literary debates that have arisen around Bertha. When Rochester's first wife (Maria Schneider) and Jane have their climactic meeting, both are dark-haired and costumed in white. Their doubling emphasises their common passivity, humiliation and sane behaviour (until Rochester's comments goad a frustrated Bertha into attacking him), alluding to Gilbert and Gubar's argument that the two women are alter egos.

As well as engaging with feminist literary criticism, Zeffirelli's adaptation attempts to benefit from the popularity of costume dramas made by feminist filmmakers in the 1990s. For various reasons, “women filmmakers who had made films associated with the feminist filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s moved into the independent sector to make more ‘mainstream’ narrative fiction films” during the 1990s.⁹¹ This development resulted in films such as *Orlando* (feature film, Sally Potter, 1992) and *The Piano* (feature film, Jane Campion, 1993). For Vidal, these films “represent a short-lived spell of feminist experimentation” in which “gender and sexuality come to the fore not only in relation to the buried histories of women but also in light of prior feminine literary models, from Emily Brontë (whose

⁹⁰ William Leith, “*The Observer* Interview: Being Totally Franco”, *The Observer* (September 29, 1996): Review Page, 5; available from LexisNexis Academic <<http://www.lexisnexus.com/hottopics/lnacademic>> [December 6, 2012].

⁹¹ Shelley Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

Wuthering Heights is an oft-cited intertext for *The Piano*) to Virginia Woolf.”⁹² These feminist films had an undeniable influence on many subsequent film and television costume dramas, including the BBC serial *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1996) that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Similarly influenced, Zeffirelli’s film appropriates these revisionist costume dramas’ interest in and exploration of themes related to the feminine creative imagination. The prominence of the feminine creative imagination often signals these costume dramas’ feminist themes and agendas. For example, the titular hero/heroine (Tilda Swinton) in *Orlando* is a writer, whilst *The Piano* depicts the struggles that Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter) faces as a musician. Subsequently, *The Governess* (feature film, Sandra Goldbacher, 1998) and, as mentioned, Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* portray heroines who express their artistic desires using, respectively, photography or writing. In Shelley Cobb’s view, women filmmakers often turn to the figure of the woman author (“in many guises”) as “a representative of female agency and as a vehicle for representing the authorizing of the woman filmmaker, thereby making a claim for the cultural legitimacy of female film authorship.”⁹³ According to Vidal, these women filmmakers often feature creative heroines who enable the films to reflect meta-cinematically upon the project of “putting women back into History by retrieving the past as an already textualised form that needs to be contested *from within* the dominant conventions of the narrative fiction film.”⁹⁴ By featuring a similarly creative heroine, Zeffirelli’s *Jane Eyre* seeks to capitalise upon the vogue for feminist costume dramas and the feminist reputation of CB’s novel.

⁹² Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 128.

⁹³ Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, 15, 1.

⁹⁴ Belén Vidal, “Playing in a Minor Key: The Literary Past through the Feminist Imagination”, in *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*, ed. Mireia Aragay (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 267.

Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre* elucidates that postfeminism does not have to be a hostile "backlash" against but can entail an opportunistic embracing of feminism. Yvonne Tasker and Negra observe that postfeminist culture "works in part to incorporate, assume or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially it also works to commodify feminism".⁹⁵ This commodification includes the transformation of the creative imagination into a convenient symbol of feminine empowerment in cultural texts that otherwise fail to interrogate patriarchal systems or oppression. As discussed in relation to *Mansfield Park*, we can perceive a similarly contradictory treatment of feminine artistry or creative expression in revisionist costume dramas. These films have garnered criticism for their anachronistic heroines but also "invite readings where the terms of the relationship with the past are not 'fidelity' and 'authenticity', but 'pastiche' and 'rewriting'".⁹⁶ As Haiduc points out, the ending of Rozema's *Mansfield Park* implies "the presence of a third character, the writer (Austen/Rozema) who acknowledges the artificiality of her fictional construct."⁹⁷ In this respect, these films offer a more sustained—though occasionally (and perhaps intentionally) incoherent—engagement with feminism that contrasts sharply with the rather more simplistic co-option evident in Zeffirelli's adaptation.

Yet Zeffirelli's film does raise relevant questions about the novel's feminist reputation when we consider the portrayal of the heroine's artistic identity. With its emphasis upon Jane's unique talents, Zeffirelli's production relies upon the heroine's creative imagination as a convenient signifier of her exceptionality. As a child, Jane distinguishes herself through her creativity whilst Rochester recognises the adult Jane's talent when he inspects her portfolio. These moments underscore that this adaptation conceptualises the heroine's feminine creative

⁹⁵ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction", in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

⁹⁶ Vidal, "Playing in a Minor Key", 265.

⁹⁷ Haiduc, "'Here is the Story of my Career...'", 59.

imagination in similarly individualist terms to the ITV telefilm. But in many respects, Zeffirelli's adaptation follows the example of CB's novel by suggesting the heroine's artworks are indicative of her genius and personal empowerment. Using her watercolours, Jane can achieve erotic power over Rochester but this form of empowerment has a limited effect upon either her or other women's systematic oppression in a patriarchal society. At the same time, this scene can be interpreted as parody and critique of nineteenth-century courtship practices. During the period, middle- and upper-class women exhibited their musical or artistic accomplishments to prospective suitors in the drawing room. Ann Bermingham explicates that these rituals were calculated to "arouse masculine desire" whilst disguising this interest "as a detached aesthetic judgement."⁹⁸ Though the eroticism of this activity is made explicit when Rochester examines Jane's work, the two characters are not a courting couple but employer and employee. When he asks to see her portfolio, Rochester is not just inspecting Jane but also assessing her artistic abilities "with an eye to their marketable use in her role as a paid governess."⁹⁹ In Losano's view, by "linking courtship with a job interview, Brontë highlights the fact that courtship is, in essence, a financial transaction".¹⁰⁰ The portfolio scene illustrates that the literary *Jane Eyre* offers a critique of but only identifies individualistic solutions to women's disempowerment in a patriarchal society. Often, *Jane Eyre* touches upon feminist issues in ways that fail and succeed simultaneously to demonstrate a wider feminist consciousness. For this reason, *Jane Eyre* and its representation of the feminine creative imagination are susceptible to being co-opted by a postfeminist culture that "glorifies individual self-making but is studiously inattentive to any context of social and/or economic inequality."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 184.

⁹⁹ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 105.

¹⁰⁰ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 105.

¹⁰¹ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 143.

But even in a postfeminist context, costume drama can be a vehicle to explore and reimagine alternative feminine experiences and identities in complex, productive ways. The possibilities of costume drama are not, however, solely explored in the work of high-profile feminist filmmakers discussed in this section of the chapter. Harper, for example, argues that even the seemingly conservative Gainsborough costume cycle featured “contradictions between the verbal level of the script and the non-verbal discourses of décor and costume.”¹⁰² To consider this matter further, I will now turn my attention to Fukunaga’s adaptation of *Jane Eyre* and its portrayal of the pleasures of the feminine creative imagination.

Jane Eyre (Cary Fukunaga, 2011): Creative Pleasures

In contrast with Zeffirelli’s adaptation and the ITV telefilm, Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* not only includes a scene where Rochester (Michael Fassbender) examines Jane’s (Mia Wasikowska) portfolio but also gives prominence to Jane’s artworks during their encounter. At the beginning of their meeting, Jane enters the drawing room and sees that Rochester has been inspecting her illustrations. During their conversation, Rochester appears uninterested in her watercolours until Jane’s imaginative and dexterous wit momentarily silences him. Disconcerted, Rochester changes the subject and holds one of her pictures in the illumination of the fire whilst he and Adèle (Romy Setton Moore) are, contrastingly, bathed in shadow (Figure 19). Jane’s painting is the focal point of the shot, which shows an anthropomorphic representation of the Evening Star. Unable to fathom the image, Rochester offers the judgment that “the drawings are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar” and his bemusement contrasts with Rochester’s interpretative authority in Zeffirelli’s adaptation. In this moment, the dialogue and the *mise-en-scène* create an interruption within the narrative that briefly privileges Jane’s identity as an artist rather than her status as a romantic heroine.

¹⁰² Harper, *Picturing the Past*, 119.

Figure 19. Interrogating Jane, Rochester holds her watercolour of the “Evening Star” up to the light of the fire. *Jane Eyre* (Fukunaga, 2011).

In this section, I intend to examine how Fukunaga’s production represents the heroine’s identity and pleasures as visual artist. Of all the adaptations discussed in this chapter, Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* is the only one to include the literary Jane’s comment to Rochester that painting her watercolours was “one of the keenest pleasures I have ever known.”¹⁰³ Even so, the film still privileges the courtship plot over the representation of the feminine creative imagination in a similar way to the other productions and the novel itself. Leaving aside this issue for now, I want to engage with Vidal’s proposal that costume dramas often provide “figurative”¹⁰⁴ moments that are at odds with the narrative and “engage us visually as spectators of a reality at a remove”.¹⁰⁵ One of her key contentions is that costume drama has developed an aesthetic that enables a “renewed engagement with the formative narratives of feminism—the struggle for women’s self-expression, the identification between women

¹⁰³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 108.

¹⁰⁴ In her study, Vidal examines figures within the genre to examine how the past is “figured, that is, given visual and narrative entity, and made sense of, through the prism of present stylistic choices, cultural concerns and imaginative (retro-) projections.” Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 10.

artists now and then—while filtering them through the politics of romance.”¹⁰⁶ Her proposition creates possibilities for examining whether Fukunaga’s adaptation displays a feminine aesthetic that enriches its conceptualisation of the heroine’s creative imagination.

Before I consider Fukunaga’s adaptation, I want to explore further the gendering of the heroine’s creativity and aesthetic in the literary *Jane Eyre*. In CB’s novel, the portfolio scene not only reveals the power but also the unconventional gendering of Jane’s creative imagination. Despite her claim that she only managed to create “a pale portrait of the thing I had conceived”, Jane’s art encroaches on what was once considered the sole province of the male genius: originality.¹⁰⁷ As the Introduction to this thesis outlined, Romanticism tended to conceptualise creative genius as being incompatible with femininity. Though attitudes shifted over the course of the nineteenth century, men were generally “associated with production of works of (possible) genius” whilst women “were generally thought incapable of originality and were relegated to the role of copyists”.¹⁰⁸ Repudiating this binary, Jane refuses to copy the work of others and instead uses her imagination to create wholly original paintings.

In terms of method and subject, Jane’s art alludes to the work of one of CB’s key creative influences: the Romantic artist and printmaker John Martin (1789-1854).¹⁰⁹ During the height of his fame, Martin “materialized the romantic and the heroic; and like Byron, both his work and his person became associated in the popular mind with the romantic idiom.”¹¹⁰ Several copies of Martin’s works were purchased by CB’s father, including a large mezzotint of Martin’s *Belshazzar’s Feast* (1820) that hung in Haworth Parsonage for most of the author’s

¹⁰⁶ Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 128.

¹⁰⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

¹⁰⁸ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Various scholars have delineated Martin’s impact on CB. See Christine Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’: Charlotte Brontë and John Martin”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 3 (1995): 285-321; Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 167-76.

¹¹⁰ Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’”, 298.

life.¹¹¹ As *Belshazzar's Feast* exemplifies, Martin frequently reconstructed biblical or ancient scenes and was unabashed about drawing upon his imagination as a source (Figure 20).¹¹² As well as using a similar approach to Martin, Jane's watercolours recall his vast subject matter and dramatic execution. Hence, Jane's pictures feature lurid skies pierced by shafts of light or violently juxtaposed against the landscape. When describing her watercolours, she mentions: one sky "low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea"; "an expanse of sky, dark blue as at twilight" and a "polar winter sky: a muster of northern lights reared their dim lances, close serried, along the horizon."¹¹³ As such, Jane's art undermines the expectations outlined in CB's father's bowdlerised copy of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and The Beautiful* (1757). Through Jane, CB contradicts Burke's account of "the gender associations implicit in the separation of the more masculine, great, and terrible objects that arouse our admiration and the small, pleasing objects that arouse our love and are commonly allied with women."¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Glen, *Charlotte Brontë*, 167-9.

¹¹² Alexander, "'The Burning Clime'", 301-2.

¹¹³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

¹¹⁴ Alexander, "Educating 'The Artist's Eye'", 22-3.

Figure 20. *Belshazzar's Feast* (1820) by John Martin. An engraving of this painting hung in Haworth Parsonage for most of CB's life. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven.

We can appreciate the extent to which Jane rebels against the cultural expectations of the feminine creative imagination if we remember that CB herself never attempted to paint in a Martinesque manner. According to Alexander, Martin inspired the writer to a considerable extent but her creative debt to him can be chiefly glimpsed in her fiction, not her visual art.¹¹⁵ When still hoping to become a professional artist, CB focused upon “reproducing facsimiles of picturesque landscapes” at the same time as her brother “was copying the grandiose scenes of John Martin and experimenting in oils and portraiture.”¹¹⁶ Their choice of copies reflected their different art educations. In BB's case, he received the mentorship and access to materials in the hope that he would join the Royal Academy. In comparison to her brother, CB never received the training that would have allowed her to paint imaginative, large-scale, or Martinesque subjects associated with “the prophet poet, the male ‘genius,’ and material

¹¹⁵ Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’”.

¹¹⁶ Alexander, “Educating ‘The Artist's Eye’”, 22.

beyond the range of female experience.”¹¹⁷ Rather, her artwork consists chiefly of copies of engravings or “tiny portraits, scenes, and flowers for ornamental use.”¹¹⁸

Unlike CB, the literary Jane turns her attention to awe-inspiring, gigantic subjects to challenge contemporary expectations of women’s art. Jane’s creative imagination is excessively large and playfully subverts the implications of Martin’s work whilst furnishing a distinct contrast with her diminutive stature. Captivated by and calling attention to Jane’s smallness throughout the novel, Rochester expresses disbelief that the “head” he sees on her “shoulders” could have produced the images in her portfolio.¹¹⁹ The images themselves portray objects that are either huge or described in terms of their impressive size, such as the “cormorant, dark and large”, the “pinnacle of an iceberg” or a “colossal head”.¹²⁰ As Losano explains, Jane intrigues Rochester partly because her art “rejects her own external appearance as well as what is seen as proper for women in the nineteenth century.”¹²¹ Jane also rejects Martin’s tendency to include in his paintings small human figures whose cowering attests to the “soaring ambition” but also “the comparative impotence of man.”¹²² In Alexander’s reckoning, CB responded to this element in Martin’s paintings as an apt analogy for her own position as “penniless single woman struggling to realize an artistic dream in the face of a hostile reality.”¹²³ Alexander argues that CB’s “heroines all maintain the defiant postures of Martin’s puny figures, asserting their individuality against overwhelming odds.”¹²⁴ Whilst this description may apply to Jane, she rejects any metaphors of personal limitation by refusing to scatter minute humans across her works. Jane’s art is the product of her imagination and an expression of selfhood that indicates an unfailing belief in her own genius.

¹¹⁷ Alexander, “Educating ‘The Artist’s Eye’”, 23.

¹¹⁸ Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’”, 299.

¹¹⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 106.

¹²⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

¹²¹ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 107.

¹²² Glen, *The Imagination in History*, 169.

¹²³ Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’”, 317.

¹²⁴ Alexander, “‘The Burning Clime’”, 318.

Yet Jane's art is not a straightforward attempt to paint "like a man" but rather constructs a feminine aesthetic. Despite the grandeur of her vision, Jane paints portfolio-sized works in watercolour and this amateur, feminine medium calls attention to limitations that prevented many accomplished women from becoming professional artists. Yet Jane does not mention her disadvantages. Instead, she recounts with pleasure and pride the careful work needed to create the different elements within her pictures. When she describes the cormorant in her first watercolour, she calls attention to how the bird's wings are "*flecked* with foam" and that the image was "*touched* with as brilliant tints as my palette could yield, and as with glittering distinctness as my pencil *could impart*" [emphases added].¹²⁵ In the second picture, she mentions that the woman's shape was "portrayed in *tints as dusk and soft* as I could combine" [emphasis added].¹²⁶ The outrageousness of Jane's large-scale masculine fantasy contrasts with the feminine fineness of detail and the delicate techniques that she uses. This combination overturns essentialist views of women's creativity but also elucidates that the conditions that women artists worked under ensured that they did often paint differently from male artists. As well as undermining culturally constructed distinctions, Jane's paintings play with size and scale to foreground the meaningfulness of women's lives and their perspectives. Her artworks signify how her overblown emotions and creative imagination manifest through miniature details in small and feminine watercolours. Jane's artworks suggest that her out-sized creative imagination can be successfully compressed into smaller canvases. In the process, she challenges the masculine values that deemed the smallness of women's art and lives to be indicative of their insignificance and lack of genius. In this respect, she develops not just a feminine but also a feminist perspective.

¹²⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

¹²⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.

In a number of ways, the complex implications of the literary Jane's deceptively small watercolours are explored in Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre*. When the cinematic Rochester examines her work, Jane's watercolours are the most visible part of the shot and the picture's edges constitute a frame within a frame to create a separate, spatially distinct landscape. When Rochester holds Jane's painting up to the firelight, his response and the shot's construction recognise her artistic identity in spite of her amateur status. Set in the drawing room, the scene lends support to Pidduck's argument that costume dramas offer a "series of mannered and self-reflexive microcosms" in which "nuanced relations of desire, power and agency emerge through subtle economies of gesture, costume, *mise en scène* and performance."¹²⁷ Within these microcosms, a decrease in size does not equal a decrease in significance whilst the scale shifts the focus onto the aspects of women's lives overlooked in official, more "masculine" historical and literary narratives. As this example reveals, Fukunaga's adaptation portrays Jane's art using the "gendered economies of scale and significance" often deployed in costume drama and in CB's novel.¹²⁸

Using but also challenging "gendered economies of scale and significance", Fukunaga's film recognises Jane's identity as an artist and overlooked aspects of feminine experience. Of all the adaptations discussed in this chapter, this screen version offers the most developed engagement with the literary Jane's feminine malaise. As in the novel, Jane articulates her desire for "action" as she stands on the third storey of Thornfield and looks outwards through a window. The "woman at the window" is a common trope in costume drama that implies women's longing to escape domestic confinement and enter spheres forbidden to their gender. In Pidduck's view, the frame of the window constitutes a microcosm that constructs "a generic spatio-temporal economy of physical and sexual constraint, a sumptuous waiting

¹²⁷ Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, 4, 17.

¹²⁸ Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, 5.

barely papering over an elaborate yet attenuated register of longing” to create a “gendered structure of feeling”.¹²⁹ Bearing out Pidduck’s analysis, Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* constructs the window, the room and Thornfield as spaces in which seemingly insignificant feminine feelings have larger implications. To suggest Jane’s sense of imprisonment, the shots are from the exterior of the building and through the bars of the windowpane. Also entrapped in the frames of the window, the hovering Mrs Fairfax (Judi Dench) notes that Jane’s situation is a “still doom for a young woman” and offers inadequate advice for self-amusement (Figure 21). Through the inclusion of Mrs Fairfax, the film diverges from the novel to indicate the cross-generational and wide-ranging effects of patriarchal restraint upon women. Such details undermine the impression that Rochester’s arrival in the next scene will permanently relieve Jane’s frustration with the fact that “the skyline over there is ever our limit.”

Figure 21. The shot similarly entraps Jane and Mrs Fairfax (Judi Dench) within the frames of the window to suggest a common feminine confinement. *Jane Eyre* (Fukunaga, 2011).

As this scene at the window also indicates, Fukunaga’s film associates Jane’s acts of looking with her creative imagination. In a point-of-view shot, we see the “skyline” that Jane is contemplating and the landscape connoting a world of movement and action denied to her

¹²⁹ Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, 26.

gender. The staring Jane states “I long sometimes for a power of vision that would overpass it. If I could behold all that I imagine.” Her declaration calls attention to the creative nature of her looking; throughout this adaptation, Jane expresses her creativity not only through her art but also by actively seeking and appreciating visual imagery. When a child, Jane (Amelia Clarkson) examines printed illustrations in a book like her literary counterpart, who retreats into Thomas Bewick’s *A History of British Birds* (1797 and 1804). In another similarity, the cinematic Jane devotes her attention to a depiction of a bird that connotes freedom and imaginative flight. Meanwhile, the shot aligns with Jane’s interests and perspective to marginalise the words in favour of the images (Figure 22).¹³⁰ Such moments construe her aesthetic appreciation as a creative act. The emphasis on her enjoyment of visual culture elucidates that the adaptation complements Jane’s identity as a watercolourist and sketcher by offering a more abstract conceptualisation of her artistry than the productions thus far discussed in this chapter.

Figure 22. The object of the child protagonist’s aesthetic pleasure in *Jane Eyre* (Fukunaga, 2011).

¹³⁰ In the novel, the heroine also acknowledges that her childhood self “cared little, generally speaking” for the “letterpress” in *A History of British Birds*. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 6.

Through its conceptualisation of Jane's creativity, Fukunaga's film feminises and explores the imaginative pleasures of looking. Another such self-reflective moment occurs at the end of a series of vignettes that portrays Jane's education of Adèle within the microcosm of the schoolroom. In the final vignette, Jane and Adèle sit together scrutinising a lurid oil painting of a beastly dog (Figure 23). They use a magnifying glass and several point-of-view shots show the animal's face distorted through the tilting lens as Jane recounts a story about the "gytrash", a folkloric dog-like creature. The scene not only accentuates Jane's creativity but also her resemblance to CB, who used to enjoy examining pictures in detail and then explaining their contents to her schoolmates.¹³¹ Through its allusions to CB and the shots' composition, the tableau associates looking with creative invention and storytelling amongst women but also bears out Vidal's observation that costume drama often constructs "a specific mode of address: a 'present-in-the-past' that asks to be examined in light of its own reconstruction (realism) as well as disguise (fantasy)."¹³² Equating fantasy with looking, the moment constructs a *mise-en-abîme* that enacts the pleasures of watching the film itself.

¹³¹ Gaskell, *Life*, 130-1.

¹³² Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 21.

Figure 23. In *Jane Eyre* (Fukunaga, 2011), Jane tells Adèle tales about the gytrash whilst examining a picture with a magnifying glass.

Moments of this adaptation recognise and grant the heroine an artistic identity that is not subsumed by her more prominent role as a romantic heroine. Throughout my consideration of this screen version, I have demonstrated the importance of costume drama's appeal to and representation of feminine creative pleasures. That said, I remain aware of the feminist critic's responsibility to critique as well as celebrate the feminine or feminised pleasures of popular culture. Reflecting upon this matter, Charlotte Brunsdon identifies a "discernible genre of feminist analysis of popular culture" that turns against the "ensorious" second-wave feminists who will not let the contemporary feminist critic "like the story and its iconography, that is, the accoutrements of femininity."¹³³ Of course, second-wave feminism should be subject to ongoing critique but stereotyping the movement as monolithically hostile to feminine pleasures is reductive.¹³⁴ Such analyses promulgate postfeminist caricatures of

¹³³ Charlotte Brunsdon, "Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella", *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 112, 113.

¹³⁴ Brunsdon observes the "striking homologues" between the defences of feminine pleasure in this recent feminist analysis and second-wave feminist scholarship on women's popular culture. Nevertheless, the oppressor

second-wave feminism as “rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist” and perpetuate the assumption that the movement “disturbed contemporary female subjectivity” by forbidding certain feminine pleasures.¹³⁵ With this warning in mind, I want to return to the BBC adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. Earlier in this chapter, I argued that the production exemplified the neo-traditionalism of postfeminism through its representation of the heroine’s creative empowerment. At the same time, the recurrent depictions of art and illustration foreground Jane’s feminine perspective, pleasures and aesthetic. For this reason, I wish to explore how this adaptation handles the persistent tension within CB’s novel between the courtship plot and its elements of a feminine *Künstlerroman*.

Jane Eyre (BBC, 2006): Creative Retreat

The first episode of the BBC serial begins with the child heroine wandering through an unknown desert wrapped in flowing, orientalist red drapery. Such imagery references the literary protagonist’s description of herself as sitting “cross-legged like a Turk” behind a “red moreen curtain” as she looks at *A History of British Birds* (Figure 24).¹³⁶ After a montage of shots of Jane walking through the sand, the landscape slowly dissolves into a close-up of the young Jane’s eyes. The camera pulls out to reveal that she is sitting in a window seat leafing through a volume of richly coloured images of exotic locations entitled *Voyages and Travels Illustrated* (Figure 25). We realise that the previous scene enacts Jane’s fantasies as she examines the pictures, which are shown in close-up canted angles that match her point of view. Whilst she turns and rotates each page, the audio track shifts to evoke the places depicted to underscore the vividness of her imaginative response to the imagery. As this

of feminine pleasure is no longer “a patriarchal academy but second-wave feminism itself.” Brunsdon, “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella”, 113.

¹³⁵ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 2, 5.

¹³⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 5.

sequence signals, the serial positions the audience as “inside Jane’s imagination” and sharing her perspective throughout its four episodes.¹³⁷

Figure 24. The novelistic character’s childhood reading experience is interpreted for the television screen in the first episode of *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

¹³⁷ Katie Kapurch, ““Why can’t you love me the way I am?”: Fairy Tales, Girlhood and Agency in Neo-Victorian Visions of *Jane Eyre*”, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2012): 95.

Figure 25. As this shot of *Voyages and Travels Illustrated* indicates, the serial positions the audience as sharing Jane's imagined and actual perspectives. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

From its very first moments, the serial prominently features the heroine's creativity by privileging Jane's actual and imagined perspectives. To convey the pleasure and imaginativeness of Jane's looking, the serial uses a lush aesthetic that emphasises Jane's artistry and recalls the type of art she herself produces. Exploring the adaptation's conceptualisation of Jane's creative imagination, this section will situate the portrayal of her artistic identity within prevalent postfeminist anxieties surrounding women's pleasure, agency and self-expression. Before I consider this matter, I want to analyse how the production constructs and genders the heroine's creativity and aesthetic.

Through a visual aesthetic that manifests in the *mise-en-scène* and Jane's artwork alike, the adaptation foregrounds and reveals the state of Jane's femininity. The relationship between Jane's surroundings, art and gender becomes apparent if we compare the art that she produces in spaces where her femininity is punished and spaces where her femininity is encouraged. The first time the child heroine creates an artwork, she is a pupil at Lowood who is sketching

the church graveyard where her friend Helen Burns (Hester Odgers) has been recently buried.¹³⁸ Lowood is portrayed as a patriarchal location that takes on the characteristics of its director, Mr Brocklehurst (Richard McCabe). The institution is dark, cavernous and filled with overbearing Christian iconography that connotes a harsh masculinity, religious extremism and emotional alienation. Illustrating the effects of this place upon Jane, the shot zooms into her sketchbook to show her using a black charcoal pencil to depict freshly dug graves (Figure 26). At this point, she turns the page and a match cut reveals the adult Jane's hand painting fluid green lines (Figure 27). The camera pulls out to reveal that Jane remains in the graveyard but is instructing a class of Lowood pupils to paint the less disturbing subject of a vase of flowers. The transition portrays Jane as nurturing her students and providing a respite from Lowood's hostility towards femininity. Unlike the tortured and dark piece that she produced as a child, the adult Jane favours vivid colours that suggest the momentary release of her inherent, vibrant femininity. As her change in artistic style reveals, the adaptation associates Jane's happiness, artistic aesthetic and flourishing femininity with natural imagery.

¹³⁸ "Episode 1", *Jane Eyre*, BBC1.

Figure 26. The effects of Lowood on Jane can be seen in the dark style and subject matter of her art, both of which suggest her repressed femininity. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

Figure 27. When her femininity is not repressed, Jane creates images of nature and favours bright colours. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

In addition to suggesting Jane's thriving femininity and creativity, such imagery comes to connote her romantic fulfilment when she moves to Thornfield. For the most part, Thornfield nurtures Jane's femininity and allows her to build relationships with the other women in the

household, such as Adèle (Cosima Littlewood) and Mrs Fairfax (Lorraine Ashbourne). When Jane does feel vulnerable, the adaptation heightens the sense of foreboding by portraying Thornfield as a gothic space, such as in the scene where Bertha (Claudia Coulter) enters Jane's bedroom and tears her wedding veil.¹³⁹ Once such threats pass, the natural imagery reappears to imply Jane's prospering femininity and to convey the growth of her feelings for Rochester. Even before Rochester arrives in Thornfield, Jane finds new opportunities to examine illustrations of and actual natural specimens in his study. Throughout the adaptation, she cultivates her artistic and scientific interests by looking at his samples and volumes of natural history (Figure 28). At an early point in their acquaintance, he interrupts her as she peruses one of his books and she apologises for not asking permission. He replies "you're a thinking, intelligent woman, aren't you? Why ever would you need to ask permission?"¹⁴⁰ During the exchange, we can see butterflies and beetles pinned to display boards to imply Jane's sense of vulnerability and capture (Figure 29). A few scenes later when they are outside, Rochester summons Jane to show her a dragonfly and the living creature's freedom underscores her growing ease with him. This recurrent imagery foregrounds Jane and Rochester's shared intellectual interests and their compatibility as a couple. These motifs, moreover, entwine the feminine pleasures of looking with romance. Associating Jane's femininity, artistry and romance with nature, the adaptation offers a gendered and essentialist conceptualisation of her creativity.

¹³⁹ "Episode 3", *Jane Eyre*, BBC1, October 8, 2006, television broadcast.

¹⁴⁰ "Episode 1", *Jane Eyre*, BBC1.

Figure 28. In Thornfield, Jane desires to create and examine natural imagery and her actions align her visual pleasures with femininity and romance. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

Figure 29. In a scene set in Rochester's study, the shot composition draws attention to the entomological subjects that arouse the heroine's visual interest but also imply her sense of entrapment. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

Indeed, the adaptation represents Jane's creativity as inextricable from and primarily in relation to her feminine desire for romance. The entanglement of femininity and romance becomes clear during the scene in which Rochester examines Jane's portfolio as he questions

Jane about her mistreatment at Lowood.¹⁴¹ He sorts through several dreary landscapes before pausing to inspect her watercolours, remarking “these are...interesting” and then inquiring “were you happy when you painted these?” She replies, “I was fully occupied. I was not unhappy.” Such a rejoinder foregrounds Jane’s despair at Lowood and, thereby, throws the ecstasy that she will discover in Thornfield into greater relief. Contrastingly, her literary counterpart declares that creating these works “was to enjoy one of the keenest pleasures I have ever known.”¹⁴² Such a response emphasises her enjoyment of withdrawing into her inner world. As I argued above, the literary Jane fascinates Rochester because she retreats into imaginative spaces beyond his control and this ability calls attention to the self-sufficiency of her interior life. In comparison to the novel’s character, the screen Jane does not enjoy the contemplation of her own genius and her bizarre visions are only an escape from her experiences at Lowood. She lacks a fantasy realm that not only remains inaccessible to Rochester but also provides her with pleasures independent from him.

The curtailing of the feminine creative imagination becomes further apparent if we consider the adaptation’s treatment of Adèle. In CB’s novel, Adèle demonstrates her accomplishments to her new governess during their first meeting after explaining that she learnt these skills for the evenings when “gentlemen and ladies came to see mamma, and I used to dance before them, or to sit on their knees and sing to them”.¹⁴³ During Adèle’s performance, Jane notes the “very bad taste” of the girl recounting “with the lisp of childhood” a tale of sexual betrayal.¹⁴⁴ During a recitation of a poem, Adèle surprises Jane with her poise that was “very unusual indeed at her age, and which proved she had been carefully trained.”¹⁴⁵ By emphasising that Adèle’s routine is inappropriate for her age, the novel underscores the

¹⁴¹ “Episode 1”, *Jane Eyre*, BBC1.

¹⁴² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 108.

¹⁴³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 87.

¹⁴⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 87.

¹⁴⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 87.

licentiousness of the child's upbringing as well as implying the inauthenticity and contrived nature of French femininity and sexuality. Jane does not merely disapprove of the fact that Adèle has been prepared for the sexual market place but she also evinces a dislike of the performing child's lack of spontaneity or originality. Reproducing only what she has been taught, Adèle represents the limitations of feminine accomplishment that Jane seeks to transcend with her watercolours.

In its interpretation of this scene, the BBC adaptation responds to a different set of anxieties that reveal that the production does not endorse or bestow approval on all of the female characters' creative desires and expression.¹⁴⁶ Through its representation of Adèle's creative imagination, the adaptation intensifies and then contains many of the novel's dormant concerns. When Adèle and Jane meet for the first time, Adèle appears through the curtains of a homemade stage whilst wearing a preposterous outfit that appears to be a costume before singing about a lover who "loves his money" (Figure 30). As in CB's novel, the *mise-en-scène* draws attention to Adèle's performance to emphasise that her behaviour and knowledge of coquetry is unnatural. Even though she is immature, the on-screen Adèle is older than the seven- or eight-year-old literary character so appears more likely to act upon her precociously informed desires in the near future. Her half-knowing behaviour, moreover, indicates her exposure to an inappropriately sexual atmosphere to raise the possibility that she may have previously been on sexual display (potentially for purchase) wherever she was living before Thornfield.¹⁴⁷ Her characterisation illustrates the production's awareness of contemporary concerns about the over-sexualisation of children and their vulnerability to paedophilia.

¹⁴⁶ "Episode 1", *Jane Eyre*, BBC1.

¹⁴⁷ Later in the first episode, Rochester reveals that Adèle's mother abandoned Adèle as a baby but he does not reveal who cared for the child until very recently when he brought her to Thornfield.

Figure 30. In their first meeting, Adèle appears in a stage-like space and in a costume that implies her childishness to underscore the inappropriateness of her fantasies. Episode 1, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

In the BBC adaptation, the treatment of Adèle's creative imagination and her sexuality bears the influences of campaigns "to expunge sexuality from girlhood and desexualise the experience of being a girl".¹⁴⁸ As Mary Jane Kehily points out, "the sexualisation of girls" is frequently construed as "a constitutive element in the toxicity of contemporary childhood" in wider discourse.¹⁴⁹ Adèle's first meeting with Jane adumbrates that the adaptation responds to and transforms what are latent uncertainties about the literary Adèle's parenting into an urgent issue. Such suspicions are ultimately allayed in the last scene of the final episode when Adèle appears dressed in age-appropriate clothing and no longer behaving in an overly exuberant or coquettish manner (Figure 31). Her makeover suggests the banishment of her inappropriately sexual desires and fantasies whilst signalling the restoration of her innocence and purity. Adèle's refashioning is a response to the realities of a postfeminist culture where "clothing

¹⁴⁸ Mary Jane Kehily, "Contextualising the Sexualisation of Girls Debate: Innocence, Experience and Young Female Sexuality", *Gender and Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 260-1.

¹⁴⁹ Kehily, "Contextualising the Sexualisation of Girls Debate", 256.

companies target girls as young as five with thongs (G-strings), belly tops, and T-shirts bearing sexually provocative slogans”.¹⁵⁰ But as I suggested earlier, postfeminist raunch culture exists alongside a new emphasis on neo-traditional gender roles.

Figure 31. At the end of the serial, Adèle is dressed in and behaves in a demure manner that implies that she is unlikely to follow her unchaste mother’s example. Episode 4, *Jane Eyre*, BBC1.

Anxieties about the sexualisation of girls are neo-traditional in nature and can be “cast as retrogressive in the light of feminist activism” for a number of reasons.¹⁵¹ As R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes observe, “the insistence that children’s sexuality is endangered from a contemporary and corrupting presence in its life is anything but new.”¹⁵² In another article, they note that the call to protect children’s sexuality from exterior influences reiterates “a particular vision of the sexual child that forecloses the recognition of children as sexual

¹⁵⁰ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture”, 151.

¹⁵¹ Kehily, “Contextualising the Sexualisation of Girls Debate”, 261.

¹⁵² R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, “Sexuality, Youth and the Perils of Endangered Innocence: How History Can Help Us Get Past the Panic”, *Gender and Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 276.

subjects and the possibility of their sexual agency.”¹⁵³ From their perspective, the anti-sexualisation-of-children discourse discourages the “deconstruction of dominant patriarchal culture by vilifying sexuality and reproducing a proscriptive and painfully narrow window of sexual acceptability”.¹⁵⁴ Bearing out this analysis, the BBC adaptation portrays Adèle as moving from a state of corruption to one of purity under Jane’s influence. Her portrayal reflects that girls’ sexuality tends to be discussed in a “bifurcated” manner that “unwittingly affirms enduring patriarchal assumptions regarding femininity, eroticism and respectability.”¹⁵⁵ In this screen version of *Jane Eyre*, the representations of Adèle and Jane’s creativity reflect that postfeminism comprises the overlapping, mutually dependent strands of neo-traditionalism and raunch culture. The contrasting treatment of their creative imaginations corresponds with the way that postfeminist culture “fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits.”¹⁵⁶

These limits are perhaps most apparent in the last scene of the final episode. The image of Jane’s painting occludes all the discomfort and unease in the literary *Jane Eyre*’s ending whilst incorporating Jane’s creative imagination into a retreatist narrative. For Munford and Waters, the “theme of ‘going home’ has assumed a new ascendancy within narratives that seek to explore the shaping of feminine and feminist identities”.¹⁵⁷ Rather than merely representing retreatism as “opting-out” from the workplace, postfeminist culture increasingly “refashions the concept of home so it is less a place of origin than the place where one is destined to belong.”¹⁵⁸ Following this trajectory, the adaptation’s Jane reunites her family and attains uncomplicated domestic bliss in a manner never achieved by her literary counterpart.

¹⁵³ R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, “The Problem with Protection: Why We Need to Move Towards Recognition and the Sexual Agency of Children”, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2009): 391.

¹⁵⁴ Egan and Hawkes, “Sexuality, Youth and the Perils of Endangered Innocence”, 280.

¹⁵⁵ Egan and Hawkes, “Sexuality, Youth and the Perils of Endangered Innocence”, 280.

¹⁵⁶ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 65.

¹⁵⁸ Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, 67.

As mentioned, the serial does not portray the married Jane and Rochester as living in Ferndean with its dismal associations but relocates them to another, unambiguously happy location.

This ending also reconfigures Jane into a contented maternal figure in contradistinction to the literary character's evident ambivalence to children and motherhood. In CB's novel, the heroine mostly exhibits indifference to children and towards Adèle, who remains an awkward reminder of Rochester's sexual past and his many disregarded women. The threat that Adèle represents to the heroine becomes apparent in the epilogue when Jane recounts going to see the girl at the school where she has been placed by Rochester. According to Jane, Adèle's

frantic joy at beholding me again moved me much. She looked pale and thin: she said she was not happy. I found the rules of the establishment too strict, its course of study too severe, for a child of her age: I took her home with me. I meant to become her governess once more; but I soon found this impracticable; my time and cares were now required by another—my husband needed them all. So I sought out a school conducted on a more indulgent system; and near enough to permit my visiting her often, and bringing her home sometimes.¹⁵⁹

The child's repeated expulsions from Jane's "home" reveal that the epilogue struggles to find a location where Adèle and her implications can be contained. The solution continues to marginalise Adèle within the family and does not fully obscure that she now occupies a similar position to Jane when she lived with her Aunt Reed in Gateshead. As this outcome elucidates, the girl cannot be incorporated into the novel's triumphal romance whilst her treatment indicates Jane's individualistic nature.

Unlike the literary *Jane Eyre*, the serial portrays a more maternal Jane who appears mindful of preventing Adèle from experiencing the cruelties that she underwent at Gateshead and Lowood. Of all the adaptations discussed in this chapter, the BBC serial features the most

¹⁵⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 383.

motherly heroine who seeks to be nurtured and to nurture. Jane appears unusually kind and liberal to children in comparison to her contemporaries, including Rochester's houseguests, who treat Adèle with disdain. Their behaviour serves to enhance the sympathy, motherliness and modernity of Jane's character, underscoring that "[m]aternity has never been so visible, so talked about, so public" in postfeminist culture.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, postfeminism advocates the "rewards of motherhood while identifying the spectre of singlehood as a fate to be avoided at all cost."¹⁶¹

To this end, the adaptation silences the literary heroine's undercurrent of discontent with the conclusion to her courtship plot. Before the novelistic Jane returns to Rochester, she refuses St John's request to accompany him to India as his wife and fellow missionary. Jane cannot imagine marrying St John but is captivated with his vision; even whilst justifying her decision, she remains entranced by the idea of a life in which her "work, which had appeared so vague, so hopelessly diffuse" takes "a definite form under his shaping hand".¹⁶² Her fascination persists until the epilogue, which concludes with a description of St John as "unmarried" but fulfilled with the "toil" of his religious mission and anticipating a glorious death.¹⁶³ In this manner, *Jane Eyre* subtextually registers the heroine's desire for an independent identity beyond the domestic sphere, challenging nineteenth-century gender roles. Though the literary Jane's artwork and fascination with St John indicate her desire to escape conventional gender roles, the adaptation portrays Jane willingly submitting to a retreatist narrative whilst containing symbols of her dissatisfaction. In the final scene, the last shot incorporates St John (Andrew Buchan) —who is abroad in India and absent from the

¹⁶⁰ Imogen Tyler, "Pregnant Beauty: Maternal Femininities Under Neoliberalism", in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 22.

¹⁶¹ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 8.

¹⁶² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 344.

¹⁶³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 385.

sitting—into the flowery border surrounding Jane’s family portrait. By representing Jane’s painting in this way, the serial undercuts the literary Jane’s dissatisfaction with her retreat into domesticity to bury her desire for an alternative life defined by her labour rather than her roles of wife and mother.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have considered how different adaptations have remoulded the heroine—and by extension the author—of *Jane Eyre* in relation to postfeminism. Jane and CB alike have become postfeminist icons and their makeovers have wide-ranging implications for contemporary conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination. Ultimately, all of the adaptations privilege Jane’s romance over the competing narrative of her artistic development. As a consequence, the screen versions undercut the disruptive implications of the literary Jane’s feminine creative imagination for the courtship plot whilst constructing resemblances between their heroines and CB. The unstable boundaries between CB’s life and art correspond with the fact that “the construction of the woman writer on the screen feeds on often contradictory cultural readings of female autonomy, as her quest for self-definition is predominately set against the background of romance and the love interest tends to overshadow all other concerns.”¹⁶⁴ But even though this observation also applies to Austen, the two women receive different treatment on screen. *Jane Eyre* adaptations do not allude to CB’s literary career and—at best—recognise her creativity in the form of amateur watercolours and sketches. As Deborah Cartmell notes, in Austen adaptations “it is often the case that, rather than the author becoming her heroine (as in *Jane Eyre*), the heroine becomes the author, a version of Jane Austen, the writer.”¹⁶⁵ For many reasons, we can critique Austen’s transformation into Fanny in Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* but the conflation between

¹⁶⁴ Haiduc, ““Here is the Story of my Career...””, 52.

¹⁶⁵ Deborah Cartmell, “Becoming Jane in Screen Adaptations of Austen’s Fiction”, in *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, ed. Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 161.

the writer's life and art serves as a reminder of her literary success. Contrastingly, *Jane Eyre* adaptations efface CB's creative ambition to emphasise her desire for domestic and romantic satisfaction.

To an extent, these screen versions merely underscore that CB could not envision the same type of creative ambitions for her heroine as she could for herself. CB's novel reveals the limitations of its own feminism through its conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination. As a visual artist, Jane possesses significantly more skill than CB with her ability to draw original works based entirely upon her imagination. Yet she resists becoming a professional artist because her amateur accomplishments are a sign of her gentility "which—given her lack of parents and money—is under siege" for most of the novel.¹⁶⁶ In the next chapter, I will discuss how an artistic career could compromise a woman's reputation when considering the heroine's professional difficulties in *Wildfell Hall*. Unlike Helen in AB's novel, Jane never seeks to capitalise financially on her artistic talents because of her social aspirations. Even when deciding upon possible careers so that she can leave Lowood, she would rather settle upon the "new servitude" of a governess position than sell her artwork.¹⁶⁷

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that CB's novel offers a wider but also partial awareness of women's patriarchal disempowerment, particularly in relation to class. Jane's class prejudices are revealed through the manner in which she depends upon her artistry as a signifier of her gentility. Jane's artworks not only allow other characters to recognise her refinement but also result in the revelation that she is a wealthy heiress. A watercolour on which she has written her true name enables St John to discover that Jane is the niece of a wealthy man and worth a sizeable amount of money. For Wells, in "a broad sense, Jane's

¹⁶⁶ Wells, "Some of Your Accomplishments Are Not Ordinary", 69.

¹⁶⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 77.

artistic skill does establish her as the lady that, once her uncle Eyre's inheritance makes its way to her, she turns out to be."¹⁶⁸ Jane also regards her artistic talents as a mark of distinction that allows her to distance herself from individuals that she considers inferior to herself. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Jane exhibits limited sympathy or sense of connection towards the "coarse" Grace Poole.¹⁶⁹ At one point, a distressed Jane briefly perceives that they may have some similarities but then remembers how the Gateshead maid Bessie commended her for being "quite a lady" on the basis of her accomplishments.¹⁷⁰ As well as comforting Jane, the memory restores her sense of superiority because she possesses "brighter hopes and keener enjoyments" than Grace.¹⁷¹ Her statement reflects that cultural and leisure activities function as class signifiers; Jane distinguishes herself from the working-class woman on the basis that Grace would never, for example, take up painting or sketching as a hobby. By entwining her sense of gentility with her artwork, Jane reveals the novel's blindness to intersections between gender and class oppression. *Jane Eyre's* conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination simultaneously reveals the boldness but also the limitations of the novel's patriarchal critique.

In comparison to *Jane Eyre*, *Wildfell Hall* has a far more complicated courtship plot and its heroine is a professional painter. When comparing the two novels, a number of critics have also argued that *Wildfell Hall* offers the more radical feminist critique of patriarchal oppression. I will examine these possibilities in further depth in the next chapter. As part of this examination, I aim to illuminate the reasons for *Wildfell Hall's* lesser cultural impact in comparison to the much wider dissemination of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

¹⁶⁸ Wells, "Some of Your Accomplishments Are Not Ordinary", 79.

¹⁶⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 133.

¹⁷⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 78.

¹⁷¹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 133.

Chapter 4

Anonymous Anne and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

Cultural Marginalisation and Feminist Rediscovery

In the previous chapter, I discussed the most recent screen version of CB's novel. Released in 2011, Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre* appeared a few months before the "grittily modern director" Andrea Arnold's cinematic adaptation of EB's *Wuthering Heights*.¹ The same year also saw the adaptation of AB's *Wildfell Hall* in the lower-profile form of a ten-episode serial for the daily programme *Woman's Hour* on BBC Radio Four.² These examples seem to confirm George Moore's remark in 1924 that AB is a "sort of literary Cinderella".³ Why has the youngest Brontë never achieved the same critical or popular attention garnered by her sisters? Why does *Wildfell Hall* not have equal cultural status to *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*? To what extent has *Wildfell Hall*'s representation of female artistry determined how we conceive of AB's creative imagination? Could her cultural status be attributed to the distinctly feminine, or even feminist, aesthetic that she develops in *Wildfell Hall*?

Investigating these questions, this chapter will examine a wide range of material for further insight into middlebrow culture's conceptualisation of the Brontës' feminine creative imaginations. To begin, I will consider representations of the historical AB with a particular focus upon middlebrow culture's perceptions of the relationship between AB's life and art. Thereafter, the chapter will turn its attention to three BBC adaptations of *Wildfell Hall*, including *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (television serial, BBC, 1968-9); *The Tenant of Wildfell*

¹ Benjamin Secher, "Dark Depths of Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*", review of *Wuthering Heights* (Andrea Arnold, 2011), *The Telegraph*, November 5, 2011, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/8870091/Dark-depths-of-Andrea-Arnolds-Wuthering-Heights.html>.

² *Woman's Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired November 28, 2011—December 9, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast.

³ George Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street* (London: William Heinemann, 1930), 222.

Hall (television serial, BBC, 1996) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* radio serial in 2011. These analyses seek to explain *Wildfell Hall*'s limited cultural dissemination whilst comparing the constructions of the feminine creative imagination in *Wildfell Hall* and its adaptations. Through this inquiry, I will illustrate the relationship between *Wildfell Hall*, its adaptations and how middlebrow culture understands the youngest Brontë sister's creativity and literary inspiration. In the process, this thesis aims to illuminate the evolution of AB's individual mythology as the "anonymous" Brontë.

We can begin to appreciate the complexity of AB and *Wildfell Hall*'s cultural status if we examine Kate Beaton's cartoon "Dude Watchin' with the Brontës" (Figure 32).⁴ Most obviously, Beaton's satire illustrates that AB has achieved the paradoxical status of being famous for not being famous. In this comic strip, EB and CB enthuse over several boorish, aggressive men whilst ignoring AB's protests that one of these men is an "asshole" and that her sisters are attracted to "alcoholic dickbags". Eventually, AB's siblings inform her that "nobody" buys her books because her attitude is "so inappropriate". Lampooning AB's cultural anonymity, the cartoon implies that *Wildfell Hall* remains overlooked due to its dark themes of alcoholism, marital discord and because AB does not romanticise the men she depicts. "Dude Watchin' with the Brontës" also raises interesting questions about how we conceive of AB's creative imagination. After AB's sisters disparage her, she insists "I'm just telling the truth!" Her zest for truthfulness leads her to share her controversial observations and distinguishes her from her sisters, who struggle to understand her creative vision. Yet AB's reputed commitment to truth is one of many reasons why recent literary critics have reclaimed her as a significant nineteenth-century feminist.

⁴ Kate Beaton, "Dude Watchin' With the Brontës", *Hark! A Vagrant*, accessed July 11, 2015, <http://www.harkavagrant.com/index.php?id=202>.

Figure 32. Kate Beaton’s “Dude Watchin’ with the Brontës” clarifies the feminist recognition garnered by AB but also perpetuates her reputation as the anonymous Brontë sister.

One reason for the burgeoning of feminist interest in AB is that *Wildfell Hall* is a feminine *Künstlerroman* and the only novel by a Brontë sister to feature a heroine who is a professional artist. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that *Wildfell Hall* “tells what is in fact a story of woman’s liberation”, declaring that the heroine Helen Huntingdon offers “a wonderfully useful paradigm of the female artist”.⁵ Indeed, they propose that Helen develops a “functionally ambiguous aesthetic” that she uses to “discover a new aesthetic space for herself”.⁶ Even so, their reading of the novel amounts to less than three pages and merely introduces a discussion of better-known women writers (including AB’s sisters).⁷ Yet commentators have long noted the feminism of AB’s work. In 1912, May Sinclair argued that AB was more audacious than her sisters because her audaciousness “was willed, it was deliberate, open-eyed; it had none of

⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 80, 81.

⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 81.

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 81

the superb consciousness of genius.”⁸ Sinclair made this point in relation to the moment when Helen informs Arthur Huntingdon that they “are husband and wife only in the name”, contending that the “slamming” of Helen’s bedroom door “fairly resounds through the long emptiness of Anne’s novel.”⁹ In more recent criticism, *Wildfell Hall* has come to be regarded as “something of a classic of mid-Victorian feminist protest”.¹⁰ Numerous critics have examined how AB’s novel engages with married women’s property and child custody rights, both of which were crucial issues for first-wave feminism.¹¹ Jessica Cox, for example, argues that *Wildfell Hall* “can be read as a forerunner to the more overtly feminist fiction of the *fin de siècle*” and claims that the youngest Brontë should be understood as “an embryonic New Woman.”¹² Indeed, one 2009 article protests that AB’s feminism has become a critical truism that occludes other aspects of her work.¹³

To understand the changes in AB and *Wildfell Hall*’s reputations, this chapter will begin by analysing how the cultural mythology surrounding AB developed. The initial section will delineate how AB’s creative imagination has been conceptualised more broadly before considering middlebrow culture’s relationship with the writer. Thereafter, the second section will consider the two screen adaptations of *Wildfell Hall* to elucidate why this novel is so rarely adapted. This analysis will provide the foundation for the third section, which examines how the 1996 adaptation interpreted the literary *Wildfell Hall*’s conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination. Continuing this inquiry, the last part of this chapter will

⁸ May Sinclair, *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1912), 54.

⁹ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 1996), 306. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 54.

¹⁰ Ian Ward, “The Case of Helen Huntingdon”, *Criticism* 49, no. 2 (2007): 151.

¹¹ For example, Ward, “The Case of Helen Huntingdon” or Laura C. Berry, “Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 30, no. 1 (1996): 32-55.

¹² Jessica Cox, “Gender, Conflict, Continuity: Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893)”, *Brontë Studies* 35, no. 1 (2010): 31, 38.

¹³ Priti Joshi, “Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë’s *Tenant*”, *Studies in English Literature* 49, no. 4 (2009): 908.

examine the 2011 radio adaptation of *Wildfell Hall* for insight into the portrayal of feminine aesthetics and creative imagination in AB's novel.

Before I consider the cultural dissemination of *Wildfell Hall*, I first want to examine how popular culture represents the youngest Brontë sister and her creative imagination. In comparison to CB and EB, AB's individual life and literary legacy have generally not inspired writers of contemporary neo-Victorian fiction. More generally, AB and *Wildfell Hall* tend to be the subject of brief allusion but not sustained engagement in popular culture. But as "Dude Watchin' with the Brontës" illustrates, AB is not straightforwardly neglected and her marginalisation is frequently satirised. Such arch knowingness has long characterised the portrayal of AB in middlebrow women's writing, with one noteworthy instance being Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). In Gibbons's novel, the character of Mr Meyerburg attempts to prove BB's authorship of his sisters' novels (albeit with the exception of any of AB's works). He claims that the Brontë sisters stole their brother's works because they "were all drunkards, but Anne was the worst of the lot. Branwell who adored her, used to pretend to get drunk at the Black Bull in order to get gin for Anne."¹⁴ The humour of this passage exploits AB's reputation as the mildest, most anonymous Brontë whose most famous work condemned and exposed the traumas of alcoholism. AB's supposed status as the gentlest and most didactic sister has often been accompanied by the assumption that she was the least talented. In Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931), a character opines "[i]sn't it artistically complete that there isn't a quotable line recorded of Anne? Wasn't there some sort of fate which ordained that she, of all the family, should be buried away from home, dying, meek, futile, on that Scarborough sofa."¹⁵ As this quip illustrates, AB tends to be more famous for her death than for her writing.

¹⁴ Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London: Penguin, 2006), 102.

¹⁵ Rachel Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 90.

Mythologizing Anonymity

Similarly to *Cold Comfort Farm* and *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, many recent allusions to AB still position her as the overshadowed, least talented sister. In Polly Teale's biographical play *Brontë* (2005), AB remains a peripheral character but she does briefly step forward during the meta-theatrical opening to state "I am not so interesting to you...My books will be read as background to their great works."¹⁶ In the animated series *Family Guy*, a character mentions the "third Brontë sister" as an example of someone "outshined [sic]" by their kin.¹⁷ In a cut-away gag, CB and EB praise each other for writing *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* until a barely verbal AB exclaims "I made blood out my lady parts". In both cases, AB appears anonymous and does not seem to possess the genius or characteristics that distinguish her sisters from each other. But these examples also illustrate that knowing references to AB's status as the forgotten Brontë have become a familiar joke. In contemporary popular culture, AB might be rarely differentiated as an individual from her sisters but gains presence through her much remarked-upon absence.

We can attribute much of AB's cultural marginalisation to her eldest sister's attempts to ameliorate the outrage and disgust aroused after *Wildfell Hall* first appeared. When Thomas Newby published AB's novel in 1848, the "Bell brothers" had already garnered risqué reputations but *Wildfell Hall* led *The North American Review* to declare that "the whole firm of Bell & Co. seem to have a sense of the depravity of human nature peculiarly their own".¹⁸ Acton Bell was singled out for taking "a morose satisfaction in developing a full and complete science of human brutality".¹⁹ Likewise, *Sharpe's London Magazine* stated that

¹⁶ Polly Teale, *Brontë*, rev. ed. (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), Act I, 6.

¹⁷ "New Kidney in Town", *Family Guy*, Fox, January 9, 2011, television broadcast.

¹⁸ Edwin Percy Whipple, "Novels of the Season", *North American Review* (1848), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 247.

¹⁹ Whipple, "Novels of the Season", 247.

Wildfell Hall was only being reviewed in order to warn readers (particularly women) against the work in spite of the “talent with which it is written.”²⁰ To contain this scandalous text, CB requested that *Wildfell Hall* not be republished after AB’s death and her actions had a long-lasting and detrimental effect upon AB’s literary reputation. CB’s publishers respected her wishes during her lifetime but Thomas Hodgson issued a cheap edition of *Wildfell Hall* in 1854.²¹ To lower the printing costs, Hodgson substantially rearranged and abridged *Wildfell Hall* and did not include the preface that AB wrote for the second “edition” of *Wildfell Hall* in 1848.²² Hodgson’s corrupted text would become the basis of almost all British editions of *Wildfell Hall* until the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1977, G.D. Hargreaves noted that the only versions of *Wildfell Hall* containing the complete text and preface that had been printed in Britain were the second Newby “edition” and the 1931 Shakespeare Head edition.²³ For a long period, many British readers and critics would have been unaware of large sections of *Wildfell Hall*, the novel’s complex structure and the preface where AB stated her artistic intent.

As well as limiting the dissemination of *Wildfell Hall*, CB further damaged AB’s reputation when she penned the “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell”. In the Introduction, I discussed how CB effaced AB’s individuality and compared her unfavourably with EB to render her sister anonymous. CB ignored AB’s literary achievements and directed attention towards her blameless life to obfuscate *Wildfell Hall*. To this end, CB argued that the novel was “an entire mistake” and attributed its disturbing aspects to the fact that AB had

²⁰ Unsigned Review, *Sharpe’s London Magazine* (1848), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 263.

²¹ See G. D. Hargreaves, “Incomplete Texts of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, *Brontë Society Transactions* 16, no. 2 (1972): 113-8 and G.D. Hargreaves, “Further Omissions in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, *Brontë Society Transactions* 17, no. 2 (1977): 115-21.

²² This edition was technically a reprinting as it involved “no resetting of the text type”. Hargreaves, “Further Omissions”, 118.

²³ Hargreaves, “Further Omissions”, 119.

in the course of her life been called on to contemplate, near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; hers was a naturally sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail (of course with fictitious characters, incidents, and situations) as a warning to others.²⁴

Though deliberately vague about who inspired AB, CB's account provided the foundations for Gaskell's attempts in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* to excuse *Wildfell Hall* and further diminish the youngest Brontë's literary reputation.

Also offering limited comment upon AB as a writer, Gaskell enabled a later mythology to arise around *Wildfell Hall*'s genesis through her efforts to divert scandal away from the sisters onto their brother. In its first edition, Gaskell relates BB's involvement with "a mature and wicked woman" who was the mother of a family that had engaged BB as a tutor.²⁵ This woman was easily identifiable as Lydia Robinson of Thorp Green, who launched a libel case that meant references to her had to be deleted from the second edition of the biography that was printed in May of the same year.²⁶ In the third edition of the biography, Gaskell is cagier about what BB actually did but explicitly mentions that AB was a governess in the same family and "was thus a miserable witness to her brother's deterioration of character at this period".²⁷ Accentuating AB's role as bystander to BB's downfall, Gaskell's statement reinforces her later explanation that AB had been motivated to write *Wildfell Hall* after seeing "the deterioration of a character whose profligacy and ruin took their rise in habits of intemperance".²⁸ Together, Gaskell and CB laid the foundations for the common perception that AB created *Wildfell Hall*'s Huntingdon wholly in response to BB's dissolution and death.

²⁴ Charlotte Brontë, "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell", in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-51*, vol 2., ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 745.

²⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 273.

²⁶ See Juliet Barker, *The Brontës*, rev. ed. (London: Abacus, 2010), 943-4.

²⁷ Gaskell, *Life*, 547.

²⁸ Gaskell, *Life*, 344.

Because of Gaskell's *Life*, AB has become famous for acting as BB's passive witness and turns into a secondary figure in *Wildfell Hall*'s creation. This assumption shapes Philippa Stone's *The Captive Dove* (1968), a novelisation of AB and BB's period of employment at Thorp Green and the only Brontë biofiction that I have found that makes AB the main character. Named after one of the youngest Brontë's best-known poems, the title implies her imprisonment as she watches her brother's downfall. At the end of *The Captive Dove*, an acquaintance from Thorp Green believes that BB was the "living model" for *Wildfell Hall*'s dissolute male characters and he imagines "the kind of scenes the girls must have witnessed during the last months of Branwell's life".²⁹ Likewise, the 2013 ITV documentary "The Brilliant Brontë Sisters" featured a lengthy consideration of BB's drug and alcohol addiction.³⁰ At the end of this segment, the presenter Sheila Hancock concluded that out of BB's tragedy "came a wonderful book by Anne, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It is one of the best studies of alcoholism and its effect on the family and everyone around them that I have ever read."

In these examples, the representation of AB's inspiration encourages the entrenched impression that the "depiction of Arthur Huntingdon's decline drew heavily on Branwell's death".³¹ Yet BB was still living when *Wildfell Hall* was written and published and "nor did his family foresee his imminent demise even when Anne wrote the preface to the second edition."³² Undoubtedly, AB was inspired by her biographical experiences but she probably also drew upon additional sources to write about Huntingdon's agonising expiration. Indeed, Marianne Thormählen notes that the description of Huntingdon's physical and spiritual

²⁹ Philippa Stone, *The Captive Dove* (London: Robert Hale, 1968), 225.

³⁰ "The Brilliant Brontë Sisters", *Perspectives*, ITV, March 31, 2013, television broadcast.

³¹ Beulah Maud Delaney, "Anne Brontë: The Unsung Sister, Who Turned the Gaze on Men", *Guardian Books Blog* (blog), January 17, 2014, accessed July 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jan/17/anne-bronte-sister-men-charlotte-emily>.

³² Marianne Thormählen, "The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon", *Modern Language Review* 98, no. 4 (1993): 841.

disintegration reflects contemporary medical discourse and his downfall appears to be a “textbook case” of what were believed to be alcoholism’s effects in the nineteenth century.³³

Thormählen’s comment underscores that biographical explanations of *Wildfell Hall* frequently obscure the intellectual and imaginative dimensions of AB’s work. In the cultural imagination, AB often appears to be a passive medium channelling BB’s tragedy into *Wildfell Hall*.

If she has been effaced from the cultural consciousness as a writer, the youngest Brontë does play a central role in one much mythologised episode of her life: her death and burial in Scarborough. Once again, the fame of this event can be traced back to Gaskell, who ensured AB’s demise is one of the few well-documented occasions in which the youngest Brontë’s actions are definitively known. Covering several months and lasting eighteen uninterrupted pages, Gaskell’s telling of this episode transforms AB’s death into the central event of her life. For once, AB’s siblings do not overshadow her. Relating the courage and piety of “this gentle, patient girl” throughout her last days, Gaskell foregrounds the qualities that thereafter become AB’s distinguishing characteristics in popular and critical accounts.³⁴ In its retelling of Anne’s death, Jude Morgan’s neo-Victorian biofiction *The Taste of Sorrow* (2009) describes the event from Charlotte’s perspective to situate the dying woman at a distance and construct an impression of sacred unreachability.³⁵ As Marion Shaw observes, AB’s death is “tinged with saintliness” and has “become as legendary as Keats’s”.³⁶ Yet the emphasis on AB’s expiration continues to be another factor obscuring her life and work as an author.

The preoccupation with her death has led popular and critical accounts to fixate on AB’s gravesite in Scarborough, away from the rest of her siblings. In “The Brilliant Brontë Sisters”,

³³ Thormählen, “The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*”, 838.

³⁴ Gaskell, *Life*, 364.

³⁵ Jude Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow* (London: Headline Review, 2009), 396–400.

³⁶ Marion Shaw, “Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist”, *Brontë Society Transactions* 21, no. 4 (1994): 125.

the segment dealing with AB begins with a sequence in which the presenter lays flowers on the author's grave. After depositing her bouquet, Hancock sits on a nearby bench and narrates the circumstances of the writer's "gentle and brave" death. Critical accounts discuss AB's grave in similar ways. Elizabeth Langland contends that AB's separation in death "is an eloquent testimony to her individuality, which has too often been lost in the myths of the Brontë sisters."³⁷ In a similar vein, Edward Chitham posits that "the youngest sister, had in her final hours escaped from the kindly dominion of the Brontë family, as she had throughout her artistic life laid claim to judgment not as a minor Brontë, but as a major literary figure in her own right."³⁸ Such statements overlook CB's role in deciding where her sister's body was interred and that her motivations were practical, rather than metaphorical. CB wanted to bury AB quickly where she had died to prevent their elderly father from "making the long and difficult journey from Haworth to Scarborough to attend the funeral."³⁹ In spite of this fact, AB's grave has become an over-determined but convenient symbol of her individuality and literary significance.

Though possessing a more complex cultural status than initially appears, AB and *Wildfell Hall* do not have the same cultural presence as either her sisters or their works. Thus far, I have focused upon how historical events and circumstances contributed to the lesser-known status of *Wildfell Hall* and AB as a writer. But if we look at *Wildfell Hall* as a text, can we find additional reasons for why the author and her novel languished in obscurity for so long? Considering AB's literary reputation in 1924, Moore claimed that *Agnes Grey* was "the most perfect prose narrative in English letters" due to its portrayal of "heat" or sexual desire.⁴⁰ Yet Moore lacked enthusiasm for *Wildfell Hall* and bemoaned that the literary device of Helen's

³⁷ Elizabeth Langland, *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 23.

³⁸ Edward Chitham, *A Life of Anne Brontë* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 186.

³⁹ Barker, *The Brontës*, 702.

⁴⁰ Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street*, 219, 215.

“diary broke the story in halves”.⁴¹ Unlike Moore, feminist critics have frequently praised *Wildfell Hall*’s metatextuality and interpreted this aspect of the novel as evidence of the writer’s feminism. Langland, for example, argues that it “is only by incorporating Helen’s diary into his own narrative that [Gilbert] Markham can reinterpret the Fallen Woman and runaway wife of Victorian convention as the model of excellent womanhood that the novel proposes.”⁴² As such contrasting views reveal, what has come to be seen as an innovative literary technique was once deemed to be *Wildfell Hall*’s major flaw.

Wildfell Hall remains undervalued, moreover, because AB’s discussion of her creative processes rejects Romantic conceptualisations of imaginative genius. AB makes her clearest statement of artistic intent in the preface to the second edition of *Wildfell Hall*, where she responded to the furore surrounding her novel. In the preface, AB insists that *Wildfell Hall* was “carefully copied from life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of exaggeration” and that her intention was “to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it.”⁴³ Supporting this impression, CB’s “Biographical Notice” portrays her sister as burdened with the belief that she “must be honest; she must not varnish, soften, or conceal” to emphasise that AB “hated her work, but would pursue it.”⁴⁴ Neither account construes AB’s writing as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” or eschewal of reason associated with Romantic poetry.⁴⁵ Instead, she labours grimly and dispassionately. Meanwhile, the explanation that AB copied “from life” invalidates the possibility that her work is an expression of or insight into her genius. Occasionally, AB garners praise for her realism and didacticism from defenders who see these qualities as inextricable from her

⁴¹ Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street*, 216.

⁴² Langland, *Anne Brontë*, 123.

⁴³ Anne Brontë, “Preface” to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 1996), 4, 3.

⁴⁴ Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, 745.

⁴⁵ William Wordsworth, “Prefaces of 1800 and 1802” to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), 260.

feminism.⁴⁶ For the most part, though, the writer's didacticism "jars against sensibilities trained to place original imaginativeness above 'copying' of any kind, and to resist anything that looks like preaching."⁴⁷

Consequently, AB has been subject to less mythologizing than her sisters who are associated with more internal, less didactic forms of creativity or "genius". In the Introduction, I argued that popular culture mainly conceives of the creative imagination in Romantic terms and celebrates writers whose works are expressions of their inner selves. Yet CB emphasised in relation to *Wildfell Hall* that "[n]othing less congruous with the writer's nature could be conceived."⁴⁸ The influence of this view of AB's creativity can be seen in Teale's play *Brontë*. On stage, CB and EB are frequently accompanied by external figures that personify their literary struggles or the sources of their inspiration but AB has no corresponding figure. Justifying her decision, Teale explained that the youngest Brontë wrote with a "much stronger social, political agenda [than her sisters]. It was less about her deep unconscious needs, her inner world, and more of a social document; a tool to provoke reform, to expose injustice."⁴⁹ Teale's admission foregrounds that the Brontë myth continues to pivot around the desire to comprehend CB and EB's internalised genius, not AB's social conscience.

Because she is not associated with enigmatic inner genius, AB does not inspire the same mythologizing as her sisters about the relationship between her life and art. Many apparent similarities exist between AB and the heroine of *Agnes Grey*, but *Agnes Grey* is a somewhat subdued work where "nothing happens that would not seem perfectly believable to even the

⁴⁶ For example, Shaw, "A Quiet Feminist", 126.

⁴⁷ Marianne Thormählen, "Standing Alone: Anne Brontë out of the Shadow", *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 4 (2014): 335.

⁴⁸ Brontë, "Biographical Notice", 745.

⁴⁹ Polly Teale, "Reality and Fiction: An Interview with Polly Teale", in Polly Teale, *Brontë*, rev. ed. (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), vii.

most unimaginative reader in any age.”⁵⁰ Any overlaps between AB and Agnes support the assumption that the author drew straightforwardly upon her quotidian experiences for her art. In contrast to *Agnes Grey*, *Wildfell Hall* abounds with dramatic incidents and has been classified as “an early example of the sensation novel”.⁵¹ Yet AB has not been mythologised for writing *Wildfell Hall* partly because she shares few clear correspondences with the rich, beautiful and socially superior Helen. Contrastingly, the greater resemblance between CB and her heroines has engendered much speculation about the writer’s creative process. Commenting upon CB’s unrequited passion for Constantin Héger, Lyndall Gordon posits that “it was to CB’s advantage to have to imagine a relationship, not enact it, for this freed her to imagine from a woman’s point of view.”⁵² Such an interpretation strives to adumbrate how CB’s imagination elaborated and distorted her personal experiences. Biographical readings of AB’s work, however, tend to construe her imaginative methods as much more straightforward. These interpretations—such as *Wildfell Hall* developed from the writer’s “extensive and intimate experience at Thorp Green with the gentlemanly class”—reinforce the impression that AB merely recorded (rather than imaginatively transformed) what she saw.⁵³

AB’s creative imagination, moreover, has not been mythologised because her works are associated with a different form of literary appreciation or pleasure than the childhood enthrallment connoted by her sisters’ novels. “Adulthood” is necessary to perceive the virtues of AB’s work according to Thormählen.⁵⁴ In her view, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are usually first encountered at “a stage in life where few readers worry about the coincidences in the former novel and the oddities of the latter” and this “youthful fascination” never quite

⁵⁰ Thormählen, “Standing Alone”, 334.

⁵¹ Lyn Pykett, *Wilkie Collins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 91.

⁵² Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, rev. ed. (London: Virago, 2008), 135.

⁵³ Langland, *Anne Brontë*, 52.

⁵⁴ Thormählen, “Standing Alone”, 333.

dissipates.⁵⁵ Thormählen's analysis is sweeping. But many readers do remember their first impressions of the other Brontës' novels even after their understanding of these works has become more sophisticated. For Gilbert, these novels conjure up "almost kinetic recollections" of her first readings and she recounts that she had "to rigorously repress" her girlhood enjoyment of *Jane Eyre*'s romance when writing as a feminist critic in the 1970s.⁵⁶ Gilbert's memories support the second chapter's discussion of *Daphne* where I argued that *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are works of high literary repute but also connote a mode of intimate, pleasurable and imaginative reading that recalls childhood and adolescence. Literary indulgence and escape are more difficult to find in *Wildfell Hall*, which deconstructs and portrays the loss of the heroine's "girlish foibles" during her marriage to Huntingdon.⁵⁷ In spite of the many warning signs, the naive Helen proceeds with the marriage under the mistaken impression that—like the heroine of *Jane Eyre*—she can reform Huntingdon. Huntingdon himself espouses the "Byronic notion of romantic love as the highest value in life" but his "Byronic pose is transparently merely a varnish over self-centeredness".⁵⁸ In this respect, *Wildfell Hall* is opposed to acquiescence into fantasy, particularly romantic fantasy.

Partly because of this quality, neither the author nor her work has produced the same degree of middlebrow fascination that surrounds her sisters and their novels. *The Taste of Sorrow*, for example, recycles many familiar tropes about AB as the quiet, marginalised sister who, nevertheless, takes consolation in her writing. But Morgan's biofiction stresses that "Anne had found it was not possible to live entirely without consolations—though it was possible to

⁵⁵ Thormählen, "Standing Alone", 333.

⁵⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert, "Jane Eyre and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 3 (1998): 352, 355.

⁵⁷ Thormählen, "Standing Alone", 333.

⁵⁸ Caroline Franklin, *The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists and Byronism* (London: Routledge, 2013), 134.

live entirely without illusions.”⁵⁹ As this emphasis upon AB’s lack of illusions illustrates, *Wildfell Hall* frustrates the sense of pleasurable escape sought or remembered by readers of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Consequently, middlebrow literature or culture has not constructed a sense of imaginative, feminine connection around *Wildfell Hall* that exists in relation to the other Brontë novels.

Throughout this section, I have attempted to demonstrate the complexity of the cultural response to AB and her work. Continuing to position her as the most anonymous sister, middlebrow culture does not embrace AB with the same passion displayed towards CB or EB but does remain aware of the writer and her literary achievements. To consider middlebrow culture’s response to *Wildfell Hall* further, the next section will examine two BBC screen adaptations of AB’s novel. The lack of *Wildfell Hall* adaptations is another evident reason for the failure of an extensive mythology to develop around AB. In the first chapter, I mentioned that *Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* were similarly overlooked in comparison to *Jane Eyre* for many years. Yet EB’s novel became enshrined in popular culture with the release of William Wyler’s cinematic adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* in 1939. A similar rehabilitation has not occurred for *Wildfell Hall* and I aim to discover why in the following section.

Adapting *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

If a prestigious and commercially successful adaptation of *Wildfell Hall*—such as Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights*—had been made, AB’s novel might occupy a more prominent space in the cultural imaginary. But does *Wildfell Hall*, in some sense, resist being adapted? ■■■

⁵⁹ Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow*, 237.

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⁶⁰ David Conroy, letter to Christopher Fry, July 5, 1967, File T5/2,025/1, *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* General File 1, BBC Written Archives, Reading.

⁶¹ Christopher Fry, letter to David Conroy, July 7, 1967, File T5/2,025/1, *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* General File 1, BBC Written Archives, Reading.

⁶² Fry, letter to Conroy, July 7, 1967.

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⁶³ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 10.

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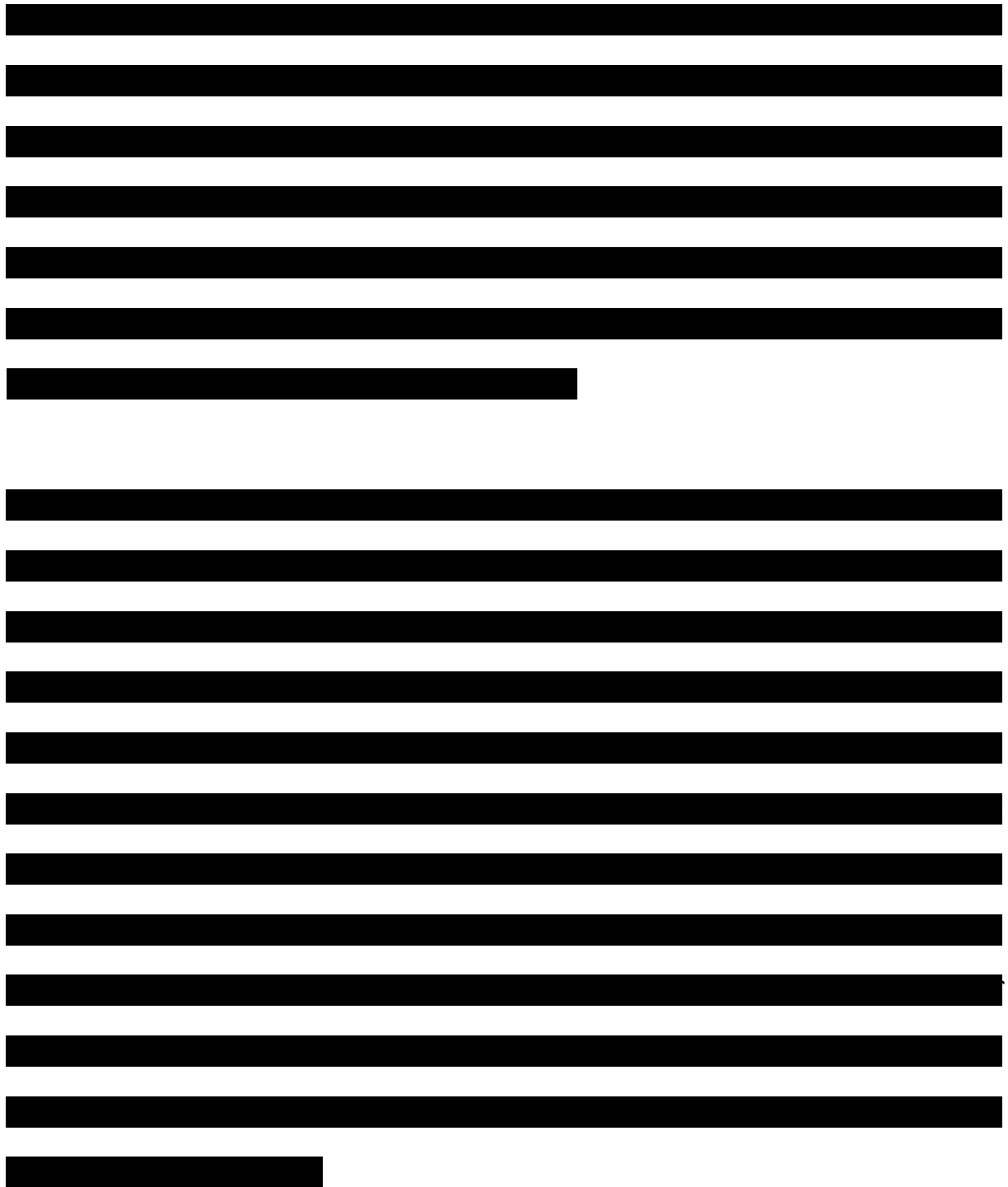
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⁶⁴ This omission could be related to the fact that the serial makers may not have had access to an edition of *Wildfell Hall* with this part of the novel's structure preserved.

⁶⁵ "Marriage: Episode 2", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC2, January 4, 1969, television broadcast.

⁶⁶ "Revolt: Episode 3", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC2, January 11, 1969, television broadcast.

⁶⁷ "Pursuit: Episode 4", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC2, January 18, 1969, television broadcast.



To enliven Gilbert's role as Helen's reader, the 1996 adaptation's third and last episode diverges from and restructures the chronology of the novel.⁷⁰ The episode commences with Gilbert having read only halfway through the journal before he discovers that Helen has gone

⁶⁸ "Episode 1", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC 1, November 17, 1996, television broadcast.

⁶⁹ "Episode 2", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC 1, November 17, 1996, television broadcast.

⁷⁰ "Episode 3", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC 1, November 24, 1996, television broadcast.

to her moribund husband in Grassdale. Though Gilbert learns of this news from Helen's brother, he does not rely upon Helen's letters for news of her situation. Rather, Gilbert returns to the diary to inform himself about the breakdown of Helen's marriage and her desertion of Huntingdon. This information is relayed through flashbacks but returns to the present to show Gilbert as he learns of Helen's decision to leave Huntingdon and become a professional artist. At this point, he can be seen hurriedly reading in a carriage (Figure 33). In a divergence from the novel, the television Gilbert undertakes a journey to Grassdale to try and convince Helen to leave Huntingdon. These changes to the plot introduce movement and dynamism into Gilbert's otherwise passive reading of Helen's narrative.

Figure 33. In its third episode, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC, 1996) enlivens Gilbert's (Toby Stephens) passivity and injects dynamism into his reading by portraying him still absorbed by Helen's diary on his way to see her in Grassdale.

As well as limiting Gilbert's passivity, screen adaptations have to address the fact that *Wildfell Hall*'s two separate plots estrange Helen and Gilbert for most of the novel. Though the beginning of the novel establishes the characters' growing acquaintance, when the literary Gilbert sits down to read Helen's diary, he disappears until Helen's account concludes. After this point, Gilbert's communication with Helen mostly consists of reading her one-sided and unsatisfactory letters to her brother. The set-up means that Helen and Gilbert have limited opportunities to share screen time in adaptations. In the case of the 1968-9 production, the characters meet and have the greatest amount of interaction during the first episode.⁷¹ After this point, Gilbert briefly sees Helen at the beginning of the second episode when she gives him her diary. They do not come into contact again until the start of the fourth episode when he pays a short visit to her studio. From this point onwards, they remain apart until they are reconciled in the adaptation's final scene.

To avoid this problem, the 1996 adaptation dispenses with many of the novel's metatextual layers but Helen and Gilbert are still separated for long periods. As with the earlier production, Helen and Gilbert are in direct contact for most of the first episode yet their opportunities to share screen time lessen with the introduction of her diary. Because the diary is integral to and brings together *Wildfell Hall*'s two plots, Gilbert spends most of the second episode reading and apart from Helen. To limit this problem, the adaptation omits Helen's letters to her brother and increases their contact by having Gilbert visit Helen in Grassdale. With this divergence from the novel, the adaptation attempts to incorporate Gilbert into the second distinct plot relating to the Huntingdons' marriage. Nevertheless, Helen refuses to accompany Gilbert and the two remain apart until Huntingdon dies and Helen returns to

⁷¹ "Episode 1: Recluse", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC2, December 28, 1968, television broadcast. This episode has not been preserved and I have based my discussion around a shooting script held at the BBC Written Archives. Shooting script for "Recluse", *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1968-9), Microfilm reel 232-233, BBC Written Archives, Reading.

Gilbert's neighbourhood. Even with these substantial changes, Gilbert and Helen have only limited contact for most of the third episode. Such alternations, furthermore, led a contemporary reviewer to complain that the episode "had become a trifle confused".⁷²

Additionally, the screen adaptations had to contend with literary Helen's absence for long sections of the novel. At the beginning of AB's *Wildfell Hall*, we receive only Gilbert's limited and frequently mistaken accounts of Helen based upon their brief encounters and malicious gossip. After he finishes reading her diary, Gilbert sees her only once until they are reunited at the end of the novel. To rectify this issue, the 1996 adaptation introduces a number of changes. For example, the first episode begins with Helen fleeing with her son, Arthur (Jackson Leach), from Grassdale so that the viewer has more insight into the heroine's origins than Gilbert. In comparison, AB's *Wildfell Hall* offers limited information about Helen's background until Gilbert receives her diary. In a further difference from the novel, the adaptation reverses the literary Gilbert's mistaken impression that Helen is engaged to another man. Instead, a series of coincidences mean that the televisual Helen—and by extension the audience—understand that Gilbert has chosen another wife. The confusion is eventually corrected so that the serial ends with the promise of Gilbert and Helen's future wedding. As Aleks Sierz notes, we "finish up by seeing Helen's story completely from her point of view."⁷³ Such a plot twist ensures that the heroine of the adaptation is present and appears in full view for much of the third episode. These divergences reveal that the television adaptors felt the need to provide the viewer with more direct access to Helen than the novel.

⁷² Matthew Bond, "Costume Drama in Light and Darker", review of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC, 1996), *The Times*: (November 25, 1996); available from LexisNexis Academic <<http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic>> [May 17, 2013].

⁷³ Aleks Sierz, "Writing and Screening the Heroine of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", in *Sisterhoods: Across the Literature/Media Divide*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kate and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto, 1998), 26

By comparing the two television versions, I have identified specific obstacles for adaptors interpreting the novel for the screen. Underlying these difficulties are additional, more complex causes. We can gain further insight into *Wildfell Hall*'s resistance to adaptation if we return to Moore's complaints concerning the novel's diary section. Moore postulated that AB should have been advised that

You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer, saying 'here is my story; go home and read it.' Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling. Moreover, the presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the question that would arise and the answers that would be given to them, would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story.⁷⁴

If AB had followed Moore's counsel, adaptors would have had a significantly easier time interpreting *Wildfell Hall* for the screen. Most obviously, the omission of the diary section would remove the novel's metatextual structure and counteract the characters' long separation as well as Helen's sustained absence. Moore's analysis makes clear that *Wildfell Hall*'s metatextual devices disrupt the "love story." Yet what if the novel's frustration of romance is deliberate?

Moore's reservations about *Wildfell Hall* make sense if we remember that theorists of the novel have long identified the courtship plot as central to the literary form. For Ian Watt, "the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage."⁷⁵ In many respects, *Wildfell Hall* does not deviate from the expected course and provides us with Gilbert's account of meeting, falling in love with and eventually marrying Helen. Yet the courtship plot becomes disrupted with the inclusion of Helen's diary and her subsequent letters to her brother. Consequently, Helen's unhappy union with Huntingdon becomes the central concern

⁷⁴ Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street*, 216.

⁷⁵ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 148-9.

of the novel. In Kelly Hager's view, "the embedding of a failed marriage plot within this apparently conventional courtship plot suggests that [the] traditional plot is being questioned from the inside out."⁷⁶ *Wildfell Hall* undermines its central courtship plot through its metatextual devices, both of which work in conjunction to render the novel an unlikely adaptation project for the screen.

Certain literary works invite recurrent adaptation because they comply with film and television genres; their compliance reflects that the same literary works have supplied the basis for these screen genres. As Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan note, "writers like Shakespeare and Austen" have been "instrumental to the development of film genre and that, with regard to genre, the relationship between film/television and literature is one of reciprocity."⁷⁷ *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, is frequently adapted because the novel supplies the "formula" for and is compatible with "a specific type" of film or television romantic comedy.⁷⁸ As one of the "founding texts" of gothic romance, *Jane Eyre* is also frequently adapted, in part, because the novel shaped but also conforms to contemporary film and television genres.⁷⁹ *Jane Eyre* does contain a failed marriage plot but, ultimately, Jane and Rochester's happier union triumphs. In contrast to CB's novel, *Wildfell Hall* refuses to bury its failed marriage but rather interpolates this narrative so as to be "read alongside the courtship plot that frames it, as a cautionary tale".⁸⁰ For this reason, the 1996 adaptation had to restructure *Wildfell Hall*'s narrative extensively in order to bring the courtship plot to the fore.

⁷⁶ Kelly Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 29.

⁷⁷ Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 92.

⁷⁸ Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation*, 93.

⁷⁹ Christopher Yiannitsaros, "Women in the Cut of Danger: Female Subjectivity, Unregimented Masculinity and the Pleasure/Danger Symbiosis from the Gothic Romance to the Erotic Thriller", *Women: A Cultural Review* 23, no. 3 (2012): 289. See also Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁸⁰ Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*, 29.

Even with this restructuring, the 1996 adaptation incorporates numerous divergences from the novel in order to portray Gilbert as a convincing romantic hero. As Tess O'Toole notes, the literary Helen's second marriage is to an "oddly unsuitable" man who "while not the rake that Arthur Huntingdon was, is capable, like Arthur, of violence and cowardice (as evidenced by his vicious attack on Frederick Lawrence, which he does not publicly acknowledge)."⁸¹ For many critics, the portrayal of Gilbert's faults reflects that the novel proposes a "radical blueprint for masculine reform".⁸² Though the 1996 television serial acknowledges Gilbert's occasionally oafish behaviour, the production contrasts him favourably to Huntingdon whenever possible.⁸³ Apart from his attack on Frederick, Gilbert mostly appears to be in control of his passions and he displays esteem for Helen in contradistinction to Huntingdon's constant pestering for sex. Additionally, the adaptation invents the incident when Gilbert journeys to Grassdale where he meets the sickly Huntingdon. Gilbert not only accepts Helen's request for him to leave but the viewer also sees the "vivid visual contrast between the inadequacies of one form of masculinity and the superiority of the other."⁸⁴ Such changes reflect the degree to which the literary *Wildfell Hall* frustrates the expectations of romance and courtship associated with costume drama adaptations. Because of its experimentation with the form of the novel, AB's *Wildfell Hall* does not fit within the generic conventions of film and television.

Many of the difficulties associated with *Wildfell Hall* apply to *Wuthering Heights* but EB's novel continues to be adapted more often for several key reasons apart from its greater fame.

⁸¹ Tess O'Toole, "Siblings and Suitors in the Narrative Architecture of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 39, no. 4 (1999): 716.

⁸² Joshi, "Masculinity and Gossip", 911.

⁸³ Liora Brosh, *Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 126-7.

⁸⁴ Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 126.

Like *Wildfell Hall*, *Wuthering Heights* questions the conventional courtship narrative through a complex double plot that is challenging to compress into the standard film length of two hours.⁸⁵ Consequently, many film versions emphasise or entirely omit the novel's second generation of characters to concentrate upon the romance between Catherine and Heathcliff. Wyler and Arnold's adaptations, for example, both adopted this strategy. Such an approach cannot work for *Wildfell Hall* because the novel's metatextual devices ensure that Helen and Gilbert's courtship is impossible to extricate from the plot concerning her marriage to Huntingdon. Helen's diary, in particular, means the successful courtship plot cannot exist independently of the narrative of her first failed marriage. As such, reconfiguring *Wildfell Hall* to prioritise the courtship plot requires screen adaptations to introduce significant changes. The two efforts to adapt *Wildfell Hall* for the screen, furthermore, have been on television. We can attribute this fact to the novel's convoluted double plots, which unfurled over four and three episodes in, respectively, 1968-9 and 1996.

On the few occasions when *Wildfell Hall* has appeared on screen, why have the adaptations been made under the aegis of the BBC? I would contend that both adaptations are a reflection of the BBC's larger and ongoing efforts to fulfil the organisation's public service commitments that justify its licence fee. I began to discuss this point in the first chapter. Since the BBC was founded in 1922, however, the organisation and its concept of public service broadcasting have undergone significant changes. In the remainder of this section, I will examine how public service broadcasting has shifted in response to a changing media landscape whilst arguing that the BBC has consistently occupied a middlebrow cultural position.

⁸⁵ In comparison, the running times of the *Jane Eyre* films discussed in the previous chapter are: 116 minutes for *Jane Eyre* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1996); 108 minutes for *Jane Eyre* (ITV, 1997); 120 minutes for *Jane Eyre* (Cary Fukunaga, 2011).

If we examine the broader cultural context, we can see that the 1968-9 *Wildfell Hall* was part of the BBC's larger strategy to prove its value as a public service broadcaster. From its inception, the BBC's purpose has been debated and this discussion intensified in 1955 with the launch of the commercial station ITV. ITV exposed the BBC's lack of mass appeal but also represented the potential dissolution of "public service values in the face of commercial 'excess'".⁸⁶ Such anxieties meant that when a new television channel was proposed, the BBC was eventually granted the rights to begin broadcasting BBC2 in 1964. As part of its remit, BBC2 had to strike the balance between the Corporation's public service commitments and the need to attract large audiences. Achieving this task was a significant challenge due to the fact that not all parts of the country had access to the channel and receiving the signal required the readjustment of the television set. Even by 1967, BBC2 had yet to establish a clear identity and "it was felt that the channel needed a prestigious programme, an 'event', in order to raise its profile and attract new viewers."⁸⁷ The answer to this problem was *The Forsyte Saga* (1967), a twenty-six episode television dramatization of John Galsworthy's series of novels published between 1906 and 1921.⁸⁸

The Forsyte Saga enabled BBC2 to experiment with the existing conventions of the classic serial on television and laid the groundwork for an adaptation of *Wildfell Hall* the next year. Previously, these productions tended to be shown during the Sunday "teatime slot" and were intended for a family audience.⁸⁹ Adopting a new strategy, BBC2 decided to show *The Forsyte Saga* on Saturday evenings and the decision reflected "a shift in the treatment of classic novels from early evening educational programming to a stronger emphasis on drama

⁸⁶ Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 30, 55.

⁸⁷ Cooke, *British Television Drama*, 83.

⁸⁸ "The Galsworthy saga, more middlebrow than highbrow, was thought to fit the bill, having 'quality' overtones (as a literary, costume drama) yet also having sufficient popular appeal (its 'soap opera' qualities) to attract a broad audience." Cooke, *British Television Drama*, 83.

⁸⁹ Iris Kleinecke, "Representations of the Victorian Age: Interior Spaces and the Detail of Domestic Life in Two Adaptations of Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*", *Screen* 47, no. 2 (2006): 145.

and sometimes a more daring choice of material.”⁹⁰ After the *Forsyte Saga*, *Wildfell Hall* afforded another opportunity for BBC2 to experiment with the more mature, controversial subjects of adultery and addiction in spite of its difficulties as an adaptive project. At the same time, the BBC could continue to position itself as edifying and developing the cultural tastes of the nation by broadcasting an adaptation of a Brontë novel. Such manoeuvres indicate that the BBC continued to construct a “betwixt and between” cultural position beyond the Reithian era.

When the BBC adapted *Wildfell Hall* for the second time, the organisation was working under markedly different conditions but still renegotiating the concept of public service broadcasting.⁹¹ As in earlier years, the BBC had to strike a balance between appealing to popular tastes and maintaining a reputation for “quality” programming. The organisation also had to contend with the effects of the Thatcherite government, the policies of which had created a “consumer-led culture where the broadcasters were forced to compete with an increasing number of competitors for a share of the audiences” during the 1980s.⁹² Concerns about the effect of the free market on British television led to a 1988 White Paper, which suggested that public service principles could be protected by the introduction of a quality threshold.⁹³ The threshold could then be used to determine which companies could bid in auctions for the licencing to make television programmes. Though this proviso meant that public service broadcasting existed in principle, the solution raised questions about what constituted “quality television”. As Charlotte Brunsdon posits, agreed signifiers of “quality” included: a literary source; big-name (often theatrical) British actors; high enough production

⁹⁰ Kleinecke, “Representations of the Victorian Age”, 145.

⁹¹ Cooke, *British Television Drama*, 159.

⁹² Cooke, *British Television Drama*, 162.

⁹³ Cooke, *British Television Drama*, 158-9.

values to satisfy “upper-middle-class taste codes”; and the potential to be internationally exported.⁹⁴

To produce popular and “quality” programmes in the 1990s, the BBC renewed its commitment to making costume drama adaptations after concentrating upon making other types of drama during the 1980s.⁹⁵ The BBC’s cycle of adaptations could be seen as an effort to regain its prior reputation after much of the period’s high-profile “quality” television had appeared on ITV.⁹⁶ In the first chapter, I noted that the BBC possesses a reputation for making adaptations that are “faithful” to their literary sources. As Iris Kleinecke-Bates points out,

the primary concern with fidelity highlights not only the importance of the classic literary text in the public service broadcasting context, but also the often noticeable focus on the BBC as provider of ‘quality’ adaptations vis-à-vis the association of ITV with cheaper and shorter and hence supposedly less ‘faithful’ productions, which illustrates the extent to which the classic serial has become embodiment and marker of quality for the BBC as public service broadcaster.⁹⁷

Satisfying the need for “quality” and “popularity”, costume drama adaptations such as *Wildfell Hall* enabled the BBC to continue to carve out a middlebrow cultural position.

In many respects, the 1996 *Wildfell Hall* indicates the BBC’s difficulty with creating critically lauded, experimental, “quality” television that also attracted large audiences. The adaptation’s initially slow pace incurred the fear “that people might turn off after the first episode—before the audience friendly scenes of Arthur’s debauchery in the flashback of the second episode.”⁹⁸

To counteract this possibility, BBC1 showed the first and second episodes on the same night

⁹⁴ Charlotte Brunsdon, “Problems with Quality”, *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 85-6.

⁹⁵ Robert Giddings and Keith Selby, *The Classic Serial on Television and Radio* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 77.

⁹⁶ As Brunsdon notes, “the recent debate has seen two programmes repeatedly invoked to carry the meaning of quality television: *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada, 1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (Granada, 1984).” Brunsdon, “Problems with Quality”, 84.

⁹⁷ Iris Kleinecke-Bates, *The Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 57.

⁹⁸ Sierz, “Writing and Screening the Heroine”, 22.

to encourage the audience to persist with the challenging drama. Competing for the same viewers, ITV screened Andrew Davies's "much-hyped version of Jane Austen's *Emma*" on the same night as *Wildfell Hall*'s third episode.⁹⁹ Though *Emma* gained a larger audience share, *Wildfell Hall* received more praise from critics who noted the adaptation's complexity and resistance to costume drama clichés. As Sierz explains, many critics saw the production as "a departure from cosy heritageville" and it was frequently "compared with Jane Campion's *The Piano* [1993]".¹⁰⁰ As an art-house movie that became a "cross-over success", *The Piano* provided a useful model for the BBC when the institution was trying to produce "quality" drama that appealed to a wide audience.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the 1996 adaptation of *Wildfell Hall* alludes repeatedly to Campion's film to position itself as a similarly "artistic, feminist, woman-orientated" production.¹⁰² In the next section, I will discuss how the serial references *The Piano* as part of its efforts to represent the feminine creative imagination.

Feminine Creativity in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

During its third episode, the 1996 *Wildfell Hall* shows a newly widowed Helen recuperating from the ordeal of her husband's death in Scarborough. In the scene, she is painting at the seaside before she chases her son beside the water (Figure 34). The setting alludes to a location associated with AB but also recalls a key moment in *The Piano* when the heroine Ada (Holly Hunter) and her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin) return to the beach where Ada's piano has been abandoned (Figure 35). As she plays the instrument and Flora dances, their mother-daughter relationship and the coastline evoke Hélène Cixous's description of

⁹⁹ Sierz, "Writing and Screening the Heroine", 23.

¹⁰⁰ Sierz, "Writing and Screening the Heroine", 24.

¹⁰¹ Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 126.

¹⁰² Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 191.

women's writing in "The Laugh of the Medusa".¹⁰³ *The Piano* has been deemed to be "an almost absurdly literal" engagement with French feminist theory, but the film consolidated Campion's reputation as an acclaimed, outspokenly feminist filmmaker.¹⁰⁴ By emulating *The Piano*, the 1996 *Wildfell Hall* foregrounds and develops its portrayal of a feminine aesthetic and creative expression. Yet the reference to Campion's film meant that the adaptation displayed Helen at a moment when the novel hides her from view. The literary Gilbert has limited knowledge of Helen after Huntingdon's death and relies upon Frederick's "provokingly unsatisfactory" letters for information.¹⁰⁵ Frederick's letters ensure that neither Gilbert nor the reader know of Helen's whereabouts or feelings towards Gilbert until almost the end of the novel. In comparison, the 1996 adaptation leaves no mystery about Helen's location and provides the television viewer with direct access to the heroine.

¹⁰³ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93.

¹⁰⁴ David Baker, "Mudwrestling with the Angels: *The Piano* as Literature", *Southern Review* 30, no. 2 (1997): 192.

¹⁰⁵ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 455.

Figure 34. In a seashore setting, a newly widowed Helen (Tara Fitzgerald) paints and then plays with her son in the third episode of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC, 1996).

Figure 35. In Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), Ada (Holly Hunter) and her daughter (Anna Paquin) return to the seashore where Ada's piano has been abandoned.

The literary *Wildfell Hall* uses the heroine's long absences as one of many strategies to frustrate the conventions of the courtship plot. In this section, I want to explore whether her limited presence affects or elucidates the novel's conceptualisation of her creative imagination. I am also interested in examining how the adaptation portrays the mostly obscured heroine as well as her creative desires and expression. In many respects, the serial represents the heroine's creativity to bring the feminist themes of AB's novel to the fore. But the production borrows from Campion's revisionist costume drama in ways that have complex implications. In the last chapter, I argued that the influence of feminist filmmakers' experiments with the genre could be seen in Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre*. Seeking to benefit from the popularity of feminist revisionist costume drama, Zeffirelli's film illustrates how postfeminist culture often employs feminine creativity as a convenient (but often ill-conceived) signifier of feminine empowerment and agency. Does the BBC *Wildfell Hall* portray the feminine creative imagination in a similarly postfeminist fashion?

Like many costume drama adaptations, the 1996 *Wildfell Hall* foregrounds the courtship plot whilst muting aspects of its literary source's broader feminist concerns. As mentioned earlier, the television production expels any doubts about Helen's second marriage through a depiction of Gilbert that silences the novel's critique of nineteenth-century masculinity whilst darkening Huntingdon's character. In the second episode, Helen asks Huntingdon if she can leave their marriage with her money and their child. After he forbids her, she requests to take only their son. He responds by attempting to rape her. The literary Huntingdon also refuses Helen's pleas and she tells him that henceforth she will be "your child's mother, and *your* housekeeper—nothing more."¹⁰⁶ He replies with a nonplussed "[v]ery good."¹⁰⁷ In this exceptional moment, Helen not only denies Huntingdon his conjugal rights but, even more

¹⁰⁶ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 306.

¹⁰⁷ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 306.

strikingly, he reveals that “possession of her body is of no great interest”.¹⁰⁸ The horror of their exchange does not derive from the threat of sexual violence; Helen is not primarily the victim of her husband but rather the victim of a legal system “that was unable to protect her from spousal abuse, that could not secure the custody of her child, and that was unable to provide her with any effective means to financial independence.”¹⁰⁹ From Liora Brosh’s perspective, the adaptation’s decision to portray Huntingdon as a would-be rapist “lays the responsibility for Helen’s predicament more on the vicious actions of an evil individual than on the broader social, economic, legal, and ideological forces the novel exposes.”¹¹⁰ In this respect, the serial typifies the individualism of postfeminist culture.

Yet this adaptation resists straightforward categorisation as a postfeminist production. Though the production appears postfeminist in its efforts to amplify the romance, Huntingdon is not the sole evil individual but is surrounded by cronies who also treat their wives appallingly. The carousing of his friends in the second episode suggests that Huntingdon’s behaviour is the product of male socialisation within a patriarchal society. Additionally, the adaptation appears to have undertaken a less individualistic engagement with the novel’s feminism if we consider its representation of the heroine’s creativity. Of course, the serial privileges the courtship plot over the narrative of Helen’s artistic development in a similar manner to screen versions of *Jane Eyre*. In the last chapter, I argued that *Jane Eyre* offers a portrayal of amateur feminine artistry that is susceptible to postfeminist appropriation. But AB’s work differs from CB’s work in its conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination. So does *Wildfell Hall* characterise the heroine as a professional painter in ways that are more resistant to postfeminist appropriation? For further insight into this matter, I first want to turn to the literary *Wildfell Hall* where, unlike CB’s novel, the heroine’s creative career is an integral

¹⁰⁸ Thormählen, “The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*”, 837.

¹⁰⁹ Ward, “The Case of Helen Huntingdon”, 156.

¹¹⁰ Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 122-3.

part of the plot that adaptations can neither fully suppress nor enmesh into the romance narrative.

Throughout AB's *Wildfell Hall*, various details remind us of the precariousness of nineteenth-century women artists' professional status. The seriousness and independence of the heroine's artistic career is made clear when Gilbert and his sister, Rose, pay a call to Wildfell Hall and Helen has to accommodate them in the only room with a fire, her studio. As Antonia Losano notes, "only women from artistic families or at the top of their profession might have studio space of their own" during the period.¹¹¹ Whilst the allocation of a specific place to paint in her home signifies Helen's relatively fortunate position, she cannot keep her sanctuary free from visitors. During the visit, Gilbert also learns of Helen's difficulties in peddling her artworks. As Arthur informs Gilbert, Helen sends her paintings to London where "somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money" and a visitor arrives shortly afterwards for that purpose.¹¹² Additionally, Helen explains that she cannot sell her works because she is in hiding. In retrospect, we realise that not only is Helen protecting herself from her husband but that she has no right to trade these works because all her possessions—including her paintings and income—legally belong to Huntingdon.¹¹³ A further obstacle for Helen is that selling her own art would have "contravened predominant definitions of a 'lady'" in a period when "women's economic independence was often considered a sign of impropriety, or even sexual deviancy."¹¹⁴ Hence, Helen's profession is cited as evidence of her unsavoury character when she becomes the target of malicious gossip.¹¹⁵ By working as a commercial painter, Helen compromises her gentility in a way that the heroine of *Jane Eyre* is careful to avoid. As these

¹¹¹ Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 78-9.

¹¹² Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 47.

¹¹³ For further discussion, see Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 81-86. Also see, Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 75-7.

¹¹⁴ Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1993), 79.

¹¹⁵ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 95.

examples clarify, *Wildfell Hall* portrays Helen's situation to throw into relief the wider cultural and social forces affecting female artists in the nineteenth century.

Many of the challenges that Helen encounters as a working artist are made similarly explicit in the 1996 adaptation of *Wildfell Hall*. During Gilbert and Rose's (Paloma Baeza) visit to Helen's studio in the first episode, Helen reveals her impecunious circumstances when she explains that she cannot afford a fire. Such details acknowledge that the majority of nineteenth-century female artists struggled to earn a living, particularly in comparison with their male counterparts.¹¹⁶ Subsequently, the episode makes clear that Helen's status as a professional artist exacerbates her social stigmatisation. At a tea party, rumours are circulating that her child is illegitimate and an oblivious Helen asks Jane Wilson (Karen Westwood) whether she also paints. Jane publically snubs Helen, replying "only as an accomplishment, not as a trade" before moving to sit elsewhere. Through such exchanges, the production construes Helen's alleged sexual indiscretions and profession as equally detrimental to her reputation. As these examples illustrate, the adaptation shares the source material's concern with illustrating the relationship between patriarchal structures and the practical difficulties that impeded women artists' professionalization.

To this end, the literary and adapted *Wildfell Hall* emphasise that patriarchal disempowerment has shaped Helen's artistic identity. In both cases, she creates for financial reasons and her motivation reflects that the "protection of her son is presented as her greatest duty and her most solemn responsibility".¹¹⁷ Helen's need to earn a living not only leads to her professionalization but to also a distinct lack of interest in personal expression or pleasure. As the literary Helen formulates her plan to escape Huntingdon, she declares that the "palette and

¹¹⁶ Cherry, *Painting Women*, 96.

¹¹⁷ Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour*, 78.

the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now.”¹¹⁸ Helen’s circumstances and attitude directly contrast with those of *Jane Eyre*’s heroine, who insists that she creates solely for enjoyment and herself. Similarly to the literary *Wildfell Hall*, the television serial characterises Helen as a detached professional with little personal stake in her work. The first episode construes art as a commodity during a conversation that arises about a portrait of Gilbert’s father. Helen inquires whether the portrait is an accurate likeness and Gilbert’s mother (Pam Ferris) quips that “it should be! My late husband paid fifty guineas for that.” Later in the episode, Gilbert questions her about one of her pieces and she assumes but does not take offence at his dislike. She observes that she paints “in the public taste. Pretty pictures devoid of feeling. Don’t forget, this is how I earn my living.” In AB’s novel and the adaptation alike, Helen’s pragmatism adumbrates that patriarchal structures not only limit women’s freedom but also the expression of the feminine creative imagination.

In this respect, the literary *Wildfell Hall* suggests that patriarchal restraints have a clear effect upon Helen’s artistic aesthetic especially after she becomes a professional painter. We can see the effect of these strictures if we compare Huntingdon and Gilbert’s responses to, respectively, Helen’s amateur and professional work. In one exchange with Huntingdon, the young Helen reveals herself to be an accomplished (and rather pompous) amateur who is on the cusp of developing a signature aesthetic. In this scene, Helen withdraws to the library to finish a picture of a young girl in a forest gazing at two turtledoves. As she relates its contents, she acknowledges that the work is “somewhat presumptuous in the design” but also intended to be her “masterpiece”.¹¹⁹ Helen neither draws from life nor copies an engraving but relies upon her imagination. Her description of the painting, moreover, suggests that she eschews strict realism and has begun to develop a stylised aesthetic. She confesses that she

¹¹⁸ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 352.

¹¹⁹ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 159.

exaggerates certain elements to “give more the bright verdure of spring or early summer, than is commonly attempted in painting”.¹²⁰ For Losano, her words intimate the “presence of a conscious aesthetic form” that “indicates something beyond mimetic reproduction.”¹²¹ The young Helen’s painting possesses evident similarities with Jane’s fantastical watercolours in *Jane Eyre*.

Yet the differences between the heroine of *Jane Eyre* and the heroine of *Wildfell Hall* become apparent when Huntingdon intrudes upon Helen. Seeing what she has produced, he asks her why she has not made the girl in the painting dark-haired, presumably so that Helen’s subject resembles herself. He also interprets the painting as a picture of a girl anticipating having a lover and “how tender and faithful he will find her”.¹²² In reply, Helen coyly proposes that the girl is pondering “how tender and faithful she shall find him”.¹²³ Though Helen rejects Huntingdon’s crude biographical interpretation of her painting, she is complicit in their flirtation and implies her self-projection into her work in a similar manner to the heroine of *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, Helen and Huntingdon’s exchange recalls the scene in *Jane Eyre* during which Rochester inspects and attempts to read Jane’s character through her portfolio. Yet their erotic games appear much more mundane. Rochester may be confounded by the strangeness of Jane’s watercolours but he exhibits more acuity than the lascivious Huntingdon. Despite Huntingdon’s lack of charm or intellect, however, Helen accepts his sexual advances and her willingness to be wooed is an indication of her gullibility. In this moment, *Wildfell Hall* not only parodies Jane and Rochester’s courtship but also rejects Jane’s conceptualisation of her creative imagination.

¹²⁰ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 159.

¹²¹ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 70.

¹²² Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 160.

¹²³ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 160.

Rejecting *Jane Eyre*'s representation of the feminine creative imagination, *Wildfell Hall* offers a very different portrayal of Helen as a mature artist whose loss of illusions about Huntingdon accompanies a loss of illusions about her talent. After she decides to pursue an artistic career, she recognises her need to practice before she can support herself to reveal a new humbleness and seriousness about her work.¹²⁴ By this point, Helen lacks any desire for personal or creative expression and exhibits an instrumentalist view of her art in contrast to her younger self and the heroine of *Jane Eyre*. No longer interested in conveying her individual vision or exceptionality, Helen changes her artistic methods and aesthetic. The difference is clear if we compare the painting that she produced when courting with Huntingdon with the works that Gilbert glances at during his visit to her studio. Inspecting an in-progress piece, he immediately recognises a depiction of Wildfell Hall that underscores Helen's talent for accurate, mimetic representation. Additionally, he notices that Helen's other pieces also portray local locations. Helen acknowledges painting the same scenes in different weather or lighting conditions because she has a "sad dearth of subjects".¹²⁵ Her admission reflects the trouble that nineteenth-century women painters experienced in finding subjects due, in part, to their restricted movement.¹²⁶ Previously, Helen had been happy to embellish or invent artistic subjects. Now, however, she paints only what she sees before her and her commitment to realism suggests an anxiety about allowing free reign to her imagination. The developments not only indicate a shift in her creative identity, but also illuminate that she shares AB's stated intention to copy "from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration".¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 352.

¹²⁵ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 47.

¹²⁶ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 29-30.

¹²⁷ Brontë, "Preface" to *Wildfell Hall*, 4.

In addition to drawing on external rather than internal sources of inspiration, the mature and professional Helen aspires to erase all markers of personality or authorship from her art. In her younger incarnation, Helen repeatedly renders herself vulnerable through art that depicts her personal desires and identity. Early in her courtship with Huntingdon, he ransacks her portfolio and humiliates her by finding and then stealing a picture with a sketch of his face on the back.¹²⁸ A similar moment arises when, in an “act of impertinence”, Gilbert rifles through Helen’s studio and discovers a portrait of Huntingdon, thereby endangering Helen’s efforts to hide her past life.¹²⁹ These efforts include the fact that she signs her paintings with false initials to obscure her whereabouts from her husband. But her desire for anonymity also motivates her new, realistic aesthetic. She confesses to Gilbert her fears that someone “might possibly recognise the style” of her work, an admission implying that the distinct aesthetic that she cultivated as a young woman has become a burden.¹³⁰ In a further effort to distance herself from her work, she mostly depicts landscapes and her compositions do not feature any female figures. Her refusal to portray women serves to discourage the type of biographical interpretation that Huntingdon previously applied to her paintings. As such, her art manages to baffle Gilbert who cannot decode anything about Helen from her work, apart from her evident skill. The message in *Wildfell Hall* is clear: female artists benefit from and must maintain their anonymity by producing anonymous art.

Helen’s desire to hide herself enables her to overcome another significant barrier to her career: the fact that women have been traditionally construed as the object rather than creators of art. In Gilbert and Gubar’s reckoning, metaphors of literary or artistic creation are frequently masculine, patriarchal and sexualised, thereby consolidating the notion that

¹²⁸ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 155-7.

¹²⁹ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 49.

¹³⁰ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 47.

“women exist only to be acted upon by men, both as literary and sensual objects.”¹³¹ Advancing a similar point, the film theorist Laura Mulvey contends that in “a world structured by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.”¹³² This dynamic has serious implications for women artists. As *Wildfell Hall* demonstrates, the scenario of a woman “holding a brush threatened to disrupt the proper flow of aesthetic desire, placing it in the hands of the female subject rather than relegating women to the role of the desired object.”¹³³ This issue arises in AB’s novel in Helen’s dealings with Huntingdon but also Gilbert. When he accompanies her on a trip to Winley Bay, he is aware that his leering prevents her from sketching the landscape but he continues to watch her. Upon the “splendid view”, he muses that “if I had but a pencil and a morsel of paper, I could make a lovelier sketch than hers, admitting that I had the power to delineate what is faithfully before me.”¹³⁴ As this statement elucidates, Gilbert struggles to overcome his assumption that men are the creators and women are the objects of art, even when the man in question is a farmer and the woman is a painter.

Similarly to AB’s novel, the 1996 television serial recognises the male gaze’s imprisoning effects upon women artists. Like his literary counterpart, Gilbert also ignores Helen’s objections to being “observed” during their visit to Winley Bay in the first episode. In this scene, Gilbert furtively continues to glance at Helen so that the actor’s performance reveals the character’s awareness of the liberties that he has taken (Figure 36). Like Gilbert, Huntingdon has a roving eye, ogling Helen and other women throughout the adaptation. A scene in the second episode acknowledges how women’s visual objectification relates to their traditionally passive role in art. As Helen and Huntingdon lie in bed together during their

¹³¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 8.

¹³² Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 11.

¹³³ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 44.

¹³⁴ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 67.

early marriage, Huntingdon kisses her torso but the camera's shots of her disembodied parts become more menacing in light of his whispered endearments. He murmurs "I'd like to keep you in a museum, just for me...[pause]...I'd come and look at you. My work of art, my wife." The moment registers the novel's anxiety that as long as a woman artist's body can be seen, her art will be overlooked. As the literary and adapted *Wildfell Hall* recognise, nineteenth-century women artists were frequently objects of erotic interest and their works were cast as "incitements to desire rather than as aesthetically viable, marketable commodities."¹³⁵ Consequently, the literary *Wildfell Hall* proposes a radical solution to the problem of the male gaze that creates numerous problems for the television adaptation.

Figure 36. In Episode 1 of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC, 1996), Gilbert gazes at Helen whilst recognising her dislike of his ogling.

¹³⁵ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 48.

To redirect our gaze from Helen to her work, the literary *Wildfell Hall* occludes the woman artist from our view through its metatextual structure. Even in the sections of the novel where direct access to Helen seems to be possible, she erects metatextual screens that hide her from sight. As Garrett Stewart observes, the heroine provides Gilbert with her diary as a protective measure because her writing allows her “*not* to put her body on the line, or not yet, but only her inked words.”¹³⁶ For Losano, the inclusion of Helen’s diary transposes “a product of her aesthetic production (her diary) between her body and the male viewer or reader”, allowing her to shift from the status of “artwork (tangible appreciable object) to artistic producer”.¹³⁷ In this manner, AB’s heroine manages to evade being objectified by the male gaze. The effectiveness of this strategy can be seen in Moore’s response to *Wildfell Hall* when he criticises the metatextual structure for lessening the “heat” of AB’s novel. Moore opines that “an accident would have saved [AB]; almost any man of letters would have laid his hand upon her arm and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer”.¹³⁸ As Losano notes, Moore envisions a “little romance of intervention” that reflects his belief that “women’s bodies must not be separated from their narrative productions but must be present, tangible and visible.”¹³⁹ His wish for physical contact with AB and Helen’s “presence” indicate his readerly and sexual frustration with the way that the novel’s structure redirects our gaze away from the woman artist’s body to her work. These deliberately thwarted passions are further evidence that the novel strives to foreground the failed-marriage plot by turning attention away from Gilbert and Helen’s courtship.

To reconfigure *Wildfell Hall* as a romance, the 1996 adaptation ensures that the heroine remains in full view and becomes eroticised whenever the literary *Wildfell Hall* leaves her

¹³⁶ Garrett Stewart, *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 120.

¹³⁷ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 75.

¹³⁸ Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street*, 216.

¹³⁹ Losano, *The Woman Painter*, 74.

unseen or uncomfortable with being watched. In the first episode, an exchange between Helen and Gilbert begins with a close-up shot of the back of her neck. From this vantage point, the camera tracks around to show her body from several angles so that we can see that she is at her easel but cannot perceive the actual work (Figure 37). At the same time, we are encouraged to examine her neck and back, parts of the female body that are traditionally objectified in Western art. Helen becomes an art piece who overshadows her own artwork. Gilbert enters the scene to reveal that the shot initially corresponded with his perspective, rendering us complicit with his gaze. The scene becomes even more troubling when Helen admits that she merely paints “pretty pictures, devoid of feeling”. Her acknowledgment of her artistic limits sits uncomfortably with her sexualised passivity. As Sierz notes, the adaptation uses a number of voyeuristic shots that invade “Helen’s privacy, turning her into a defenceless object of prying gaze”.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Sierz, “Writing and Screening the Heroine”, 25.

Figure 37. In Episode 1 of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC, 1996), the heroine's desire for the male protagonist leads to her transformation into a figure of erotic contemplation.

Yet this scene also alludes to the works of feminist filmmakers that seek to explore the complex connections between feminine creativity and desire. The focus upon Helen's neck and the arrangement of her hair recall the frequent shots of the heroine in *The Piano* (Figure 38). Many of these shots align with the perspective of the character Baines (Harvey Keitel) who has purchased Ada's piano and allows her access to her instrument in exchange for the opportunity to gaze at and fondle her body. In the beginning, the representation of Ada's piano playing renders the viewer complicit with her unwilling objectification by Baines. Yet Ada's visual eroticisation becomes less straightforward when she enters into a consensual sexual relationship with Baines. A similar scenario of desire is replayed in the scene from the 1996 *Wildfell Hall*. When the camera tracks around to show Helen, we see how her costume exposes her body in contrast with her previously modest outfits. Her revealing clothing and

new flirtatiousness imply her receptiveness to Gilbert's attentions, calling attention to her enjoyment of romance and submission to his gaze. As such, the scene debatably "marks the convergence of visual and narrative pleasures towards a specifically feminine position, which is active and mercurial."¹⁴¹

Figure 38. Campion's *The Piano* (1993) represents the heroine's unwilling objectification by a male character's gaze.

Such moments elucidate costume drama's complex relationship with feminine pleasure and fantasy. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the genre's possibilities have been employed by a number of feminist filmmakers in their attempt to conceptualise the feminine creative imagination. In Belén Vidal's estimation, these films often represent the problematic confluence of feminine creativity and desire through "the staging of fantasy, dissolving the separation between positions: subject and object merge in a theatrical representation where pleasure comes, again, from the feminine gaze's control over its own objectification."¹⁴² In these moments, the films disrupt "the continuity aesthetics of realism" and reveal "the

¹⁴¹ Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 160.

¹⁴² Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 158.

workings of fantasy and desire.”¹⁴³ Such a staging of fantasy occurs in the 1996 adaptation of *Wildfell Hall* as the sequence showing Helen’s body clarifies how middlebrow culture engages with revisionist feminist costume dramas to represent the heroine as an artist and a desired and desiring woman.

Yet the adaptation’s borrowings produce tensions with the conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination in the literary *Wildfell Hall*. AB’s novel conceives of the feminine creative imagination in ways that directly contrast with the more individualistic conceptualisations in *The Piano* and *Jane Eyre*. From Christine Knight’s perspective, Campion’s film “places a woman artist, Ada, in the traditionally male role of the Romantic artist” and perpetuates the “Romantic idea that Ada expresses her ‘true inner self’ through her piano playing.”¹⁴⁴ When Ada’s husband (Sam Neill) discovers that she has entered into a sexual relationship with Baines, he cuts off her finger and permanently impedes her ability to demonstrate her genius through her music.¹⁴⁵ In Brosh’s view, *The Piano* “emphasises that within unequal power structures, art and love, free expression and romance, cannot co-exist.”¹⁴⁶ Similarly to Campion’s film, *Jane Eyre* features a heroine who uses her creative work as an outlet for her exceptional interior life. As I explored in the previous chapter, Jane’s watercolours are erotic props in her interactions with Rochester but also enable the novel to challenge the gendering of Romantic conceptualisations of creative genius within the confines of its romance plot. As such, the disappearance of Jane’s creativity is another discordant element in the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*’s courtship plot. Her loss of self-expression constitutes a loss of self. In contradistinction to *Jane Eyre* and *The Piano*, AB’s work does not

¹⁴³ Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, 160.

¹⁴⁴ Christine Knight, “Ada’s Piano Playing in Jane Campion’s *The Piano*”, *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, no. 49 (2006): 26.

¹⁴⁵ At the end of the film, Ada can still play the piano with a false finger but her performance lacks ease and fluency.

¹⁴⁶ Brosh, *Screening Novel Women*, 151.

celebrate women artists' individuality or personal expression. Instead, Helen's interactions with Huntingdon and Gilbert recommend that women should retain their creative anonymity to ensure their safety in a patriarchal society.

Because the literary *Wildfell Hall* does not view creativity in Romantic terms, AB's novel is less preoccupied with the tension between women's desire for creative expression and romance than either *The Piano* or *Jane Eyre*. Helen's chief difficulties as an artist do not relate to the suppression of her ability to express herself but rather the practical issues of supporting herself and her son. At the end of the novel, the widowed Helen stops working as a painter because she has inherited money and properties from her husband and uncle. Thereafter, she marries Gilbert, who forfeits his primogeniture to live on her estate. These complex exchanges have generated critical debate about Helen's future economic security and property ownership.¹⁴⁷ Meanwhile, we receive no indication whether or not she returns to painting as a form of amusement now she has no financial incentive. Yet the loss of her self-expression does not connote the same loss of self that the heroine of *Jane Eyre* experiences. The final chapter of the novel suggests that, overall, *Wildfell Hall* evinces more concern with the patriarchal structures that systematically disempower women than the question of how individual women negotiate the tension between their creative and sexual desires.

Like the literary *Wildfell Hall*, the 1996 adaptation tends to focus upon the wider structures that disadvantage women artists rather than Helen's individual struggles. Whilst the novel contains a number of ekphrastic episodes, the adaptation never positions Helen's work as a

¹⁴⁷ For Deborah Denenholz Morse, Gilbert "symbolically demonstrates that he does not want to be implicated personally in the injustices of English property laws." Deborah Denenholz Morse, "'I speak of those I do know': Witnessing as Radical Gesture in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, ed. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 106.

Ward, however, contends that "Helen takes a considerable economic gamble in remarrying, trading off the security of her son's inheritance against her desire that he should have a father figure in his life once more." Ward, "The Case of Helen Huntingdon", 167-8.

prominent part of the *mise-en-scène* to underscore the fact that she is a commercial painter, not a genius. In many respects, the narrative of Helen's creative trajectory enables the serial to retain a surprising degree of feminist awareness in spite of its postfeminist courtship plot. Of course, the production also fits within these generic confines by connecting Helen's artistry to the development of her romance. To heighten the romance, the adaptation recurrently draws upon the representation of Ada in *The Piano* but does not feature examples of Helen's artistry or conceive of her feminine creativity in the same way. As such, certain scenes bring Helen's creative and romantic desires to the fore but leave the tension between the two underdeveloped. Without the sustained treatment of this theme that is apparent in Campion's film, these moments merely eroticise Helen.

On the whole, the adaptation represents Helen's artistry in a manner that engages with many of the novel's feminist themes. These feminist themes prevail partly because the source material does not tangle together its feminine *Künstlerroman* with its courtship plot as closely as *Jane Eyre*. Thus, the novel offers a conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination that is less susceptible to postfeminist appropriation. At the same time, the 1996 screen version of *Wildfell Hall* engages less opportunistically with the feminist reputation of *Wildfell Hall* or the work of feminist filmmakers than, for example, Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre*. Though postfeminist in many respects, the BBC adaptation displays an awareness of broader feminist issues that reflects the complexity of the relationship between middlebrow culture and feminism. Considering these issues further, the last section of this chapter examines the 2011 ten-part serialisation of *Wildfell Hall* for the programme *Woman's Hour* on BBC Radio Four. BBC Radio Four has historically been associated with middlebrow taste and *Woman's Hour* is known for being "openly partisan in its support of feminist politics, whilst trying to retain

its broad appeal.”¹⁴⁸ In light of these connotations, my discussion will continue to examine the BBC’s relationship with this literary text as well as exploring what happens when *Wildfell Hall* is remade for radio and what this adaptation reveals about AB’s cultural status.

Reading and Hearing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

So why did *Woman’s Hour* choose to feature a serialisation of the relatively obscure *Wildfell Hall* in 2011? *Woman’s Hour* aired the first episode of *Wildfell Hall* on November 28, a few weeks after Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* and Arnold’s *Wuthering Heights* were released, respectively, on September 9 and November 11. This timing suggests that the topical programme was aiming to take advantage of the Brontës’ conspicuous cultural presence after two high-profile cinematic adaptations. Such an opportunity could be exploited, in part, because radio dramas are relatively cheap and convenient to produce, particularly in comparison with film or television.¹⁴⁹ This relative lack of financial risk means that the BBC frequently adapts novels for radio that are either rarely or have never been adapted for the screen, such as *Wildfell Hall*. We can also connect these adaptive choices to the fact that the BBC and BBC Radio Four, in particular, are associated with a tradition of broadcasting that strives to fulfil the Reithian obligation to “inform, educate and entertain” the nation.

As David Hendy observes, the channel is “the Reithian service par excellence: perhaps not as avant-garde as some would wish, certainly overcautious at times: but, through its ‘mixed’ programming, generally committed to the old BBC project of nurturing rounded citizens and forging a common culture.”¹⁵⁰ Because of its public service status, Radio Four secures an

¹⁴⁸ Jane Arthurs and Usha Zacharias, “Introduction: Women and Radio”, *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no. 3 (2007): 334.

¹⁴⁹ David Hendy, *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁵⁰ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 3.

extraordinary amount of funding for a radio station in spite of its relatively small audience.¹⁵¹ This fact reflects that the Corporation tends to emphasise “quality programme content rather than maintaining a quantity of listeners”.¹⁵² At the same time, the BBC cannot ignore the wants or needs of the public. The organisation works under the eternal paradox that “it *has* to be popular in order to justify the universality of the licence fee but that it also *has* to serve minority tastes in order to prove its difference from commercial services.”¹⁵³ Consequently, the Corporation aims to cater to and elevate popular tastes simultaneously in an effort to construct—as discussed in the first chapter—a community of middlebrow listeners. As a result, Radio Four’s drama output has come to rest in the “middle part of the [cultural] spectrum” but that “‘middle’ as always, was territory so loosely defined that it could be stretched and renovated in ways that might satisfy Radio Drama’s evident desire to achieve something of cultural significance—and in ways that even suspicious listeners might tolerate.”¹⁵⁴ To remain in this position, Radio Four is dedicated to producing diverse, experimental and contemporary drama but also frequently adapts the literary canon. Discussing Radio Four programmes of the 1970s and 1980s, Hendy opines that adapting the canon was “the perfect Reithian enterprise: it introduced an audience to literature almost everyone agreed was ‘good’, and, provided it was well-acted, the commitment to quality also reflected well on its producers.”¹⁵⁵ As the 2011 *Wildfell Hall* indicates, the classic serial continues to be a mainstay in radio schedules and enables the organisation to retain its “betwixt and between” cultural status.

As an adaptation, the 2011 *Wildfell Hall* differs greatly from television versions of the same novel. The most obvious difference is that the audio version of *Wildfell Hall* preserves the

¹⁵¹ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 6.

¹⁵² Dermot Rattigan, *Theatre of Sound: Radio and the Dramatic Imagination* (Dublin: Carysfort, 2002), 12.

¹⁵³ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 400.

¹⁵⁴ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 200.

¹⁵⁵ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 200.

source novel's metatextuality and draws attention to Helen's (Hattie Morahan) absence and mediation by other characters. In this version, Gilbert (Robert Lonsdale) provides a retrospective narrative frame within which Helen's diary and letters are embedded. Though Gilbert is not writing a letter to his brother-in-law, his account addresses the listener directly and his narration introduces and announces the setting for scenes. For the first few episodes, we mostly hear Gilbert's descriptions of Helen or second-hand reports of her activities. On the rare occasions on which she speaks, her prickly manner repels any friendships or sense of intimacy. In the first episode, for example, she becomes confrontational when defending her unconventional views on alcohol and children's education.¹⁵⁶ As a result, Gilbert's perspective dominates the production and we must learn about Helen's past through and alongside him. This dramatization contrasts with the viewer's heightened, direct access to Helen in the 1996 television adaptation.

Unlike television, radio drama's conventions mean that our lack of contact with Helen's character presents fewer problems when dramatizing *Wildfell Hall*. As Andrew Crisell points out, "sound on radio will tell us all the things we need to know, and we can visualize them instantly."¹⁵⁷ The medium relies upon listeners' ability to supply an "imaginative core" and they are used to inferring information from sound clues.¹⁵⁸ To relay such clues, the first episode ends with an aural montage of the local villagers gossiping about Helen with snippets being repeated at the start of the second and sixth episodes.¹⁵⁹ The chatter relates to her

¹⁵⁶ "Episode 1: The Tenant", *Woman's Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired November 28, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast.

¹⁵⁷ Andrew Crisell, "Better than Magritte: How Drama on the Radio Became Radio Drama", *Journal of Radio Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 467.

¹⁵⁸ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 198.

¹⁵⁹ Episode 1, *Woman's Hour Drama*; "Episode 2: A Snake in the Grass", *Woman's Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired November 29, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast; "Episode 6: Domestic Scenes", *Woman's Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, December 5, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast.

identity and purpose, even questioning “why is she so private?”¹⁶⁰ These voices call attention to her absence in the first few episodes but also keep the listener abreast of the enigma surrounding Helen. Over the course of the adaptation, we do gain increased access to Helen and learn about her past but she remains perceptible only through the dialogue and sound effects. But radio listeners are habituated to interpreting “series of symbolic sounds” that require “mental powers of visualisation to complete a scene.”¹⁶¹ The medium’s conventions mean that despite the fact that Helen is frequently silent or even absent, her disappearance has a less alienating effect on radio audiences than for television viewers.

In a further dissimilarity from the television adaptations, the radio version can focus upon and sustain dramatic interest in Gilbert during the sections recounting the failed-marriage plot. Radio plays are frequently described as “as dealing in ‘the theatre of the mind’” in contrast with the more external action associated with stage or screen drama.¹⁶² This view of radio drama developed over the twentieth century so that a theatre that was previously “about drawing exterior places in the mind became one about interiority.”¹⁶³ Consequently, Gilbert’s first-person narration not only describes his response to Helen’s unfolding tale but also gives us the impression—due to the conventions of radio drama—that we are privy to his consciousness. As a result, his process of discovery becomes another narrative that runs alongside Helen’s account of being married to Huntingdon.

As well as representing *Wildfell Hall*’s internal drama more fully, the radio adaptation benefits from the medium’s characteristically “flexible handling of time and space that is

¹⁶⁰ “Episode 1” and “Episode 2”, *Woman’s Hour Drama*.

¹⁶¹ Hendy, *Life on Air*, 198-9.

¹⁶² Crisell, “Better than Magritte”, 470.

¹⁶³ Neil Varma, *Theatre of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 6.

barely matched by film and quite beyond the conventional theatre”.¹⁶⁴ In comparison to the screen versions of *Wildfell Hall*, the radio adaptation can move more easily between the double plots’ separate temporal periods and locations. The television versions feature fewer scenes of Gilbert reading and these moments often create breaks in the narrative of Helen’s and Huntingdon’s relationship. In comparison, the radio adaptation’s frequent shifts in time and space are less jarring and have the side effect of incorporating the reading Gilbert into the failed-marriage plot far more seamlessly. Gilbert narrates the transitions between the two plots, ensuring that he remains perceptible even during the points when he effectively disappears in the novel or television adaptations. With such measures, the radio adaptation prevents the failed-marriage plot from dominating the narrative and creates a sense of continuity between the multiple plots in AB’s novel.

Though radio is a “blind” medium, this version of *Wildfell Hall* manages to portray the effects of the male gaze upon Helen. The second episode elucidates women artists’ struggle to direct male attention away from themselves to their work during Helen and Gilbert’s trip to Winley Bay. Despite Helen’s request that he not watch her as she sketches, he admits that “I could not help stealing a glance, now and then, from the splendid view at our feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil.” Though they behave in a flirtatious manner, the characters’ interaction appears retrospectively sinister in subsequent episodes when Huntingdon (Leo Bill) and then Hargrave (Stephen Critchlow) ogle Helen under the pretence of looking at her paintings.¹⁶⁵ As previously discussed, the same problem is raised in the 1996 screen adaptation but the viewer also becomes complicit with the male characters’ gaze at several points. Contrastingly, the radio *Wildfell Hall* features a heroine who exists as an unseen figment of the listener’s visual imagination. As a result, we can focus upon her conversations

¹⁶⁴ Crisell, “Better than Magritte”, 468.

¹⁶⁵ “Episode 4: The Warnings of Experience”, *Woman’s Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired December 1, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast; “Episode 6”, *Woman’s Hour Drama*.

with the male characters rather than her body whilst being aware of the benefits of concealment for the female artist. In this case, we can see how radio's apparent limitations necessitate "original forms of drama in which what is normally the inadequacy of visualization is preferable to the literal ability to see".¹⁶⁶

Though Helen and her painted artworks remain invisible, her creativity and agency is made apparent when the production shifts its focus from Helen onto her diary. Helen is increasingly more present throughout the course of the adaptation, particularly after she forms a friendship with Gilbert. At the end of the third episode,¹⁶⁷ she gives him her journal to read and he learns of her marriage and escape from Huntingdon in episodes four until eight. Though Gilbert continues to narrate events occurring in the diegetic present, Helen's voice announces the date and sets the scene for each incident that occurs in the journal with the result that she is a participant in but also a creator of the narrative simultaneously. For example, we hear a dramatization of her escape from Huntingdon but the scene is also intercut with sections from her diary. We receive her viewpoint upon the unfolding events but are still conscious that she is writing and recording her experiences. This audio version of *Wildfell Hall* preserves the novel's metatextual structure to foreground Helen's creativity and agency.

By encasing Helen's diary within Gilbert's narration, however, the radio adaptation replicates a metatextual structure that has caused much debate. For some critics, the literary Gilbert's actions are a violation of Helen's privacy and intensify already existing doubts about his character. Not only does he transcribe Helen's journal into his letter but he writes to Halford whilst his "family are absent on a visit".¹⁶⁸ Consequently, we are unsure whether Helen has

¹⁶⁶ Crisell, "Better than Magritte", 470.

¹⁶⁷ "Episode 3: Assault", *Woman's Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired November 30, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast.

¹⁶⁸ Brontë, *Wildfell Hall*, 10.

consented to having the document copied. From Elizabeth Signoretti's perspective, Gilbert's use of the diary is an "appropriation and editing" of Helen's words and an effort to "contain and control" her.¹⁶⁹ Likewise, Jill Matus argues that Gilbert's inclusion of Helen's journal in his letter is "discomforting" and "we could read these details as conveying the novel's scepticism or even pessimism about the authority and voice women retain in marriage."¹⁷⁰ Yet other literary critics have interpreted Gilbert's transcription of the diary to reflect more positively upon his character and union with Helen.

The radio adaptation brings these more hopeful possibilities to light by emphasising Gilbert's role as Helen's reader (rather than her redactor). Gilbert does subsume Helen's diary within his account as he comments upon and summarises the gaps in the narrative of her marriage to Huntingdon. Yet his narration situates us within the immediacy of his consciousness. For instance, he states at the beginning of episode five that "I continued to read Helen's journal with a trembling heart. I knew now who her husband had been, and I instinctively distrusted what lay in the pages ahead."¹⁷¹ Such a speech construes him as a passive reader rather than an active editor of her words. To reinforce the impression that Gilbert is reading, his remarks are accompanied by the sound of turning pages in many episodes. For his performance of Gilbert, the actor employs a Yorkshire accent and he sounds younger than the mature-sounding Helen. The fact that he is subordinate in age and class to Helen implies that Gilbert does not have the capacity to dominate Helen in the same way as Huntingdon. Rather, Gilbert sounds attentive and willing to learn from the more experienced Helen. The effect of Helen's

¹⁶⁹ Elizabeth Signoretti, "'A Frame Perfect and Glorious': Narrative Structure in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", *The Victorian Newsletter* 87 (1995): 21.

¹⁷⁰ Jill Matus, "'Strong Family Likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 104.

¹⁷¹ "Episode 5: Matrimony", *Woman's Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired December 2, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast.

teachings becomes apparent after he finishes the diary and confesses “of my own conduct, I could not have been more ashamed.”¹⁷²

As the radio character reveals, the literary Gilbert’s actions are less objectionable if we interpret him as reading and learning from Helen’s diary. Additionally, his behaviour makes sense in light of AB’s religious influences. Even though AB was not a Methodist, Methodism had a significant effect on her outlook and literary work, leading Melody J. Kemp to propose that AB’s “acceptance of certain Methodist tenets made her see character not as inherent but as within human control”.¹⁷³ On this basis, Kemp asserts that the novel undertakes “to demonstrate how a reader should employ his or her time in order to save, or at least improve, himself: by reading, if not by writing, narratives that will make him self-conscious about the moral status of his character”.¹⁷⁴ Likewise, Deborah Denenholz Morse draws attention to the many acts of witnessing in *Wildfell Hall* that encompass “seeing good and evil played out in the domestic sphere to recounting that vision in order to understand it oneself, and ultimately, to educate others, be they characters within the narrative or readers of the novel itself.”¹⁷⁵ She notes that

reading as well as writing becomes a mode of witnessing, as Markham reads Helen’s diary before inscribing it as truth in his own private journal, which he then writes down once again in a letter to his brother-in-law Halford. We as readers of Anne Brontë’s novel are drawn into the role of witness, as we judge what we read, the truth of Helen’s words—and of Brontë’s.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² “Episode 9: Reconciliation”, *Woman’s Hour Drama: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, aired December 8, 2011 (London: Radio Four, BBC, 2011), radio broadcast.

¹⁷³ Melody J. Kemp, “Helen’s Diary and the Method(ism) of Character Formation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, ed. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 198. Various other critics have also addressed AB’s religious views. For example, Lee A. Talley, “Anne Brontë’s Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, ed. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 127-51.

¹⁷⁴ Kemp, “Helen’s Diary”, 198.

¹⁷⁵ Morse, ““I speak of those I do know””, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Morse, ““I speak of those I do know””, 103.

With this analysis in mind, we can reinterpret the frequently boorish Gilbert as attempting to learn from Helen and spread her message to others. He appropriates Helen's texts not in an effort to violate her privacy but to disseminate her teaching and, in the process, reveals her narrative's ameliorating impact upon himself.

Such didacticism limited the cultural fame and dissemination of AB and *Wildfell Hall* for many years but subsequently led to the author and the novel's critical and popular reclamation. Even so, AB's "overtly religious" concerns receive limited consideration in all of the adaptations of *Wildfell Hall*.¹⁷⁷ Whilst these productions represent Huntingdon's physical torment as he dies from alcoholism, they give far less attention to his spiritual torment. As such, the versions obscure the novel's engagement with nineteenth-century debates about salvation and damnation.¹⁷⁸ Yet *Wildfell Hall* addresses matters more interesting to a secular age, many of which relate to women's liberation and sexuality. As such, *Woman's Hour* could stress the contemporary relevance of *Wildfell Hall* in an introductory segment for the first episode of the radio adaptation.¹⁷⁹

Woman's Hour is known for advancing a "common sense acceptance of women's rights" that explains the tone surrounding the discussion of *Wildfell Hall*.¹⁸⁰ The daily magazine programme was launched in 1946 with the intention of helping women recreate domestic life after the Second World War. Since then, *Woman's Hour*'s purpose has shifted as "the woman's movement brought other issues into the foreground of debate about women's

¹⁷⁷ Shaw, "A Quiet Feminist", 136.

¹⁷⁸ Thormählen, "The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*", 838-40.

¹⁷⁹ Jane Garvey, "The Tenant of *Wildfell Hall*", *Woman's Hour*, aired November 28, 2011 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2011), radio broadcast.

¹⁸⁰ Danica Minic, "What Makes an Issue A *Woman's Hour* Issue?", *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 313.

lives.”¹⁸¹ This concern with women’s issues arises during the conversation between the *Woman’s Hour* presenter Jane Garvey with the Brontë scholars Patsy Stoneman and Pam Hirsch. Their discussion positioned AB as an early and significant feminist. Hirsch described AB as “the most radical” Brontë sister who “hit all the nails on the head that the organised women’s movement took up.” Likewise, Stoneman advanced that *Wildfell Hall* was “a critique of *Jane Eyre*” that deconstructed the underpinnings of Jane and Rochester’s relationship by challenging the notion that a woman could reform a rakish man “without legal or financial power”.

Strikingly, Stoneman not only foregrounds AB’s feminism but also disseminates a widely held critical view that *Wildfell Hall* rewrites or outright subverts either, or both, models of masculinity presented in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. I mentioned this possibility in the Introduction to this thesis and also argued in this chapter that several incidents in *Wildfell Hall* are responding to similar scenes in *Jane Eyre*. Also noting these connections, a number of critics have drawn attention to how Helen’s first husband exposes the unattractiveness of AB’s sisters’ heroes. Chitham, for example, postulates that *Wildfell Hall* is *Wuthering Heights* retold from Edgar Linton’s perspective.¹⁸² Likewise, Langland argues that *Wildfell Hall* undercuts the narrative of Jane’s reformation of Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Superior in beauty, wealth and status to Jane, Helen cannot save Huntingdon and her failure makes explicit that “with all the advantages in the world, no woman can easily reform a man whose habits are already established; far less can she undertake that task if she has the disadvantage of social inferiority.”¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Arthurs and Zacharias, “Introduction: Women and Radio”, 334.

¹⁸² Edward Chitham, “Diverging Twins: Some Clues to *Wildfell Hall*”, in *Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems*, ed. Edward Chitham and Tom Winiffrith (London: Macmillan, 1983), 100.

¹⁸³ Langland, *Anne Brontë*, 52.

More recently, Caroline Franklin has suggested that AB's rewriting of her sisters' novels is a critique of their Byromania. In Franklin's view, AB "refuses to endow her mocking, handsome Arthur Huntingdon with Byron's intellectual gifts, nor even the Byronic hero Heathcliff's vitality, and certainly not with Edward Rochester's fundamental goodness."¹⁸⁴ Consequently, *Wildfell Hall* foregrounds a central absurdity of Byromania; Byron's beguiling paradigm persisted through many forms but his descendants—Austen's Mr Darcy, George Eliot's Will Ladislaw and, of course, Heathcliff and Rochester—are chiefly identifiable by their "Byronic pout" rather than any other Byronic qualities.¹⁸⁵ As Frances Wilson observes, these characters are "more famous for their temperament than any literary talent they might possess" and "not one of them ever penned a line."¹⁸⁶ Pinpointing this paradox, *Wildfell Hall* excoriates the transformation of Byron—a prolific poet—into a little more than a libertine celebrated for his excesses. In a rebuff to her sisters' heroes, AB reconfigured the Byronic archetype in the form of Huntingdon to condemn the celebration of his violence, promiscuity, impulsiveness and selfishness. For Franklin, the author's rejection of the Byronic cult was also responsible for her decision to make the "heroine the artist" but one that is "a hard-headed commercial painter rather than a Romantic genius."¹⁸⁷ Through Helen, AB proposes an alternative model of creativity that is less egotistical and more sober, dedicated and productive than any of the bastardised Byrons in wider culture or her sisters' fictions. Through its portrayal of Huntingdon, AB's novel offers a combined critique of masculinity and the concept of Romantic genius.

¹⁸⁴ Franklin, *The Female Romantics*, 127.

¹⁸⁵ Frances Wilson, "Introduction: Byron, Byronism and Byromaniacs", in *Byromania*, ed. Frances Wilson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 2.

¹⁸⁶ Wilson, "Introduction", 2.

¹⁸⁷ Franklin, *The Female Romantics*, 127.

Conclusion

Occasionally able to look beyond the “myth” of Romantic genius, middlebrow culture is beginning to distinguish AB from her sisters not because of her gentle saintliness but rather on the basis of her incisive feminism. At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that AB did not engender the same mythologizing as her sisters because of the perception that she relied upon external rather internal sources of inspiration. But as we can see, middlebrow and popular culture is increasingly willing to recognise and celebrate her literary vision as an unflinching feminist. As the discussion on *Woman’s Hour* and “Dude Watchin’ with the Brontës” illustrate, middlebrow culture increasingly recognises AB as a writer and feminist whilst applauding her efforts to tell “the truth” about “alcoholic dickbags”.

Similarly, Morgan’s biofiction novel *The Taste of Sorrow* reassesses AB’s significance in light of her feminism and realist aesthetic. Her commitment to copying from life is made apparent when the fictional Charlotte observes that *Agnes Grey* portrays a “world very like this one, and you can move about it with familiarity—but not freedom: it is a place of rigorous consequence”.¹⁸⁸ In another incident, the novel foregrounds Anne’s mental effort, determination and bravery as she composes *Wildfell Hall*. A fearful Charlotte watches her at the task, observing that the work is “well done, it is very well done, but this account of a drunkard’s decline, so bare, so inescapable—should Anne do it? Somehow it is like someone you love grinding away at a task until their hands bleed.”¹⁸⁹ Morgan’s characterisation of Anne represents her as more capable of dealing with external reality than her siblings, resulting in a different (but equally powerful) literary corpus from that produced by CB and EB. Morgan has commented upon AB’s “strength of character”, noting that she “was the one who was the most successful in living in the wider world, and was also startlingly focused and

¹⁸⁸ Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow*, 340.

¹⁸⁹ Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow*, 361-2.

professional as a writer”.¹⁹⁰ Accordingly, Morgan’s novel does give extended consideration of Anne’s time as a governess at Thorp Green (as well as a lengthy account of her death). Rather than being judged for not drawing upon her internal life for her art, AB is lauded for taking inspiration from outside of herself. Morgan’s biofictional version of Anne advocates that the youngest Brontë’s achievements require a different set of criteria from the one that celebrates her sisters. Even so, AB remains the overlooked Brontë sister and middlebrow culture continues to recycle the trope that she is chiefly notable for not being noted.

But can we also attribute AB’s continuing cultural anonymity to her representation and conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination? Earlier in this chapter, I proposed that a mythology has never grown up around AB because—unlike CB and Jane—she is difficult to confuse with her heroine, Helen. Amongst other reasons for their lack of conflation is the fact that Helen remains a shadowy presence throughout *Wildfell Hall*. Striving for artistic anonymity, she consistently redirects attention away from herself to her work. AB attempts to achieve a similar effect in the preface to the second edition of *Wildfell Hall*; in a curious double manoeuvre, AB insists upon being distinguished from Currer and Ellis as Acton Bell but states “whether the name be real or fictitious, it cannot greatly signify to those who know him only by his works.”¹⁹¹ Thereafter, AB asked her readership to turn their attention away from her and actively search for meaning within her text through a complex set of metaphors. Hence, she compares the task of decoding *Wildfell Hall* to the retrieval of a “priceless treasure” from the “bottom of a well”.¹⁹² She advises that the searcher for her text’s truth must have “some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks

¹⁹⁰ Jude Morgan, “An Interview with Jude Morgan”, in *The Taste of Sorrow* (London: Headline Review, 2009), 446.

¹⁹¹ Brontë, “Preface” to *Wildfell Hall*, 5.

¹⁹² Brontë, “Preface” to *Wildfell Hall*, 3.

for the jewel he procures”.¹⁹³ The preface also observes that “she who undertakes the cleansing of a careless bachelor’s apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises, than commendation for the clearance she effects.”¹⁹⁴ Strikingly, the second metaphor criticises those who overlook the effects of a woman’s work in favour of focusing upon the woman. This statement of artistic intention suggests that the meaning or power of a creative work lies not in its creator but in the response of the reader.

AB’s more famous sisters undoubtedly overshadow her. Most defenders of the writer draw attention to the role that CB and then Gaskell played in ensuring AB “would never gain the iconic status of her sisters” and, of course, they did efface her from wider cultural consciousness.¹⁹⁵ But AB herself constructed an anonymous authorial persona for herself and conceived of the feminine creative imagination in ways that contributed to her partial cultural erasure.

¹⁹³ Brontë, “Preface” to *Wildfell Hall*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Brontë, “Preface” to *Wildfell Hall*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), 157.

Conclusion

In 2011, the stationary manufacturers BIC attracted widespread mockery when launching a pen aimed at women called the “BIC for Her”.¹ This product prompted an extended tirade by the comedian Bridget Christie in her BBC Radio Four comedy series about feminism *Bridget Christie Minds the Gap* in 2013. In its first episode, the series included a sketch where Emily confesses to her sisters “I’m having terrible trouble writing Heathcliff. It’s my pen, you see. It doesn’t fit my hand properly. I think it’s because it’s a man’s pen.”² Charlotte replies, “my pen is also causing me massive probs. Poor Jane Eyre. She’s so one-dimensional at the moment. I think that it’s because the pen that I use only comes in men’s colours. If only it was pink, or purple. I’m sure I could make Jane a more interesting character.” When they ask Anne how *Wildfell Hall* is progressing, she answers “Oh fine, thank you. As you well know, I’ve always had man’s hands.” Advancing a similar point, *The Brontë Project* features a scene where the jilted Sara decries how her ex-fiancé was “always looking down his nose at the Brontës, at the foofy girliness of all those ‘books with corsets’.”³ Sara rages that “[i]n their day, the Brontës were constantly criticized for being too masculine”.⁴ *The Brontë Project* foregrounds that the accusations against the Brontës might have changed but that masculine prejudices against women writers and feminine pleasures prevail.

In the “Bic for Her” sketch and *The Brontë Project*, we can perceive that middlebrow culture exhibits scepticism about gender essentialism whilst continuing to recognise the Brontës as women who overcame prejudice against their gender to become major figures in the literary

¹ Hannah Furness, “BIC Ridiculed Over ‘Comfortable’ Pink Pens for Women”, *The Telegraph*, August 28, 2012, accessed July 16, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/9503359/BIC-ridiculed-over-comfortable-pink-pens-for-women.html>.

² Bridget Christie, “Episode 1”, *Bridget Christie Minds the Gap*, aired March 7, 2013 (London: BBC Radio Four, 2013), radio broadcast.

³ Jennifer Vandever, *The Brontë Project* (London: Pocket, 2006), 76.

⁴ Vandever, *The Brontë Project*, 76.

canon. These two works confront a paradox that still perturbs feminist literary critics and scholars concerned with “women’s writing” and feminine creativity. As the Introduction to this thesis explained, many critics exhibit unease with continuing to single out and study women writers on the basis of their gender, conscious that insisting on a “special place for the woman author is essentialist, anachronistic and ties her to victimhood.”⁵ Yet feminism continues to be interested in women writers because “for the female author the problem may not be the need for ‘death’ but the fact that she has barely lived and, thus, the critic should not help with her euthanasia.”⁶ Recognising this situation, Christie’s radio programme and Vandever’s novel suggest that the time has not yet come to forget that the Brontës were women and view them as simply writers.

These examples lend support to Patsy Stoneman’s observation that the Brontë myth is “a matrix of interlocking stories, pictures and emotional atmospheres” so that it “might be easier to say there are many Brontë myths”.⁷ Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that the various myths surrounding the sisters and their works enable middlebrow culture to explore its relationship to feminism. In the process, middlebrow culture engages with significant debates about feminine creativity that have long been part of feminist discourse. In particular, middlebrow conceptualisations of the feminine creative imagination frequently expose the “long-running tension” between feminism as a movement and its “pull as a politicizing of individual self-realization and change.”⁸

⁵ Mary Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

⁶ Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author*, 23-4.

⁷ Patsy Stoneman, “The Brontë Myth”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214

⁸ Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 117.

Yet this tension predates second-wave feminism and the contemporary works discussed in this thesis, playing out within and between *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall*. In the second and third chapters, I argued that *Jane Eyre* reworks Romantic conceptualisations of creative genius to be in harmony with femininity. I also proposed that the heroine's watercolours reveal an aesthetic that is simultaneously feminine whilst also undermining gender essentialism. Yet CB's novel conceives of feminine artistry in a manner that *Wildfell Hall* contests. In the fourth chapter, I considered the established critical contention that *Wildfell Hall* undercuts *Jane Eyre*'s individualistic feminism and representation of masculinity. As I also posited, *Wildfell Hall*'s critique of these aspects of *Jane Eyre* is inextricable from its critique of how CB's novel depicts creative genius. In particular, AB's work suggests that women in a patriarchal culture are too vulnerable to risk the exposure of creative self-expression. More generally, she condemns the individualism of *Jane Eyre*'s representation of the creative imagination.

Throughout this thesis, I have considered conceptualisations of feminine creativity whilst examining the convergence between the Brontë myth and the cultural afterlives of the sisters' novels. In my exploration of this matter, I have argued that *Jane Eyre* and *Wildfell Hall* represent women's creative identities and desires in ways that have influenced the Brontës' individual mythologies and the likelihood of their novels being adapted. In CB's case, her portrayal of her heroine's individualistic artistic genius contributed to her greater fame and her reputation as an early feminist but has also made her and her novel more susceptible to postfeminist co-option. As a result, adaptations of *Jane Eyre* often obscure the wider feminist implications of CB or her heroine's creative expression. In comparison to CB, AB is more difficult to mythologise because she resisted characterising her heroine as a genius whilst her statements of literary intent rejected Romantic creative paradigms. As such, she never

attracted the intense mythologizing or speculation about the relationship between her life and art that surrounds her sisters. AB's conceptualisation of the feminine creative imagination is one of several reasons why her novels are not widely adapted and why she has never achieved the same prominence as her sisters. I have suggested that she has begun to acquire some recognition as a feminist in middlebrow culture but that her self-representation and her representation by her contemporaries means that she remains an unlikely figurehead for feminism in wider culture.

AB might be less famous than her "genius" sisters, but the Brontës' collective fame rests partly on the fact that they symbolise a cooperative form of feminine creativity.⁹ As Lucasta Miller observes, "the motif of three sisters has a cultural mystique stretching back into fairytale" and "contributes to the sense of mystery which surrounds them."¹⁰ Heightening the fascination, the Brontë siblings are known to have worked together creating imaginary worlds as children and then as adults. In her biography of CB, Gaskell mentions that the three women had a "habit" of gathering at night in the sitting room where "they talked over the stories they were engaged upon, and described their plots. Once or twice a week, each read to the others what she had written, and heard what they had to say about it" and "the readings were of great and stirring interest to them all".¹¹ This iconic scene has inspired many depictions of the literary sisters and is alluded to in Christie's "Bic for Her" sketch and Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre*.

At the same time, representations of the sisters' relationship often retain an awareness of their creative strife and disagreements. As I have pointed out in the fourth chapter, *The Taste of*

⁹ For a discussion of the Brontës' collaborative creativity, see Olivia Malfair and Marysa Demoor, "Sibling Collaboration and Literary After-Life: The Case of the Brontës", *Brontë Studies* 40, no. 3 (2015): 187-200.

¹⁰ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), xi.

¹¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 307-8.

Sorrow includes a scene where the sisters are “gathered around the table as usual, Anne reading out from her novel in progress: Charlotte feeling uncomfortable.”¹² Certain other incidents have become infamous, such as EB’s anger about CB reading her poetry without permission or revealing her identity to the publisher William Smith Williams. As CB wrote to Williams, “‘Ellis Bell’ will not be alluded to under any other appellation than the ‘nom de plume’. I committed a grand error in betraying ~~her~~ ‘his’ identity to you”.¹³ These incidents tend to be key dramatic moments in depictions of the Brontës’ lives. In *Becoming Jane Eyre*, for example, Emily responds to the suggestion that the sisters reveal their identities with the impassioned cry that “you forced me to publish my very private poems, for an uncomprehending public. Now you want to expose me to the public.”¹⁴ In Morgan’s *The Taste of Sorrow*, when Emily discovers that Williams knows her true name she glares at Charlotte with “betrayal and grief” before running away for half of a day.¹⁵ As such representations underscore, the Brontës signify the possibilities but also the difficulties of less individualistic models of the feminine creative imagination.

Primarily associated with individualism, the feminine creative imagination was a subject of intense debate and disagreement within second-wave feminism. In her influential 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, Linda Nochlin argued that feminist art historians should not rise to the bait of that particular question. Admonishing the desire to identify examples of Great Women Artists, Nochlin instead recommended eschewing the related concepts of “Greatness” and “Genius”.¹⁶ Rather, she maintained that the feminist art historian should examine the “total situation of art making, both in terms of the development

¹² Jude Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow* (London: Headline Review, 2009), 361.

¹³ Charlotte Brontë, letter to William Smith Williams, July 31, 1848, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-51*, vol 2., ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 94.

¹⁴ Sheila Kohler, *Becoming Jane Eyre* (London: Corsair, 2011), 174.

¹⁵ Morgan, *The Taste of Sorrow*, 382.

¹⁶ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Boulder: Westview, 1988), 158.

of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself'.¹⁷ For Nochlin, feminist art history needed to draw attention to the fact that the artist and the artwork

occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.¹⁸

Like Nochlin, the second-wave movement was suspicious of such individualism and exhibited much ambivalence towards women writers within its ranks. These women were seen as “trying to assert a leadership role and to court visibility and individual kudos”.¹⁹ Many feminists have perceived the creative imagination to be too individualistic to be compatible with the second wave’s collective identity and aims as a movement.

At the same time, the feminine creative imagination has proved to have been a powerful and mobilising force for feminism. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Gilbert and Gubar feminised but did not set out to deconstruct the concept of creative genius. Even so, they sought to theorise women from the past and present as part of a larger creative collective whilst showing that writing “against the expectation and models for women, whether in 1879 or 1979, was an act of literary and cultural resistance to patriarchy.”²⁰ Meanwhile, women writers who were either influenced by or actively involved in the second-wave movement frequently featured female characters that were “frustrated artists, writers, or would-be intellectuals”.²¹ In these works, creativity becomes “symbolic of the power of self-determination; and in more sophisticated accounts the woman as artist is shown as needing to

¹⁷ Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 158.

¹⁸ Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 158.

¹⁹ Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller*, 86.

²⁰ Marlene Tromp, “Modelling the *Madwoman*: Feminist Movements and the Academy”, in *Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, ed. Annette R. Federico (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 38.

²¹ Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller*, 8.

break down the norms of what art can be in order to show its gendered foundations.”²² In a similar manner, contemporary middlebrow culture continues to explore feminist issues using artistic or imaginative female characters. In the case of *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne*, both novels seek to reconceptualise feminine creativity in less individualistic ways.

On the whole, the middlebrow continues to engage with second-wave feminism’s interest in the feminine creative imagination whilst retaining a liberal humanist attachment to individual figures of “genius”. Yet middlebrow culture cannot avoid the tension between the collective and the individual in its engagements with feminism. Throughout this thesis, I identified how various works explore this issue in productive, thought-provoking ways that reflect on the legacies of second-wave feminism. At the same time, I pointed out that the feminine creative imagination is one of second-wave feminist criticism’s most important “signifiers of choice and empowerment” that has also been co-opted by postfeminism.²³ As I suggested in the fourth chapter, contemporary middlebrow culture retains an awareness of feminism as a wider collective movement when engaging with AB’s life and work. But thus far, middlebrow culture has not fully transformed the youngest Brontë into a feminist figurehead. We can partly attribute this fact to her rejection of the concept of creative genius but also her works’ resistance to the type of imaginative escapism or pleasure so highly prized by the middlebrow. I have returned to the issue of pleasure throughout this thesis, seeking to strike a balance between seeing the discovery of pleasure as a feminist act and remaining mindful of the need for feminism to critique its pleasures.

By consistently finding pleasure in *Jane Eyre*, middlebrow feminism often enables its progressive and conservative tendencies to converge. As Heather Glen points out, CB’s “tale

²² Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller*, 8.

²³ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 79.

of egocentric triumph is counterpointed by another story, in which the protagonist is not all-powerful, but precarious, powerless, threatened: one that speaks not of self-confirming triumph, but of uncertainty and impotence.”²⁴ To an extent, returning to this novel enables middlebrow culture to recover an “ex-centric” figure and align itself with the legacy of second-wave feminism. Such engagements contrast with the selective appropriation and disavowals of feminism present in wider postfeminist culture. For Imelda Whelehan, postfeminism positions “feminism as the madwoman in the attic, the illegitimate other of femininity” but “like Bertha Mason, feminism is too disordered and unpredictable to be contained so easily”.²⁵ Bearing out this observation, contemporary middlebrow feminism revives the legacies of second-wave feminism through *Jane Eyre* just as second-wave feminism used the same novel to rediscover first-wave feminism. But as Whelehan’s analogy also illustrates, middlebrow feminism needs to be more conscious of its tendency to blend Jane and CB together into a feminist “Everywoman”.²⁶ Works such as the novel’s many screen adaptations, *The Brontë Project*, *Becoming Jane Eyre* and *Daphne* overlook the characters pushed to the margins of *Jane Eyre*. Like Gilbert and Gubar, middlebrow feminism tends to overlook differences between women, particularly those deriving from race and class. This tendency manifests in the treatment of not just Bertha but also Grace Poole, characters who are either strikingly absent or who have their ideological implications contained in many of the works examined in this thesis. In the third chapter, I noted how the character of Grace enables Jane to affirm her own sense of cultural distinction. In turn, an intimate knowledge of *Jane Eyre* enables middlebrow culture to maintain but also fail to reflect on its own sense of distinction. In its continued celebration of *Jane Eyre*, middlebrow feminism continues to ignore the intersections between gender, race, class and other forms of discrimination.

²⁴ Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

²⁵ Imelda Whelehan, “Foreword” to Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), xiii.

²⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 339.

In my exploration of contemporary middlebrow engagement with the Brontës' lives and art, I have concentrated primarily on the connection between gender and the creative imagination. Fruitful further research could be undertaken on the relationship between the creative imagination and class. Additionally, further study could examine how these middlebrow works circulate in different cultural contexts whilst extending the consideration of the middlebrow's cultural reception, industrial production and consumption in Britain and abroad.

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