

Introduction: Justifying Historical Murders: Problems of Neo-Victorian Fiction and Returning Lost Agency

2008 saw the birth of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, a journal founded and edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke in which she claims ‘the production of neo-Victorian artefacts, fictions, and fantasies has become too prolific to be contained as a ghost in the corner of the Victorian Studies parlour...’.¹ Ten years on, Kohlke is among many prominent critics that have contributed to the ongoing debate about neo-Victorianism and its purpose. Sally Shuttleworth was one of the first to define the genre, claiming to have coined the phrase ‘retro-Victorian’ in 1993.² She argues that this branch of historical fiction employs a ‘postmodern self-consciousness’,³ and that Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is ‘one of the first in a long line of texts which have sought to open up the silent spaces of history...’.⁴ Within his own studies, Christian Gutleben subscribes to the same prefix, acknowledging that Shuttleworth ‘baptised’ the ‘retro-Victorian’ novel in her discussion of Rhys’ *Jane Eyre* prequel. However, Gutleben claims it was with John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) that literature situated in the nineteenth century was ‘brought to public attention’.⁵ Kohlke opposes both these views, having criticised the literary canon that prioritises Fowles and Rhys, along with the likes of A.S. Byatt and Sarah Waters.⁶ According to Kohlke, ‘[t]here are several profuse producers of novels with nineteenth-century settings, who are

¹ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 1–18 (p. 1).

² Sally Shuttleworth, ‘From Retro- to Neo-Victorian Fiction and Beyond: Fearful Symmetries’, in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, eds. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (London: Routledge, 2014), pp.179-192 (p. 180).

³ Sally Shuttleworth, ‘Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel’, *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), p. 253.

⁴ Shuttleworth, ‘Natural History’, p. 256.

⁵ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 5.

⁶ 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*, eds. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (London: Routledge, 2014) pp. 21 – 37.

nonetheless not accorded generic importance in neo-Victorian criticism'.⁷ Within the same year as Fowles' critically acclaimed text, George MacDonald Fraser published the first of his eleven novels within 'The Flashman Papers' series, which incorporated 'paratextual editorial prefaces' and a 'comical debunking of the master-narrative of glorious empire', all with a Victorian backdrop.⁸ Yet despite pre-empting numerous integral traits of neo-Victorianism, Fraser's texts remain almost completely excluded from the canon.

Just as critics dispute the earliest example of a neo-Victorian text, multiple studies debate the correct terminology. *Victoriana*, *Victoriographies*, *post-Victorian*, *faux-Victorian*, along with Shuttleworth's *retro-Victorian* and, most prominently, *neo-Victorian*, are all terms that have been previously associated with literature that looks back on, and (re)writes, the nineteenth century. In an essay published within the first edition of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Andrea Kirchknopf collates all earlier critical discussion around these terms. She decides Julian Wolfrey's label of 'Victoriographies' sounds 'somewhat broad',⁹ while Cora Kaplan's 'Victoriana' also too widely describes a collective of Victorian information and artefacts.¹⁰ Instead, Kirchknopf argues that '*post-Victorian*' is the most appropriate term to depict the genre. She writes that while '*retro-* prioritises the past, *neo-* prioritises the future', yet '*post-Victorian* comprises both historical settings without immediately taking a stance of the hierarchy of eras'.¹¹ However, it is the term '*neo-Victorianism*' that has prevailed, both critically and culturally. In an extremely influential study, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn explain this trend, as they argue:

⁷ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein', p. 33.

⁸ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein', p. 34.

⁹ Andrea Kirchknopf, '(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 53–80 (p. 61).

¹⁰ Kirchknopf, '(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction', pp. 65–66.

¹¹ Kirchknopf, '(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction', p. 65.

the 'neo-Victorian' is more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of [their definition of] neo-Victorianism...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*.¹²

Therefore, the concept of 'neo-' implies that something *new* is being done to the era. However, Kohlke criticises this argument as another that assists in producing an exclusive literary canon. She states that 'such demarcation proves inadequate for conceptualising the full range and diversity of neo-Victorian writing'.¹³ Kohlke's discussion of the genre as exclusionary thus provides the necessary basis for arguing that neo-Victorianism, in its terminology and purpose, is fundamentally problematic.

Why neo-Victorianism?

Numerous critics interrogate why the return to the Victorians has become such a popular literary trope. John Kucich and Diane F. Sadoff ask, 'why, exactly, has contemporary culture preferred to engage the nineteenth century...as its historical "other"',¹⁴ while Jennifer Green-Lewis questions

why, when we want to reinvent and revisit the past, do we choose the nineteenth century as the place to get off the train? What is it about the look of this past that appeals to the late-twentieth-century passenger?¹⁵

Perhaps the opportunity to construct a 'new' narrative for the Victorians may be the answer. These critics however, also exemplify two opposing fields of thought in

¹² Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999 – 2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

¹³ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein', p. 25.

¹⁴ John Kucich and Diane F. Sadoff, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. xv.

¹⁵ Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Victorian photography, Literature and The Invention of Modern Memory: Already the Past* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 143.

explaining the frequent (re)visiting of the past. While Kucich and Sadoff depict the Victorian subject as the “other”, Green-Lewis questions the ‘appeal’ of the nineteenth-century. Therefore, as Gutleben suggests, the neo-Victorian text becomes either ‘subversive’ or ‘nostalgic’ in its (re)working of the past.¹⁶ The return to the Victorian era, if subversive, invokes a ‘derisive’ approach that critiques the historical ‘other’,¹⁷ and if nostalgic, (re)writes and romanticises the nineteenth century with ‘wistful revisionism’.¹⁸ Kohlke furthers Gutleben’s suggestion of the ‘subversive reworking’, claiming the nineteenth-century subject becomes ‘our darkest double’.¹⁹ She discusses the ‘ironic inversion’, as the Victorian era that once imparted an imperialistic view of the Orient, now ‘itself becomes Western culture’s mysterious, eroticised, and exotic Other’.²⁰ Kohlke also argues that ‘we enjoy neo-Victorian fiction at least in part to feel outraged, to revel in degradation and revulsion, *reading for defilement*’.²¹ Simon Joyce similarly claims that, compared to ‘those repressed Victorians’, the contemporary reader becomes ‘enlightened’,²² and Louise Hadley states that ‘the strangeness of the Victorians is not merely nostalgically mourned, but rather, exoticized and fetishized’.²³ The (re)vision of the nineteenth century can therefore become an attempt to demonise the past. The Victorians embody the sexually deviant and degenerate ‘other’, from which the contemporary reader has – hopefully – progressed.

¹⁶ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 10.

¹⁹ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Fiction’, in *Negotiating Sexual Idioms: Image, Text, Performance*, eds. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 53–77 (p. 57).

²⁰ Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’, p. 68.

²¹ Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’, p. 55.

²² Simon Joyce, ‘The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror’, in *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. Christine L. Krueger (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 3–17 (p. 7).

²³ Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 10.

Within neo-Victorianism there is also a desire to *redeem* our 'darkest doubles', and to save them from their nineteenth-century struggles by (re)voicing those silenced or marginalised. Llewellyn, in his article 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies', claims a neo-Victorian text is one that desires to 'rewrite the historical narratives of that period by representing marginalised voices...'.²⁴ Helen Davies also focuses her monograph, *Gender and Ventriloquism*, on the same subject. She writes,

we see that the 'silenced' Victorians are granted a 'voice' by contemporary authors and this is largely perceived as a noble, politically-aware enterprise, an attempt to challenge and redress the broader social and cultural inequalities that lead to this 'silencing' in the first instance.²⁵

Similarly, Christian Gutleben claims that,

the fascination with Victorianism seems inevitably to come with a temptation to denounce the injustice towards some of its ill-used or forgotten representatives such as women, the lower classes or homosexuals²⁶

Therefore, while the genre (re)writes, and (re)interprets history, there are also specifics of *who* is being (re)voiced, often with a socio-political agenda. Heilmann and Llewellyn discuss the importance of 'reclaiming historical events and personages', particularly for 'women writers'.²⁷ As a hugely marginalised group within the nineteenth century, Victorian women become significant subjects in need of (re)voicing. Jeanette King similarly suggests that 'historical fiction by women is part of the wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of rewriting history

²⁴ Mark Llewellyn, 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 164–185 (p. 165).

²⁵ Helen Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012), p. 3.

²⁶ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 10.

²⁷ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 2.

from a female perspective',²⁸ while Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that 'it is by interrogating the male-centred past's treatment of women', that '(counter-)histories' can be written.²⁹ Sarah Waters similarly draws attention to women's writing being that which confronts the 'traditional, male-centred historical narrative'.³⁰ For many critics, the discussion of (re)voicing also often returns to Linda Hutcheon's early and influential study of postmodernism. Hutcheon describes the genre as 'resolutely historical, and inescapably political',³¹ and she coins the phrase 'historiographic metafiction', described as 'those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages'.³² The critic claims that, within postmodernism, 'there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths.'³³ In questioning 'whose truth gets told',³⁴ Hutcheon notes the importance of (re)writing the 'ex-centric' characters, the 'marginalised' and 'peripheral figures of fictional history'.³⁵ Through the ex-centric, postmodernism is then able to critique 'the center' and confront marginalisation.

Problems of neo-Victorianism

Hutcheon states, however, that 'the relation of the center to the ex-centric is never an innocent one',³⁶ mirroring Shuttleworth's argument that 'no return to history can

²⁸ Jeanette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3-4.

²⁹ Heilmann Llewellyn, *Metafiction and Metahistory*, p. 2-3.

³⁰ Sarah Waters, 'Wolfskins and Togas: Maude Meagher's *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian Historical Novel', *Women: a cultural review*, 7:2 (1996), pp. 176-188 (p. 176).

³¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 4.

³² Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 5.

³³ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 109.

³⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 123.

³⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 114.

³⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 72.

be innocent'.³⁷ The ethics of (re)writing and (re)voicing the Victorians are therefore brought into question, yet the problems of neo-Victorianism remain relatively un-discussed. Heilmann and Llewellyn note that one issue may be the genre's engagement with real historical figures, as it creates 'the potential for treating the historical past as if it were a fictional narrative', and could thus undermine 'history as a lived experience'.³⁸ These two critics also tackle problems surrounding global neo-Victorianism, as they argue that 'neo-Victorian criticism risks an implied imperialism in its response to such Anglocentricity'.³⁹ Gayatri Spivak, one of the most influential critics in the sphere of post-colonialism, argues that

[i]t should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English.⁴⁰

If the era of the Victorians was therefore so tied up with Empire, neo-Victorianism is forced to confront the same issues. While there have been numerous debates about the pre-fix within the term, there is a significant shortage of those willing to challenge the 'Victorian' element of neo-*Victorianism*. However, Jessica Cox suggests that, while it 'would be unnecessarily and distortedly restrictive' to limit the term neo-Victorian to solely British,⁴¹ and Britain-based texts, 'the problem with global neo-Victorianism...is precisely the 'Victorian''.⁴² Elizabeth Ho takes this suggested imperialism of historical fiction even further, and theorises the sub-genre of 'neo-Victorian-at-sea', arguing that 'the further neo-Victorianism moves from Britain, the

³⁷ Shuttleworth, 'Natural History', p. 268.

³⁸ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 20.

³⁹ Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann, 'The Victorians Now: Global Reflections on Neo-Victorianism', *Critical Quarterly*, 55:1 (2013), pp. 24-42 (p. 26).

⁴⁰ Gayatri Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (1986), pp. 243-261 (p. 243).

⁴¹ Jessica Cox, 'Canonization, Colonization, and the Rise of Neo-Victorianism', *English*, 66:253 (2017), pp. 101-123 (p. 116).

⁴² Cox, 'Canonization, Colonization', p. 120.

more capable it becomes in addressing new sites of production'.⁴³ Kohlke, however, argues strongly against the terminology prioritising a British history, and instead claims that 'neo-Victorian' is

a generic and integrative umbrella term to encompass virtually all historical fiction related to the nineteenth century, irrespective of authors' or characters' nationalities, the plots' geographical settings, the language of composition, or, indeed, the extent of narratives' self-consciousness, postmodernism, adaptivity, or otherwise.⁴⁴

Here Kohlke attempts to establish a sense of total inclusivity within the genre, mirroring the 'Aims and Scopes' of the *Neo-Victorian Studies* journal. In order to incorporate all historical fiction situated in the nineteenth century, the journal states that it intends 'not to be restricted to geographical British contexts or those of the British empire and its one-time colonies'.⁴⁵

A final issue, that seems consistently ignored within the critical sphere, is related to neo-Victorianism's repeated (re)voicing and (re)claiming of the marginalised subject. It can be perceived that the reparation of agency is on the brink of going too far, as within this study I analyse narratives that return autonomy to morally questionable, criminal women. It is certainly debatable whether all marginalised ex-centrics *deserve* a (re)voicing. Also, by narrating a corrupt character, historical literature runs the risk of conforming to Kohlke's 'ironic inversion' of imperialism, turning the Victorian 'other' into the 'all too convenient bogeymen and nemeses' for the contemporary reader.⁴⁶ The four texts within this study each

⁴³ Elizabeth Ho, 'The Neo-Victorian at Sea: Towards a Global Memory of the Victorian', in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, eds. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 165–178 (p. 166).

⁴⁴ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein', p. 27.

⁴⁵ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Aims and Scopes', *Neo-Victorian Studies* (N/A). Available at: <http://www.neovictorianstudies.com> [accessed 1 July 2018].

⁴⁶ Kohlke, 'Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel', p. 57.

engage with these outlined issues of neo-Victorianism; they each narrate real historical lives and (re)cast them in fictional narratives; they each embody the neo-Victorian in the sense that they (re)write the nineteenth century, yet do not locate themselves in Victorian England; and they each (re)voice a morally questionable and criminal female, and by doing so return agency to the marginalised woman. Angela Carter, within two short stories, (re)discovers the American Lizzie Borden, the potential murderess arrested in 1892 for acts of parricide. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (re)voices Grace Marks, the servant-girl in Canada imprisoned in 1843 for murdering her master and his mistress. Finally, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (re)interprets the tale of Margaret Garner, a fugitive that murdered her child in 1856, in order to avoid returning to slavery. The events of each narrative occur across the Atlantic Ocean from Victorian England, and therefore this thesis engages with the concept of 'Anglocentricity' in defining all nineteenth-century-situated texts as neo-Victorian. Despite Kohlke's emphasis on the 'integrative umbrella term' that defines the genre, it becomes a challenge to argue that narratives located in Canada or America can all fit within the exclusive neo-*Victorian* label.⁴⁷ I therefore employ the, perhaps crude term, 'neo-nineteenth-century' to discuss these texts, in order to avoid the Anglocentric repercussions of 'Victorian', in a genre that ultimately attempts to un-do the imperialistic beliefs of the 1800s. However, each narrative subscribes to many of the essential expectations of neo-Victorianism. As '*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision*',⁴⁸ the four texts are also all published within the span of eleven years, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and thus surface within the era of the 'intensification of Victorian-

⁴⁷ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein', p. 27.

⁴⁸ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 4.

focused novels', according to Shuttleworth.⁴⁹ Gutleben also argues that, in the 1980s and 1990s, novelists 'unearthed and resuscitated' the Victorian tradition, yet while he states it is a British trend, these texts suggest it becomes international.⁵⁰ An underlying concern throughout this thesis, the implied imperialism of 'neo-Victorian' determines that the term is simply not expansive enough to accommodate all areas of literature situated in the nineteenth century.

The female killer

The central concern of this study, however, is the problematic (re)voicing of the (possibly) undeserving ex-centric – the nineteenth-century murderess. It is therefore useful to engage with theories surrounding common representations of the female killer. Just as neo-Victorianism became a popular genre in the late twentieth century, similar attention surrounded adaptations of dangerous women. In 1993, Helen Birch argues that, 'in recent years, the rampaging female has become a new cliché of Hollywood cinema'.⁵¹ Yet representations of the murderess are often, unsurprisingly, extremely gendered. Renée Herbele argues, 'when men commit violence in the private sphere, they are in a sense fulfilling the grim assumptions society holds about masculinity'.⁵² A murderess, however, is 'relatively rare'⁵³ and critics have suggested that, 'in breaking the law, female offenders are 'doubly deviant'...because they breach general social expectations as well as transgressing appropriate feminine

⁴⁹ Shuttleworth, 'From Retro- to Neo-Victorian Fiction', p. 182.

⁵⁰ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Helen Birch, 'Introduction', in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, ed. Helen Birch (London: Virago Press, 1993), pp. 1-6 (p. 1).

⁵² Renée Herbele, 'Disciplining Gender; Or, Are Women Getting Away with Murder?', *Signs*, 24:4 (1999), pp. 1103-1112 (pp.1105-1106).

⁵³ Birch, 'Introduction', p. 2

behaviour'.⁵⁴ The female killer is thus depicted as either 'mad' or 'bad', or even 'sad', and each of these portrayals creates problems for agency. In Belinda Morrissey's study of women who kill, she claims that 'agency is denied through three techniques: vilification or monsterization, mythification and victimism'.⁵⁵ The victimization of the murderess detracts agency by depicting the criminal as only acting 'out of desperation or fear'.⁵⁶ However, to mythologize a female killer – presenting her as 'Medea or the evil witch'⁵⁷ – or to depict her as a monstrous, Lady Macbeth character that is 'more profoundly evil than any man',⁵⁸ eradicates agency through eliminating humanity. Morrissey also states that 'vilification operates to displace the offender from her society, to insist on her otherness, thereby avoiding the knowledge that she is produced *by* that society'.⁵⁹ This argument becomes integral for (re)writing the murderess, as in order to return agency to the female killer, this vilification surely must be undone. Carter, Atwood and Morrison therefore specifically place their heroines within society, undermining their status as the 'other' and portraying them as the ultimate product of nineteenth-century oppressions. Chapter 1 studies Angela Carter's two short stories about Lizzie Borden. I first analyse "The Fall River Axe Murders" as a tale that depicts numerous justifications for Lizzie's crimes due to a lack of female autonomy in a male-centred era. I then examine "Lizzie's Tiger" in light of Carter (re)claiming the murderess as the monstrous, 'bad' female killer, in order to recuperate agency. Chapter 2 takes *Alias Grace* as seemingly 'neo-

⁵⁴ Patricia Eastel, et al., 'How are women who kill portrayed in newspaper media? Connections with social values and the legal system', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 51 (2015), pp. 31-41 (p. 32).

⁵⁵ Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of agency and subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 25.

⁵⁶ Birch, 'Introduction', p. 4-5.

⁵⁷ Morrissey, *When Women Kill*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ Christine Bell and Marie Fox, 'Telling Stories of Women Who Kill', *Sage & Legal Studies*, 5:4 (1996), pp. 471-494 (p. 472).

⁵⁹ Morrissey, *When Women Kill*, p. 24.

Victorian' in its use of meta-fiction, intertextuality and interrogation of truth and historical accuracy. Much like the first chapter, I then confront the male-centred treatment of women that becomes a central justification for the act of murder. I conclude this section with discussing how agency is returned to Grace, while historical truth is not compromised. Chapter 3 interrogates the neo-Slave narrative, Morrison's *Beloved*, that revises the most marginal of historical figures. First, I debate how the horrors of slavery justify the act of infanticide, before then examining the spectral figure of the text as one that represents these horrors. Unlike Carter and Atwood, Morrison also provides a complete redemption for her murderess, which I discuss in the concluding segment of this chapter.

This thesis studies neo-Victorianism in light of two of Kohlke's influential studies, one which questions the canonization within neo-Victorian fiction,⁶⁰ and the other that interrogates the retrospective imperialism of the past, within the same genre.⁶¹ In the discussion of each text I highlight neo-Victorian generic traits in order to exemplify the exclusivity of the British-centric terminology. However, the fundamental concern of my study is that, although Kohlke perceives orientalism of the nineteenth-century as starting and ending with an enlightenment against a *sexually* degenerate 'other', it seems that historical literature demonises a whole range of bygone morals. The four narratives here examined portray nineteenth-century pressures and expectations as culpable for constructing the murderess, and the killer herself becomes moulded by her oppressions. While Lizzie, Grace and Margaret are 'our darkest double[s]', it is the culture that produced them that we read 'for defilement'. Demonising history, the contemporary reader is the enlightened

⁶⁰ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein'.

⁶¹ Kohlke, 'Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel'.

other that looks back on the sexist, classist and racist structures of the past. The most significant problem of (re)voicing morally corrupt, marginalised subjects is that *their murderous crimes are therefore justified*. By analysing the ways in which agency is returned to the female killer, as well as highlighting the Anglo-centricity of neo-Victorianism, and confronting the retrospective orientalism of socio-political structures that justify historical murders, this study confronts and interrogates the central issues surrounding this popular genre of historical fiction.

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