“UNJUSTLY NEGLECTED”: RECLAIMING VICTORIA HOLT AS A PIONEER OF NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

by

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Contents

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Abstract

Victoria Holt (a pseudonym of Eleanor Hibbert (1906-1993)), has received very little critical attention and she is not yet accepted as a neo-Victorian author. In order to reclaim her, this thesis investigates her work as a neo-Victorian response to the Victorian era. In addition, it uses her novels to 'talk back' to current neo-Victorian criticism. Employing a variety of critical lenses to reflect the varied genres embedded in sensation fiction, the thesis examines Holt's novels as historical, Gothic, crime and romance fiction in conjunction with analysing them as neo-Victorian sensation fiction. By using selected novels as case studies, it reveals their influential innovations in these genres. Holt's intertextual use of Victorian fiction also co-articulates matters of socio-political concern, particularly issues relating to the position of women. Examined in the context of second wave feminism and late twentieth-century legislation, her work shows an unrecognised politicised slant which the thesis uses to problematise the perception of her as an author of 'popular' fiction.

Holt's work is especially impactful in relation to the neo-Victorian canon, which is still developing. There is a currently unrecognised convergence between her novels and established neo-Victorian texts including Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* (1998) and Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002). Reclaiming Holt as an author of neo-Victorian sensation fiction, the thesis contributes to knowledge surrounding the early development of neo-Victorianism, expands the neo-Victorian canon and restores justice to a neglected but important author.

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Introduction

"searching the archives to identify unjustly neglected writers and texts"

— Marie-Luise Kohlke

When Marie-Luise Kohlke argued that the neo-Victorian canon needed to be extended, she remarked that "[a]s well as prospecting for neo-Victorian . . . future canonical works . . . we should also be actively prospecting backwards . . . searching the archives to identify unjustly neglected writers and texts" (*Literature* 32). This thesis argues that Victoria Holt,[1] a pseudonym of prolific author Eleanor Hibbert (1906-1993), is one such neglected writer. It continues my reclamation of Holt as an author of neo-Victorian fiction which I began in my MA in 2016. I continued the work in my article, "Madness, Monks and Mutiny: Neo-Victorianism in the Work of Victoria Holt", which was published in the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2019. This thesis is the first full-length critical study of Holt.

The aim of the thesis is to reclaim Holt as a neglected pioneer of neo-Victorian fiction. Building on my earlier work, the study breaks new ground by arguing that Holt was not only a pioneer of neo-Victorian fiction, but that she was also a pioneer of neo-Victorian sensation fiction. To this end, it uses close analysis of a wide range of Holt's novels, many of which are previously unexamined, to reveal her consistent use of motifs that are now recognised as neo-Victorian. In, particular, it focuses on the mirroring of socio-political concerns, intertextuality and the restoration of silenced voices. By revealing the extent of neo-Victorian elements in Holt's work the thesis has the further aim of contributing to the ongoing debate about the place of so-called popular fiction in the neo-Victorian discourse, since Holt is currently regarded as an author of popular fiction. Using its analysis to "talk

Ut [1] From here on, I refer to the author as Holt unless specific circumstances dictate the use of her real name, Eleanor Hibbert, or one of her other pseudonyms.

back" (Davies 1) to neo-Victorian criticism, the thesis challenges the view that neo-Victorian fiction is synonymous with so-called literary fiction and argues for the necessity of a wider, more diverse text base.

Previously unseen contemporary material is examined, including letters to and from Holt's publishers, as well as newspaper articles, reviews and advertising matter. This material provides new insights into Holt's work, reception and position as a neo-Victorian author. Also mentioned are some of the novels which Hibbert wrote under the pseudonyms of Jean Plaidy, Elbur Ford and Philippa Carr as they have Victorian settings. Conversely, not all of the thirty-two novels Hibbert wrote under the name of Victoria Holt are considered. *The Black Opal* (1993) is excluded because it was published posthumously and was unfinished at the time of Holt's death. It was then completed by other hands. *Devil on Horseback* (1977), *Seven for a Secret* (1992), *The Queen's Confession* (1968) and *My Enemy the Queen* (1979) are also excluded because they are not set in the Victorian era. *Bride of Pendorric* (1963), however, is included despite its contemporary setting because it is used to test the temporal limits of neo-Victorianism.

Two main areas of criticism are foregrounded: the limited existing criticism concerning Victoria Holt and neo-Victorian criticism. In addition, each chapter draws on criticism relevant to the component genre under discussion: since Victorian sensation fiction encompasses diverse genres including Gothic, Newgate and romance fiction, the chapters of this thesis reflect these genres and draw on criticism in their respective fields.

'Neo-Victorian fiction' is a key term. The development of the term neo-Victorian and its changing usage over time are discussed in detail below when tracing the state of the field. However, whilst acknowledging that there is no universally accepted definition, and that some areas such as postmodernism are the subject of vigorous debate, this thesis uses the term 'neo-Victorian fiction' in line with areas of general critical accord. It is "contemporary

fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both" (Hadley 4). It is "*more than* historical fiction" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4, italics in original) and it "is motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge . . . emphas[ising] events that are usually left out of histories" (Shiller 541), showing "a palpable desire to respond to the Victorians in some way, to answer back to the society and culture of this era" (Davies 1). Major areas of response include the "desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices" (Llewellyn "What" 165); intertextually revisiting canonical Victorian narratives in a "compulsive recycling of Victorian material" (Kaplan 15); "explor[ing] how present circumstances shape historical narrative" (Shiller 540); "formulat[ing] our relationship to the period as a series of repetitions which produce the shock of recognition and the fright of estrangement" (Mitchell 177) and "revisiting the nineteenth-century past in order to (co)-articulate today's concerns" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss (5).

The related term 'neo-Victorian sensation fiction' is also key to this thesis. It is used here to denote neo-Victorian fiction which 'talks back' specifically to Victorian sensation fiction. It can involve a response to sensation fiction's hallmark of creating a new novel from elements of multiple other genres including Gothic, Newgate (crime) and romantic fiction; it can be the reworking of a novel which is already acknowledged as a part of the Victorian sensation canon, but reworking it as critique rather than imitation, and it can also involve the prominent use of one or more of sensation fiction's defining narrative tropes in order to mirror contemporary concerns.

Defining tropes are here considered to be "the novel-with-a-secret" (Kathleen Tillotson qtd. Nemesvari 70); "preoccupations with class and gender, identity and sexual transgression . . . use of crime, mystery, doubling and melodramatic incidents" (Beller 13)

which are "insinuated . . . into the lives of ordinary, respectable middle-class characters" (Hughes ix); female criminality, female madness and the female detective, which have been identified as important elements by Lynn Pykett, Mary Elizabeth Leighton, Lisa Surridge and many others. Also considered as a fundamental aspect is "women's complex representation . . . and the way that male characters were often secondary to the action of the story" (MacDonald 127).

Further defining neo-Victorian sensation fiction is its participation, like Victorian sensation fiction before it, in the burning issues of the day. As Andrew Mangham rightly points out, sensation fiction provides "a no-holds-barred area for asking controversial questions" (Mangham 4). Most importantly, Beller argues convincingly that a "central aspect of both sensation novels and the critical discourse which accompanied them in the 1860s concerned the nature, role and legal position of women" (17). Lillian Nayder comments insightfully that the genre's use of bigamy reveals contemporary "[a]nxieties about marriage law reform and civil divorce" (156). Whilst mid-Victorian sensation fiction's focus on women participates in issues of first wave feminism, particularly their legal status, Holt's neo-Victorian sensation fiction participates in issues of second wave feminism, a subject to which I will be returning.

Additional key terms are 'popular' and 'literary' fiction, since much of the debate in recent neo-Victorian criticism hinges around the traditional hierarchical definition of literature as belonging to one or other of these types. The two forms of fiction are often defined in contrast to each other, with popular fiction being considered as inferior to literary fiction; or, as *The London Quarterly Review* put it in 1866, "literary trash" ("Recent" qtd. Costantini 102). The 'inferior' nature of popular fiction is inevitably bound up with questions of taste. Pierre Bourdieu argues authoritatively that "[t]aste . . . [is] one of the most vital stakes in the struggle fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural

production" (3). Influentially, he remarks that dominant classes use literature as one of the forms of "cultural capital" (4). Subjective taste is therefore, as Bennet rightly remarks, used to "claim that there is a powerful divide between 'high' (or alternatively, 'elite' or 'establishment') culture and 'popular' culture", with the terms "highbrow', 'middlebrow' or 'lowbrow' [being used] to distinguish different class cultures" (11). Issues of class are highlighted in Cox's remark that "[m]any of the literary descendants of *The Woman in White* — works like [Sarah Waters'] *Fingersmith*, Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), and [Joanne] Harris's *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1994), have climbed the social ladder and undergone a transformation into something more 'respectable'" (*Neo-Victorianism* 6).

It is noticeable that that Waters, Setterfield and Harris all have academic backgrounds. Bourdieu shows that cultural capital can be passed on and this can be seen, not only in the examples of the privileged position of Waters, Setterfield and Harris, but also in the prominence of some of the most-discussed authors, including John Fowles and A. S. Byatt. All of these authors have academic qualifications and so share, or are at least aware, of the academy's ideas of cultural value.[2] There is a danger therefore of the academy implicitly redefining 'literary' fiction as 'fiction produced by academics'. Recognising the contribution of popular fiction not only increases diversity, but it also guards against charges of quasi-nepotism occasioned by amplifying the voice of authors to whom the academy has bequeathed cultural values and subjective taste. The terms popular and literary are both used in this thesis but both types of fiction are held to be equally important in our understanding of the neo-Victorian impulse.

My intention is to separate these terms from the value judgements they have accrued, informed particularly by the work of Scott McCracken, Herbert Gans and Jessica Cox.

[2] Fowles and Byatt were educated at Oxford and both went on to teach English at university; Harris studied languages at Cambridge, Waters has a Ph. D in English Literature and Setterfield has a Ph. D. in French Literature.

McCracken offers a basic definition of popular fiction as fiction that is "read by large numbers of people" (1). A view of popular fiction as 'trash' has led to accusations that it is "intellectually destructive because it offers meretricious and escapist content" (Gans 41); yet as Gans rightly points out, this view is not supported by any evidence. Indeed, McCracken observes insightfully that popular fiction "mediates social conflict" (6) because "narratives read by large numbers of people are indicative of wide-spread hopes and fears" (2). He elaborates by perceptively remarking that, whilst "popular fiction may use simple forms . . . if those forms are to win an audience they must be able to address their audience's concerns" (11).

Despite defining popular fiction, he points out the limitations of any definition and remarks that "genre boundaries are never absolutely fixed" (12). This idea is exemplified by Cox's insightful argument that popular and literary fiction do not have impermeable boundaries. If the word 'popular' is to be used literally, she argues, then John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), as well as Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002) are all popular fiction, yet they are all regarded also as literary fiction. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that there are areas of overlap between the two. However, whilst acknowledging the difficulties of definition, Cox offers the view that "[l]iterary fiction may be said to exhibit an overarching concern with narrative art – with how the story is told – whilst popular fiction is typically plot-driven" (8). Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that even this definition is not absolute, because *Fingersmith* is largely plot-driven and as such can be seen as popular fiction.

Being mindful of the difficulties involved in defining popular and literary fiction and the lack of an absolute boundary between them, the thesis nevertheless views literary fiction as being concerned with 'narrative art' and regards popular fiction as being largely plot

driven whilst using simple forms. However, being produced and consumed *en masse*, popular fiction is regarded as more than 'meretricious' or 'escapist' and is recognised as providing insight into the 'hopes and fears' of its society.

Introducing Victoria Holt

Victoria Holt is a pseudonym of Eleanor Alice Hibbert, née Burford. She inherited her love of books from her father, a dock worker, and became an avid reader from the age of four (Dalby 17). Growing up in London had a profound influence on her and she credited it with giving her a love of history which influenced her novels. Her family was poor and when she was sixteen she had to go out to work in order to earn a living (Burgess n.p.). When she was "about seventeen" a visit to Hampton Court had a profound effect on her life. She remarked: "I really felt the fascination of that place, and it just gripped me, and I think perhaps then I knew subconsciously that I had to write historical novels" (Plomley n.p.). She began to write long, serious novels that she described as "[p]sychological, hopefully significant studies of contemporary life" (Lord 70) which emulated the Victorian novels she loved. However, at the length of Victorian triple decker novels, the books were too long for the 1930s marketplace. Consequently they were not published. She adapted her work to suit the marketplace over the next two decades and became a successful author, adopting a number of different pseudonyms for different styles of novels. She was extremely prolific and over the course of her career she wrote ninety-one historical novels under the name of Jean Plaidy, thirty-eight historical sagas under the name of Philippa Carr, thirty-one romantic novels under her maiden name Eleanor Burford, eight crime novels under the name of Kathleen Kellow and four novelisations of real-life Victorian murderers under the name of Elbur Ford. She also wrote a few novels in various genres under less prolific pseudonyms. The patterns of historical fiction exhibited by Carr can be seen in Holt's contemporaries. Historical fiction by Winston

Graham, Norah Lofts and Cynthia Harrod-Eagles, for example, in the Poldark, Suffolk and Dynasty series respectively, create sagas which span multiple generations. Lofts and Harrod-Eagles both create series which span many centuries. Holt's novels, by contrast, often cover a short period of time and are in any case limited to the lifespan of the narrator, creating a more intense experience. They are also prone to collapsing the temporal distance by conflating past and present. For example, the narrator in *Mistress of Mellyn* (1960) wonders if she is actually a woman from the past, as discussed in Chapter One. This creates a greater sense of urgency surrounding the distancing of contemporary debates because the Victorian era not only haunts, but also often seems to inhabit, the same temporal space.

Hibbert initially found fame with her Jean Plaidy novels. These books were fictionalised accounts of the lives of prominent historical women, usually the Queens of England. As Philippa Carr she wrote novels which "show off the major events of history, through the lives of ordinary people – although they're fictitious" (Smith 14). Carr's novels, like Plaidy's, focus on women. and the effect their historical milieu has on their lives. The Carr novels as a whole are referred to as the Daughters of England series, reflecting their female-centric concerns as they follow the lives of women in an English family over a period of many generations.

However, her greatest success came with the novels she wrote under the name of Victoria Holt, which combined a historical setting with the motifs of the gothic. When her agent, Patricia Myrer, suggested she should write a series of novels in the manner of *Jane Eyre* Holt immediately liked the idea because it fit in with her love of history and her deep-rooted fascination with Victorian literature. In an interview, she stated that "Dickens, Zola and particularly the Brontës and nearly all the Victorians influenced my writing" (Holt qtd. in Harris n.p.). It was not only her love of Victorian but also her love of history which influenced her work. She bought and restored a Tudor house in Sandwich, Kent, which

appears to be the model for The Queen's House in *The Secret Woman*. The Queen's House has a disturbing atmosphere and the narrator feels that the house, which is full of antiques, is haunted by ghosts of the past. Its atmosphere echoes that of the King's Lodging, which she restored. She filled it with "gothic chairs, and chests and fourposters" but later said that it had been a "'terrible mistake'" and "a bit weird . . . Everybody said it was haunted. I felt there was something strange about it'" (Bennet 5). She found it so disturbing that she sold the house and returned to London, where she lived in a modern flat. Nevertheless, an unsettling ambience continued to haunt her work.

The novels were immediately successful. The first, *Mistress of Mellyn*, had sales of over a million copies in the first six months. By the time of her death, total sales of all the Holt novels had reached seventy-five million. This figure rose to over a hundred million copies when all of her pseudonyms were included, spanning 183 novels which were translated into over twenty languages. Her enormous output was used by some critics to disparage her work but Holt herself put it down to hard work. She described herself as being "a compulsive writer" (Plomley n.p.), saying that she wrote for five hours a day, seven days a week, in addition to which she spent much of her time researching and proofreading. She remarked: "I love my work so much that nothing would stop me writing. If I take even a week's break, I just feel miserable" (Dalby 25).

Her novels were influential as well as popular, spawning a new subgenre known most usually as the 'modern Gothic' novel but also referred to as romantic suspense, and occasionally referred to under a range of other names including Gothic romance. The genre itself influenced Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), in which the heroine writes "costume Gothics" that are described in terms which echo Holt's novels. Marion Harris points out that "[i]n 1960, no one was writing or publishing novels of romantic suspense", but Holt's influence was so great that by the time her fourth novel was published, "the phrase 'romantic suspense'

had become part of the language and an important category in book shops" (Harris n.p.). *The New York Times* also stressed her importance, calling her a "pioneer in the romantic suspense or Gothic genre" (Lambert D25). By 1974, her influence was so great, and the genre she spawned was so massive, that "five paperback publishers ran off approximately 23 million copies of almost 175 gothic titles by 100 authors" (Ewing BR3). Holt remained the most popular author in the genre, with her novels being market leaders. When the popularity of the modern Gothic novel began to decline in the late 1970s, Holt's popularity did not fade with it and her novels continued to appear on the bestseller lists until after her death in 1993. New editions have been issued since her death, the most recent appearing in 2014, and eight of her novels are currently still in print.

Whilst the late twentieth-century saw the Victorian era being increasingly being left behind from a temporal perspective, the age was not forgotten. Louisa Hadley argues that there is a change in the way the Victorians are perceived as the twentieth century progresses. The Victorians are no longer seen as "oppressive parent-figures" but as "benign grandparents" (1). Her argument that "[a]lthough Victorian had become a pejorative term at the turn of the twentieth century, Thatcher turned it into a positive term" (8) is not convincing. As Raphael Samuel has shown, the term 'Victorian' continued to be used to denote squalor, poverty and oppression in the late twentieth-century and Margaret Thatcher herself did not always use the term in a complimentary fashion. However, Hadley's recognition of the paradox in twentieth-century portrayals of the Victorians, which either emphasise "the distance between the Victorians and us – their strangeness" or "their proximity to us – their familiarity" (8), is well argued and convincing. This paradox is revealed in Holt's work, where the daily 'strangeness' of Victorian life is matched with the familiarity of socio-political concerns.

Holt wrote across four decades of enormous socio-political change, particularly for women. Whilst individual changes, particularly in relation to legislation, are discussed in detail

throughout the thesis in the context of specific novels, of overarching importance is the rise of second wave feminism. Although contemporary critics dismissed Holt's novels as conservative, she herself stressed their feminist nature, saying they were about "women of integrity and strong character" who were "struggling for liberation, fighting for their own survival" (Holt qtd. in Lambert D25, my italics). The word "liberation" is of specific importance since it echoes the name that was used at the time to describe second wave feminism, namely the Women's Liberation Movement. The name was used particularly during the period when Holt was active, which was from 1960 to 1993.

Echoing Victorian sensation fiction's participation in the main issues of first wave feminism, particularly women's legal status, this thesis argues that Holt's neo-Victorian sensation fiction participates in the debates surrounding the concerns of second wave feminism. In the 1960s, the main focus was on equality between the sexes and this found expression in demands for equal pay, equal education and opportunities, twenty-four-hour nurseries, free contraception and abortion on demand. These concerns were formalised at the first Women's Liberation Movement conference, which was held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970. As Sue Thornham rightly points out, there was a "double focus which marked out second wave feminism: on women as an oppressed social group and on the female body with its need for sexual autonomy as a primary site of that oppression" (27).The oppression included domestic violence, including marital rape.

A series of legislative measures in the 1960s and early 1970s went some way to redressing the issues. The contraceptive pill was introduced in 1961 for married women and extended to all women in 1967. In 1964, the Married Women's Property Act, which was first introduced in 1870, was revised. It allowed women to keep money they saved from the allowance their husband gave them, up to a half of that allowance, and this gave many women more financial independence. In 1968 the strike at Ford's Dagenham plant, by women who

wanted their work to be recognised as skilled, led on to the 1970 Equal Pay Act. Under the Act, women were entitled to the same pay as men if they were doing the same job, or one of equal skill or value. This was followed by the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 which legislated for equal opportunity. In 1984, there was the first successful claim for equal pay, which was won in 1988. The Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act of 1976 gave women protection against violent husbands. However, marital rape was an ongoing concern. It was not recognised as a crime until 1991 and was not outlawed until the Sexual Offences Act of 2003. These issues all find expression in Holt's novels, whose plots deal explicitly with the limited employment opportunities open to women and the attendant economic disadvantages, the sexual double standard which encourages promiscuity in men but condemns it in women, and the plight of women trapped in violent marriages who can also be subjected to marital rape. These concerns are highlighted throughout the thesis, as they appear repeatedly in Holt's novels.

State of the Field on Holt

Holt's novels seem to have been unremarked by criticism in the 1960s. However, in the 1970s, some criticism emerged in the field of popular culture in America. Its main focus was the cultural significance of the modern Gothic novel in its contemporary American society. Typically, it mentioned Holt as the most significant author in the genre because of her position as the category's progenitor, her wide influence and enormous sales. However, it rarely analysed her novels. When it did so, it analysed them as a part of the modern Gothic genre rather than as independent texts. The critical tone was flippant and was typified by such titles as Joanna Russ's *Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic* (1973). Much of this early criticism makes its American focus clear. Russ's article opens: "What fiction do American women read? God knows" (666). Similarly, Kay

Mussell's 1975 article, "Beautiful and Damned: the Sexual Woman in Gothic Fiction", uses Holt's novels to determine whether American women are still interested in a traditionally domestic role. Mussell's attention is therefore directed towards a consideration of whether, in the 1970s, "the feminine responsibility for nurturing and maintaining the family unit are still viable ideals for many [American] women" (89).[3] Despite its focus on American readers in the 1970s, the early criticism in American popular culture has influenced more recent literary criticism on Holt, for example in Diana Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (2005), and it is therefore addressed in this thesis.

The term 'modern Gothic' was coined by Gerald Gross, an editor at Ace books, when he noted the "gloomy, arched and towered architecture so often described in the stories" (Whitney 11). Ace was an American publishing house whose speciality was straight-to-paperback fiction, much of which imitated Holt's novels in an effort to emulate her extraordinary sales. The term was typically used to describe novels published in the 1960s and 1970s which featured women in threatening situations and which were written in the first person from the female point of view. Holt's novels have often been referred to as modern Gothic novels by critics such as Caesarea Abartis, Russ and Mussell. However, the difficulty in defining Holt's work can be seen by the wide variety of other terms used. Francesca Billiani sometimes uses the term "modern Gothic", but notes that the genre is also referred to as the "drugstore Gothic", "Gothic romance" or "popular Gothic" (233). Radway uses "modern 'Gothic' romance" ("Gothic" 141). Juliann Fleenor favours "female Gothic" ("Introduction" 4); Punter uses the term "popular Gothic romance" (*The Gothic* 279). Wallace refers to "modern Gothic", as well as "drugstore Gothic" and "costume Gothic" ("Female" 233). Many of these terms are disparaging in tone. They are used to describe the

[3] Russ was writing in 1973, Mussell in 1975 and Abartis in 1979 when the modern Gothic genre was a dominant force in terms of sales, particularly at the start of the decade.

genre which Holt spawned, and have therefore been applied to her writing, but although she is a part of the genre, the necessary distinction between her novels and those of her followers is often overlooked. Including her in this phenomenon has led to her novels being ridiculed by association and this is a probable reason, at least in part, for the lack of serious attention devoted to her work.

One of the chief methods of diminishing the significance of the novels is the attention directed to the "paratext", defined by Gérard Genette as the elements of a text which are on the threshold of the work, such as the title, format, covers, interviews, publicity announcements and reviews. These parts "are designed to assist the reader in establishing what kind of text they are being presented with and how to read it" (qtd. Allen 101). As such, they influence the reception of a work, in a similar manner to genre. Paratextuality is therefore particularly significant for Holt's work since it has an impact on the way her novels are perceived, particularly by those who have not read them. A review in *The Sydney Morning Herald* for *The Curse of the Kings*, for example, claims: "it is the sort of story to bring despair to literary critics and rage to supporters of Women's Lib." (Smith "Passion" 14). However, contrary to the impression the review creates, *The Curse of the Kings* has serious feminist themes which are discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

When Billiani cites Holt, amongst other "Gothic romance" authors, as being "published in paperback" (221), she gives the impression that Holt was published *only* in paperback and that her novels were therefore considered cheap and disposable. However, Holt's novels were all published in hardback as well as paperback. They had a greater range and made a greater impact than those of other authors working in the same genre. Some of Holt's novels were optioned (although not always made) for cinema and television. A Hollywood film of *Mistress of Mellyn* was planned, with a screenplay being produced. Rights were sold to Paramount "for a very large sum" (HC 27 April 1960), although the film was

never made. A Taiwanese language film version of the novel was, however, made. *The King of the Castle* (1967) also attracted interest from visual media producers. Talks were afoot with Universal Television to make the novel into a film, although again it was never made. The interest is evidenced by a copy of the quitclaim held in the Glasgow University Archive, dated 20 March 1979. The quitclaim shows that the publishers do not hold the rights for film versions.

Length is another area of major difference. Holt's novels are much longer than those of her followers. The novels which Ace published straight to paperback were sixty thousand words in length whereas Holt's novels are typically about 120,000 to 150,000 words in length.[4] At twice the length (or more), Holt's novels inevitably had more room for complexity. However, one of the paratextual areas that has most often been used to belittle the novels is the book covers. Wallace, Russ and Radway all comment on the modern Gothic covers but although they mention Holt, they fail to point out that Holt's covers do not follow the same pattern. Russ remarks:

> Anywhere paperback books are sold you will find volumes whose covers seem to have evolved from the same clone: the color [sic] scheme is predominantly blue or green, there is a frightened young woman in the foreground, in the background is a mansion, castle, or large house with one window lit, there is usually a moon, a storm, or both, and whatever is occurring is occurring at night.
>
> These are the modern Gothics (Russ 666).

[4] An estimated word count using the white paper method. The average number of words is calculated by counting the number of words on three individual pages, then the average is multiplied by the number of pages in the novels whist making suitable adjustments for half pages.

She goes on to specifically mention Holt as a part of this phenomenon. Similarly, Janice Radway comments:

> During the peak period of 1969 to 1974, gothics by top authors like Holt and Whitney outsold their equivalents in all other categories . . . the publishers facilitated ready identification of the genre by adopting a stock cover. Nearly every modern gothic issued before 1974 sported a predominantly green and blue drawing exhibiting a terrified woman, clad in a long, swirling robe, who was fleeing from a darkened mansion lit only by a glow in an upper window. The cover proved so effective that gothic popularity developed into a cultural "phenomenon" worthy of comment and analysis in innumerable news magazines, daily papers, and general interest monthlies ("Utopian" 144).

Likewise, Diana Wallace talks of Holt in relation to the modern Gothic, saying that "the central motif of the modern gothic [is . . .] encapsulated by the cover image of the girl and castle" (*Historical* 133). Like Russ and Radway, Wallace does not differentiate between Holt and the other modern gothic authors, leaving the impression that Holt's novels are covered in a similar manner.

However, Holt's book covers are very different from those of her imitators. When her first novel was published, her publishers were not looking for an easily-identifiable and generic cover. A letter dated 27 April 1960 from Mr Smith at Collins, Holt's UK publishers, says of *Mistress of Mellyn*: "This is a period novel and we want a very attractive pictorial wrapper" (n.p.) Moreover, the image used bears a striking resemblance to a Mariette Lydis illustration for Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), suggesting that the publishers

anticipated a more literary market for the novel. Both images feature distinctive bare trees which form an arch to frame the distant house.

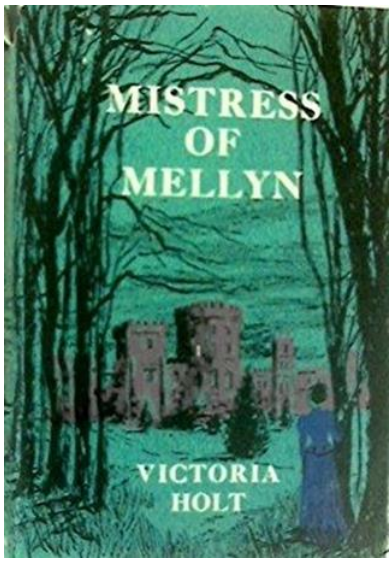

Figure 1: Original hardback cover for *Mistress of Mellyn*. Scanned from author's private collection.

Figure 2: Mariette Lydis illustration for *Turn of the Screw*. Scanned from author's private collection.

Unlike the modern gothic covers, many of Holt's covers do not feature a house at all. Instead, they feature one of the relevant locations in the novel, as hardback covers for *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* and *The Secret Woman show*:

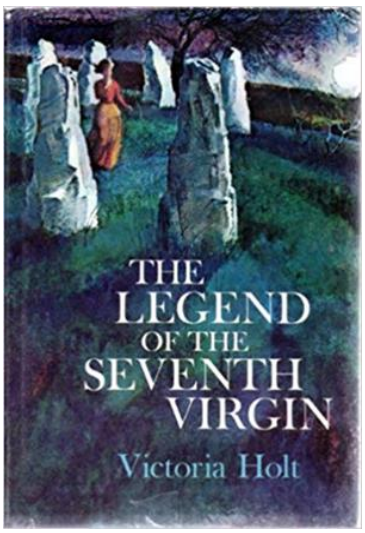

Figure 3: Original hardback cover illustration for *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*. Scanned from author's private collection.

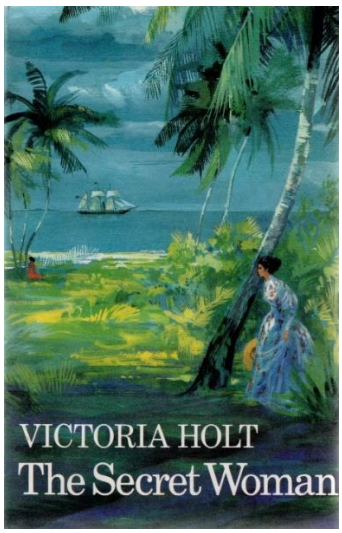

Figure 4: Original hardback cover for *The Secret Woman*. Scanned from author's private collection.

The paperback covers for Holt's novels are similarly unlike those of the modern Gothics. Holt's novels typically came out in paperback about a year after the hardback release, and were originally published by the paperback divisions of Holt's hardback publishers rather than a paperback specialist such as Ace. A comparison of covers for one of the Ace modern Gothics novels, and one Holt novel, can be seen below. The Ace cover is on the left and shows the ubiquitous Ace style of a frightened woman running away from a house or castle. There is a yellow light shining in one of the windows. She is dressed in a flimsy nightdress and the period of the novels is indeterminate. The UK paperback cover for *Kirkland Revels* (1962) is shown on the right. It features a strong and independent-looking woman holding the reins of her horse, against an appropriate background of the moors. The house is barely visible in the remote distance and the scene depicted is in daylight.

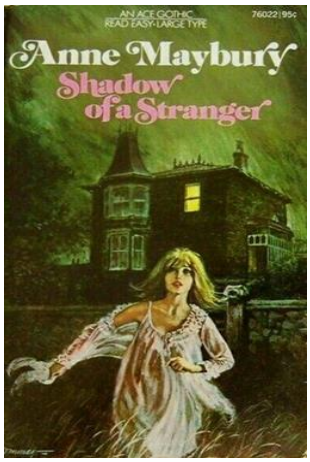

Figure 5: Ace paperback cover for Anne Maybury's *Shadow of a Stranger*. Scanned from author's private collection.

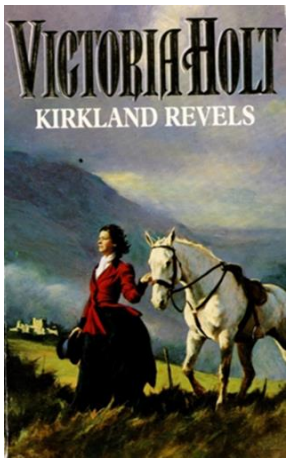

Figure 6: Fontana paperback cover for *Kirkland Revels*. Scanned from author's private collection.

One of Holt's later paperback covers suggests, again, that the publishers were aiming at a more literary market, perhaps one which might be expected to respond to Holt's use of intertexts. Below is the paperback cover for *The Captive* (1989). It shows a similarity to the cover of the screenplay for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by Harold Pinter (1981), which

is based on the novel of the same name by John Fowles. Since *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is one of the foundational texts of neo-Victorianism, the similarities are particularly significant. Both feature a woman in a cloak, whose hand is holding her cloak shut as it blows in the wind. The women are standing by the sea and are shown in side view, facing left.

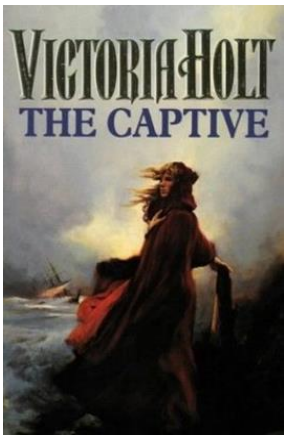

Figure 7: Fontana paperback cover for for *The Captive*. Scanned from author's private collection.

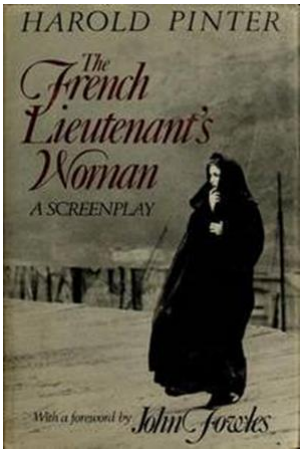

Figure 8: Cover for Harold Pinter's Screenplay of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Scanned from author's private collection.

Many areas of the paratext were out of Holt's control, but where she could control them she used them to create a distinctly Victorian, literary ambience. She revealed that the pseudonym Victoria Holt was specifically chosen to suggest the Victorian age, so that readers are primed to enter the Victorian era when they open the books. The titles of the novels similarly emphasise their relationship to nineteenth-century literature. The titles of *The Shivering Sands*, *The India Fan* (1988) and *The Spring of the Tiger* (1979), for example, are all intertextual in nature. *The Shivering Sands* is named after one of the locations in *The Moonstone* and therefore alerts readers to a connection between the texts. *The India Fan* is again an intertextual use of *The Moonstone* as both the fan and the stone are cursed Indian objects linked to the Indian Rebellion (otherwise known as the Sepoy Rebellion or India's First War of Independence). In both novels, the mutiny has a profound influence on the texts.

The Spring of the Tiger is a reference to Lord Byron's "Don Juan" (1819), which is quoted in the novel by the murderess Celia Herringford.

Many of the books have titles which place them in a line of descent from canonical Gothic novels by featuring the house. Holt's first novel underwent a change of title between the manuscript and publication stage. The novel was published as *Mistress of Mellyn* but the original title on the manuscript is *Mont Mellyn* (Higham n.p.). Whether it was changed by the author, agent or publisher, or indeed by all three working together, is uncertain. However, both old and new titles foreground the name of the house. Similarly, *Kirkland Revels*, *Menfreya* and *The House of a Thousand Lanterns* (1974) all foreground the house, establishing the novels as a part of a long literary tradition including such works as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's seminal *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and canonical Victorian Gothic novels including Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). "The Fall of the House of Usher" is particularly significant as a precursor text. Like Holt's novels, the house is anthropomorphised. Roderick Usher talks of the "the *physique* of the gray [sic] walls and turrets" (96, italics in original). The narrator, recounting Usher's thoughts, relates:

> The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement . . . Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen, he said, (and I here started as he spoke), in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had

> moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was (100-101).

Similarly, Holt's houses are often portrayed as sentient. For example, the narrator of *The Secret Woman*, Ann Brett, is "obsessed by the idea that the house was a living personality" (14). In *The House of a Thousand Lanterns*, Jane Lindsay thinks: "How easy it was to believe that a house such as this was a living thing, that it was saying something to me" (210).

Like Poe, Holt uses the word 'house' in two ways, to mean not only the building but also the family who owns it. In *Mistress of Mellyn,* for example, the name of the house is Mont Mellyn and the name of the family is TreMellyn, with 'Tre' being a traditional Cornish prefix meaning homestead. Poe emphasises the link between house and family in "The Fall of the House of Usher":

> the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher"—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion (92).

Critics, however, denied the modern Gothic genre its canonical roots and Holt's work became dismissed by association. Russ remarks: "the [modern Gothic] stories bear no resemblance to the literary definition of 'Gothic'. They are not related to the works of Monk Lewis or Mrs. Radcliffe, whose real descendants are known today as Horror Stories" (666). Russ's general ridicule of the modern Gothic is surprising since it runs counter to the views she expresses in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), a feminist work which declares that "an alternative to denying female agency in art is to pollute the agency — that is, to

promulgate the idea that women make themselves ridiculous by creating art" (29). By ridiculing the work of the (almost exclusively) female authors of the modern Gothic, Russ contributes to polluting female agency by mocking the genre and denying the novels' literary heritage. This denial contributes to the impression that the novels are part of the "specifically domestic context" to which Mussell refers ("But why" 58), and a dismissive view that the house is nothing more than "a glorified domestic dwelling – that which will make the little woman of the house into the lady" (Abartis 260).

Russ's opinions, and her derisory attitude, were influential. They led later critics to prejudge the material, or to judge it without reading it at all. There are cases of critics dropping their usual analytical faculties and joining in with the general mockery. Maurice Levy, for example, offers perceptive views on the Gothic in general, and provides a discriminating scrutiny of other criticism, but when it comes to the modern Gothic he simply cites Russ's views unchallenged. For example, he critiques James Keech's definition of the 'pure' Gothic by saying that it is so broad it "can apply to any work of any kind at any period" (11). However, when it comes to the modern Gothic, he quotes Abartis and Russ without questioning their views. He appears to do so without ever reading any of the novels to which he is referring. Instead, he objects to them for a variety of spurious reasons: because there are so many of them, because they are sold in drugstores, and because their authors (all female) are prolific. Levy describes the modern Gothic as:

> the most intriguing and frustrating metamorphosis of the Gothic during the last two or three decades. It is very saddening indeed to see this highly-reputed epithet shamelessly appropriated by a host of popular writers . . .. A detailed analysis of this 'neo-Gothic' literature would be here quite out of place. But it ought to be mentioned that the novels

> I have in mind – by Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart, Dorothy Eden, Phyllis Whitney, Norah Lofts, and others – are so numerous that even the most complete bibliographies cannot claim to have recorded them all, and that although they name Walpole as their 'founding father' their stories bear only the remotest resemblance – if any at all – to *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or *The Monk* (12).[5]

If Levy had conducted a detailed analysis of Holt's *Kirkland Revels,* for example, he would have found that it features the medieval architecture he admires, as well as a (supposed) monk. Moreover, he would have found that the monk is used to symbolise repressive power and that, by morphing the monk into a doctor, Holt reveals the morphing of threatening patriarchal power from the church to the medical profession in the nineteenth century. In doing so, Holt reveals the fears of her society as it battled patriarchal authority. As it is, he simply quotes Russ, saying, for example: "if Russ is to be trusted" (13) before repeating her derisory and misleading views verbatim. Primed by those views, he complains that "in spite of these huge differences [between the modern Gothic on the one hand, and the work of Walpole and Lewis on the other], reviewers still persist in describing these productions as 'gothic'" (14). Had he conducted his own analysis, it is possible he would have understood why Holt's novels were described as Gothic. Regardless, he would at least have developed his own opinion, instead of offering an opinion on novels he does not appear to have read. Similarly, James Keech remarks: "I suggest that the Gothic as a literary

[5] Levy's criticisms echo those levelled at Victorian sensation fiction. The prolific nature of the genre is attacked by Henry Mansel, who condemns sensation novels as "so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern" (496). Levy's gender bias also echoes Victorian criticism, which Anne-Marie Beller highlights when she notes that criticisms of sensation fiction in the mid-Victorian period focus particularly on women writers (9). Beller cites an unsigned review essay in "Literature of 1856" which asks: "And who are the writers of fiction? For the most part ladies, who think that a ream of paper, a bottle of ink, and a bundle of crow-quills are all that is necessary to write a book with" (603).

response neither ended with Maturin, nor did it degenerate further into the drugstore book-racks as cheap popular literature" (137). Whilst being quick to condemn the 'drugstore' novels, he does not say if he has read any of them. His use of the dismissive term suggests that he is judging them on their place of purchase rather than on critical analysis. Moreover, he overlooks the fact that, like the modern Gothic, the eighteenth-century Gothic novels he admires were 'popular literature' and were not highly regarded for their literary worth.

Later critics offered a more discriminating view based on actual readings but were divided as to the nature of the modern Gothic. Radway mentions Holt by name in her consideration of the modern Gothic which she includes in the influential *Reading the Romance* (1984). Radway refers to "careful examination of the works of such authors as Victoria Holt" (141). She points out that some critics saw the genre as conservative because the modern Gothic "invariably establish[es] its heroine's happiness by throwing her into the arms of a traditionally protective male" (142), whilst others saw the genre as subversive because of the narrator-heroine's independence during the course of the novel. Whilst making an important point about the subversive nature of the genre, Radway's sweeping statement about heroines being 'thrown into the arms of a traditionally protective male' gives a false impression of Holt's novels, which have far more varied endings. This variety is discussed further in Chapters Two and Five of this thesis. Similarly, Cynthia Wolff claims that the heroines are "[i]nvariably orphaned when the novel opens" (102), yet this is not true of Holt's novels.

More recently, Wallace considers Holt as an author of historical fiction in *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* and as an author of female Gothic fiction, notably in *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic* (2013). However, in both cases Wallace makes reference to the modern Gothic, a critical lens which makes assumptions about Holt's novels and therefore affects their reception. This perhaps

accounts for Wallace's somewhat ambivalent views on Holt. Whilst acknowledging Holt's importance by including her in critical histories from which she has been previously excluded, and acknowledging that the novels reveal repressed anxieties in her society, Wallace at the same time uses the term 'costume Gothic' to describe them. The term has a derogatory ring. It seems to derive from Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* (1976) in which the narrator, Joan Foster, writes "costume Gothics" (33). Joan's use of the term springs from the fact that she spends a lot of time researching period costumes because she feels that, once the costume is right, the rest of the novel will follow. However, unlike Joan, Holt offers only the sketchiest information about costume. It is not the surface which is important but what lies underneath. *Lady Oracle* is important, however, in showing how far Holt's influence spread, since Atwood's novel is a response to the modern Gothic phenomenon.

Wallace also revisits Russ's views on Holt, utilising Russ's identification of the (stereo)typical characters of the modern Gothic novel: "[t]he Heroine . . . sardonic *Super-Male,* who treats her brusquely . . . .The Other Woman [who] is (or was) beautiful, worldly, glamorous . . . *Young Girl* . . . a *Buried Ominous Secret* . . . the *Shadow-Male,* a man invariably represented as gentle, protective . . . The Other Woman is *immoral*. The Heroine is *good*" (32-34, capitals and italics in original). Wallace compresses Russ's identifying elements of the modern Gothic, when referring specifically to Holt, commenting on "the independent but vulnerable heroine, the haunted House, the brusque but attractive Super-Male, the Other Woman, the quiet Shadow-Male, and the repressed Secret" (133). This analysis, however, is too widely applicable to be of much use in either identifying or analysing the modern Gothic genre or, by association, Holt's novels. Many novels which are not modern Gothics have the same set of characters. For example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) has a heroine in Elizabeth Bennet, a Super-Male in the arrogant Mr Darcy,

the Other Woman in the form of Caroline Bingley, the Young Girl in the form of Georgiana Darcy, the Buried Secret in Georgiana's elopement and a gentle Shadow-Male in Mr Bingley.

The reference to stereotypical characters contributes to a negative impact on the reception of Holt and a feeling that the novels are all the same, yet Holt's novels do not fit Russ's formula. For example, the 'good' woman is not always the heroine. Instead, she is often the heroine's friend, whilst the heroine often bears the hallmarks of Russ's 'Other Woman'. In *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, for example, the heroine-narrator, Kerensa Carlee, is so far removed from notions of a 'good' woman that Barbara Bowman mistakes her for the Other Woman. Bowman's analysis is hampered by prejudging the novels as popular fiction, specifically "Gothic romances". She argues that the ambitious narrator, Kerensa, is not the heroine but that Kerensa's gentle friend, Mellyora, is the heroine. This leads Bowman to the erroneous conclusion that the novel is narrated "entirely by the *femme fatale*" (78). Her reasoning is that because Holt's novels are "Gothic romances", and because romantic heroines are always 'good', the ambitious Kerensa cannot be the heroine but must be the Other Woman. The reader, according to Bowman, "applaud[s] her [Kerensa's] fall rather than her maturation into a fuller womanhood" (78). However, Kerensa is marked out as the heroine by her position as the narrator. A full consideration of the novel, which contests Bowman's interpretation, is given in Chapter Two of this thesis.

The Legend of the Seventh Virgin is not the only Holt novel to feature a transgressive woman as the narrator. Whilst Holt's novels often pair two women, with one of them refusing to conform to society's norms and the other one conforming, the heroine is not always the good woman and the rewards are not always meted out as Bowman suggests when she argues that the good woman is rewarded with the hero's love.[6] In *The Curse of the Kings*, for

[6] There are parallels here with pairings of Victorian sensation heroines who are portrayed as either 'good' women who conform to society's expectations or 'transgressive' women who flout them, for example Lucy and Aurora in Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1963), Laura and Marian in *The Woman in White* and Alicia and Lady Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

example, the heroine-narrator Judith Osmond is a bold woman who refuses to conform to society's expectations yet she is rewarded by love and marriage. Her gentle, feminine friend Theodosia also marries but she is then murdered, so that the novel grants a greater reward to the transgressive woman. In *The Judas Kiss* (1981), the narrator Philippa Ewell has an affair before marriage and her sexual nature marks her out as Russ's Other Woman, yet she is not the Other Woman. She is, instead, the novel's heroine. The greater sexual freedom allowed to her reflects the more liberated attitudes in Holt's society at the time of the novel's publication. Whilst it might be expected, therefore, that the novels which appear after *The Judas Kiss* should also feature sexually liberated heroines this is not always the case. There is no uniform trajectory throughout Holt's oeuvre and some of the later novels return to the good narrator and transgressive friend. In *The India Fan*, for example, the narrator is a good woman who is rewarded by marriage, whilst her transgressive friend is murdered. This variety argues against a view of Holt's novels as being formulaic. The diversity is likely to be an important part of Holt's success, since readers who read all of the novels could never be certain of the outcome.

Alison Milbank includes Holt in the female Gothic tradition but makes generalisations which do not hold true for Holt's novels. For example, Milbank regards the novels of Mary Stewart and Holt together as examples of the female Gothic and remarks that in those novels "a young woman, often a governess to a widower's child, flees his house and his supposed evil designs" (120). Few of Holt's narrators are governesses. Although some of them work as a governess for a short period of time, often for ulterior motives such as to gain access to a house as in *The Captive*, only Martha Leigh in *Mistress of Mellyn* is a full-time governess. Moreover, Holt's narrators do not flee the house when danger threatens. Instead, they face up to difficulties. This stalwart attitude is made explicit in *The Secret Woman* when the narrator

remembers her father's words: "Never turn your back on trouble. Always stand and face it" (4).

Both Juliann Fleenor and Anne Williams also mention Holt in relation to the female Gothic. Drawing attention to typical Freudian readings of the female Gothic, Williams rightly points out that they "have not been particularly useful" as the analysis of any, and every, novel concludes that the Gothic tropes are "invariably hid[ing] the same psychosexual secret: the dangers of the irrational desires within the 'other'" (242). Freudian interpretations of Holt are now outdated, not only because they are reductive but also because they are inherently sexist. Toril Moi rightly points out that Freud "is a male in patriarchal society, and moreover not just any male but an educated bourgeoise male, incarnating *malgré lui* [despite himself] patriarchal values", whose "political and social role [is] as an oppressor of women" (341).[7] As such, his views run counter to the feminist concerns expressed in Holt's novels.

Recent criticism, including my own work, has begun to consider Holt's novels as neo-Victorian. Regarding Holt as an author of neo-Victorian fiction gives a different perspective. Some of the twentieth-century criticism on Holt is useful in furthering our understanding of Holt's relationship with the Victorian era, even though it did not refer to the term neo-Victorian since the discourse, at the time, did not exist. However, the central ideas coincide with those of neo-Victorianism. Linda Bayer-Berenbaum perceptively compares Holt's *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The comparison establishes the literary antecedents of Holt's novel and offers a sensitive analysis which remains relevant to a neo-Victorian study of Holt. Bayer-Berenbaum rightly points out:

> [d]issimilar as they are, these two works share psychological biases, themes, images, and symbols that mark them as close

[7] Phyllis Chesler has written extensively and persuasively on Freud's patriarchal influence, which she refers to as "psychiatric imperialism" (1).

> Gothic relatives . . . Shelley and Holt systematically explore the different kinds and degrees of violent motivation in two works that are all but case studies in the pathology of violence and the attraction to death ("Frankenstein" n.p.).

Her study is particularly relevant since it can be used as part of an argument for extending the temporal boundaries of neo-Victorianism. Showing that Holt revisits Shelley can be used to make a case for including the whole nineteenth century in the term neo-Victorian, rather than confining it to the dates of Queen Victoria's reign.

Overall, early criticism regarding Holt as an author of modern Gothic novel has had a negative impact on the reception of her work. Criticisms levelled at the modern Gothic are not all applicable to Holt, and yet a distinction between her work and that of others has not been made. The derisory tone used in much of the criticism invites a similar judgement on the part of the reader or critic and asks for the novels to be dismissed. Focus on the paratext instead of detailed analysis of the novels in question, as well as a tendency to regard them as part of a homogenous mass rather than individual texts, has contributed to a feeling that the novels are all the same. Claims that the narrators are "invariably" orphaned governesses who "invariably" fall into the arms of a protective man contribute to the negative impact and suggest that a cursory reading of one novel gives an accurate view of all of them. Criticism which situates Holt as a part of the female Gothic has been more successful because it focuses on some of Holt's novels as individual texts. Neo-Victorian criticism, however, opens up new ways of understanding the novels, and of understanding Holt's place in the emerging neo-Victorian canon. The state of the field in this discourse is therefore now discussed.

State of the Field in neo-Victorian Criticism

Neo-Victorianism is a relatively new discourse; so new, in fact, that it was not in existence in Holt's lifetime and her novels could therefore not be recognised as a part of this impulse. The discourse emerged in the late twentieth century when critics noted the high incidence of recently-published novels that were set in the Victorian era and which appeared to respond to that era in some way. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* drew particular critical attention as a part of this new trend. Cora Kaplan described *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as "[t]he original of this sub-genre" (8). Shuttleworth also regarded Fowles's novel as important, calling it "[o]ne evident progenitor", whilst at the same time describing *Wide Sargasso Sea* as "[a]nother progenitive model" for the 'retro-Victorian' (256). Tatjana Jukić called Rhys's novel "the first great intertextual dialogue with the Victorians" (78) and Christian Gutleben credited Rhys with "starting a new literary movement whose very essence consisted in re-thinking and rewriting Victorian myths and stories" (5).

A variety of terms appeared to address this trend. In 1995, Kelly Marsh remarked on the "neo-sensation novel" which she described as "a contemporary genre in the Victorian tradition [. . . that] recreate[s] an established, somewhat obscure, Victorian form" (99) of sensation fiction. She remarked particularly on the similarities to novels by Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood (also known as Ellen Wood). In 1997, Dana Shiller remarked on "the neo-Victorian novel" which she regarded as a "subset of the historical novel", commenting on its features including postmodernism and "a historicity of the nineteenth-century novel" (538). Sally Shuttleworth referred to the "retro-Victorian novel", which she associated with "nostalgia" (253). John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff used the term "post-Victorian", associating it with "historical continuity and disruption" (xii). By 2008, however, Andrea Kirchknopf's comprehensive review of competing terminology in the

first issue of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* concludes by favouring the term 'post-Victorian' because it emphasises the relationship to postmodernism and defines "a specific group within historical fiction, establishing a relationship between history and fiction with a particular relevance to the Victorian age" (63). The very title of the journal in which the article is published, however, points the way to the future and neo-Victorian has become the dominant term. Its prevalence is exemplified in the naming of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* as well as in the titles of many subsequently-appearing critical works, from Kate Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (2010) to Cox's *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction* (2019) and many others.

Early neo-Victorian criticism regards postmodernism as an essential tool for understanding the neo-Victorian impulse and Fredric Jameson's views in particular have engendered a great deal of debate. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson takes a negative view of the relationship between postmodernism and history, contending that postmodernism's historical approach reveals "a new depthlessness" which shows "a consequent weakening of historicity" (6). He argues that the historical novel, as exemplified by E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), "can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes 'pop history')" (25). Particularly influential in early neo-Victorian criticism are Jameson's arguments regarding pastiche and nostalgia, which, he argues, create a "simulacrum" of history instead of "what used to be historical time" (18). Jameson defines pastiche as "the wearing of a linguistic peculiar mask" (17). It differs from parody because, whereas parody mocks a deviation from the norm, pastiche has no such norm to set itself against. In an age where no new styles are possible (because there are only a limited number of possibilities and they have all been explored), all that is possible is "speech in a dead language" (17).

His views have attracted a great deal of opposition, and rightly so. Indeed, the impetus for Shuttleworth initially "suggesting the term 'retro-Victorian' fiction" was that she "wished to lift the genre out of Jameson's category of pastiche" ("From" 180). Shuttleworth's concern has been to move 'post-Victorian' fiction away from Jameson's negative view and "into a more knowing, self-conscious and ironic form – style not for its own sake, but to interrogate the relations of past and present" ("From" 180). Shuttleworth's views are convincingly argued, particularly her stress on the relationship between past and present, which is itself an issue recurringly foregrounded in neo-Victorian criticism.

Shiller, too, challenges Jameson's negative view that "we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (25) and argues cogently that "neo-Victorian fiction addresses many of Jameson's concerns by presenting a historicity that is indeed concerned with recuperating the substance of bygone eras, and not merely their styles" (540). Indeed, she regards a "postmodern approach to history" and a setting which is "at least partly in the nineteenth century" as defining elements of neo-Victorianism (558 n.1). Compellingly, she argues that it "explore(s) how present circumstances shape historical narrative" (540). Linda Hutcheon also takes issue with Jameson's view that postmodernism results in a depthless view of history, saying that, instead, it actively "questions our [. . .] assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge" (*Poetics* xii).

Hutcheon's work on "historiographic metafiction", a term she coined in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (5), has been particularly influential. Indeed, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham suggest that neo-Victorian fiction is a "fascinating subgenre of historiographic metafiction" (xi). However, this places a limitation on neo-Victorianism and it is an area of ongoing concern since it suggests that neo-Victorianism is the preserve of literary fiction. Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as being a part

of the postmodern attitude to history and she includes intertextuality as a part of this postmodernism. She explains that her term relates to "fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it "historiographic metafiction [. . .] novels whose metafictional self-reflexivity (and intertextuality) renders their implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic, to say the least". (Hutcheon "Historiographic" 3). Contained within the term are novels such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* "which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 5).

Given that most of Holt's novels do not feature historical events and personages, they are not, as a whole, examples of historiographic metafiction according to Hutcheon's definition. The few Holt novels that do, in fact, contain historical events and personages are given consideration as historiographic metafiction in Chapter Two. However, Hutcheon's theories form one of the central areas of contention within the neo-Victorian discourse, namely self-reflexivity. The issue of self-reflexivity, or self-consciousness or self-awareness, has provoked much argument and is central to the debate surrounding the inclusion of popular fiction in the neo-Victorian genre, or, indeed in the discourse, since it implicitly rules out popular fiction "*a priori*" (Kohlke "Mining" 29). Such a ruling closes down discussion before it has begun. It is therefore relevant to Holt's work as a whole, since Holt is generally regarded as an author of so-called popular fiction. Precipitately discounting her work, and the work of other authors who are currently recognised as authors of popular fiction, limits our understanding of the neo-Victorian impulse. It also limits our understanding of the extent of the fluid boundaries between works that are conventionally regarded as either popular or literary fiction.

The issue of nostalgia has also been important, generating a great deal of debate. Although critics are in agreement that nostalgia is a partial cause of neo-Victorianism, they rightly argue that it does not offer a full explanation. Louisa Hadley's idea of the 'strangeness' of the Victorians is, she claims, "often motivated by a nostalgic impulse which positions the Victorian era as a 'golden age' from which the present has dropped off" (8). However, she notes insightfully that "[n]eo-Victorian fictions reinsert the Victorians into their historical context and thus avoid a purely nostalgic or aesthetic approach to the Victorian past" (14).

Davies similarly argues that neo-Victorianism is more than nostalgia, saying it "is *doing something* with the Victorian era; critically engaging with nineteenth-century fiction, culture and society as opposed to just repeating or nostalgically harking back to a past era" (2, italics in original). Gutleben, too, turns his attention to nostalgia, or what he calls 'nostalgic postmodernism'. He extends the issue of nostalgia in a meaningful way to include readers as well as authors, suggesting that "[b]y resuscitating the voices and principles of Victorian fiction, the contemporary novel not only displays its own nostalgia, but it also makes clear, through its continuing success, the nostalgia of its readership" (46). His argument that "the object of retro-Victorian fiction is not a historically accurate referent but the commonly fantasized image of Victorian fiction" (167) is less convincing since it raises the question of whether any referent can be historically accurate, given that postmodernism regards history itself as subjective

Cora Kaplan, whilst acknowledging the lure of rose-coloured stereotypes of an idealised past, convincingly argues that a fascination with the Victorian era cannot be simply dismissed as nostalgia. She rightly asserts that Victoriana is "more than nostalgia — a longing for a past that never was — and more too than a symptom of the now familiar, if much debated, view that the passage from modernity to postmodernity has been marked by

the profound loss of a sense of history " (3). 'Victoriana', she suggests, is "history out of place, something atemporal and almost spooky in its effects" (6). She concludes perceptively that Victoriana is "a debate about historical memory" (162), an important view that will be explored further in Chapter Two.

Arias and Pulham again extend the argument surrounding nostalgia by pointing out that the original meaning of nostalgia is homesickness. They use this interpretation to make a compelling argument that nostalgic elements in neo-Victorian fiction "disclose(s) the significance of the 'home' or the 'return home' in the neo-Victorian engagement with the past" (xiv). They highlight the fact that, in neo-Victorian fiction, the past has never truly left and point out that this lingering presence is often represented in Gothic terms, as either a form of uncanny repetition or as a kind of haunting, suggesting that "[t]he spectral presence of the Victorian past is all around us" (xi). Kate Mitchell expresses similar views when she argues that "the ghost signals . . . the uncanny repetition of the past in the present" (35).

Kirchknopf regards nostalgia as a component of intertextuality, a literary device which is prevalent in neo-Victorian fiction. Appropriations of *Jane Eyre*, for example, can be understood as Brontë's novel haunting current literature and other media. However, Kirchknopf rightly emphasizes the transformative nature of neo-Victorian novels, arguing that "[t]hey exhibit characteristics of nostalgia [. . .] at the same time as they display critical perspectives, particularly in postcolonial and feminist revisions of canonical texts", giving as an example Rhys' reworking of *Jane Eyre* (69). Creating a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* relates the early life story of Bertha Mason who, in *Jane Eyre*, is a 'madwoman' confined to an attic. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not simply a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, however. Using a different point of view, it gives a voice to Bertha, who is a voiceless Creole in the original. It takes place predominantly in the West Indies rather than England and

presents a feminist, post-colonial reworking of the original text which critiques the characters and events of *Jane Eyre*.

As attempts to delineate the discourse progress, Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss warn against making any definition too prescriptive, saying that "the attempt at defining the field succinctly may . . . include some academic pitfalls, for example the narrowing down of the text base supporting the definition in the first place" ("Introduction" 3). Nevertheless, the necessary process of refining Kirchknopf's broad definition has continued. Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that neo-Victorian novels are "*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" (4, italics in original). Cora Kaplan refines the idea of neo-Victorianism being a form of historical fiction by arguing that it is engaged in "self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories" (3). Llewellyn expands on this view, speaking of it as "representing marginalised voices" (165), whilst Kohlke similarly comments that it is "liberating lost voices . . . left out of the public record" (9). Neo-Victorianism therefore *responds* to the Victorian era instead of simply inhabiting it. Responding to the era by restoring marginalised voices has now been generally accepted as one of the themes of neo-Victorianism.

Kirchknopf identifies technical similarities between neo-Victorian novels and their Victorian predecessors which included length, structure and genre. With the length of a typical Victorian novel, the structure of neo-Victorian novels often reflected the tripart structure of the Victorian triple-decker novel, or they used multiple viewpoints in the manner of *The Moonstone*. The genre was, as Marsh pointed out in her early work, usually sensation fiction. In addition, the new novels "typically employ narrative voices of the types dominant in nineteenth-century texts, i.e. the first person character narrator or the third person omniscient one" (Kirchknopf 54). Kirchknopf's findings were accepted. However, many

critics pointed out that neo-Victorian novels were not simply imitative and the new genre did more than mimic Victorian fiction.

Davies remarked that neo-Victorianism "is *doing something with* the Victorian era; critically engaging with nineteenth-century fiction, culture and society as opposed to just repeating or nostalgically harking back to a past era" (2, italics in original). Davies's argument remains relevant, being representative of current thought, and is particularly important for a study of Holt, whose novels 'do' a variety of 'somethings' with the Victorian era and its literature. As part of doing something with Victorian literature, intertextual use of Victorian texts has become of particular interest and it is now agreed that appropriations of Victorian novels are an important aspect of neo-Victorianism. Furthermore, appropriations tend to cluster around a small number of texts and *Jane Eyre* is one of the key base texts. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been the first appropriation to be identified as neo-Victorian. The novel is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and it fleshes out the character and life of one of the minor characters in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is presented as a mad Creole, the unloved and unwanted wife of Mr Rochester but *Wide Sargasso Sea* restores Bertha's marginalised voice. Brontë's novel has spawned an enormous range of related texts. Prequels and sequels, as well as retellings from different points of view, all provide a new perspective on the novel and are therefore transformative rather than imitative. Reworkings of *Jane Eyre* continue to be of major critical interest, for example they are the focus of the very recent *Neo-Victorian Madness: Rediagnosing Nineteenth-Century Mental Illness in Literature and Other Media* (2020).

Deviance is also an area in which critics are largely in accord. Both Kohlke and Max Duperray call attention to the theme as a trope of neo-Victorianism and Saverio Tomaiuolo expands on the issue. Tomaiuolo remarks: "Neo-Victorianism not only suggests or implies analogies with the present but also proves . . . that the Victorian age was much more 'deviant'

than it is usually depicted. . . . This notion of 'deviance' appears at odds with the period's own view of itself" (5). Whilst Tomaiuolo is right to foreground the fact that neo-Victorian fiction often deals with deviance, he goes too far when he suggests that it is presenting something new in doing so. Victorian fiction often deals with deviance and portrays its own era in an amoral or immoral light. For example, sensation fiction foregrounds deviant, transgressive women such as Lady Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), who commits arson and attempted murder. Deviant men feature in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), in which a doctor creates a potion that unleashes his bestial impulses and allows him to go on violent rampages. Similarly, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) the titular character gives in to every type of debauchery, safe in the knowledge that the evidence of his debauches will appear on his portrait rather than on his face and body. Deviant children are not neglected, for example in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which features two children who commit unspecified foul acts and who may, or may not, be under the control of their ghostly tutor and governess. Many more examples can be found. Deviance, then, is an important element of neo-Victorianism but it should not be overplayed.

Despite these areas of agreement, an accepted definition has not yet emerged. Davies comments on the difficulties caused by "the plurality of textual voices – literary and critical – that are at work" (2). Sonia Solicari also acknowledged the difficulties, pointing out there is "neither a handy manifesto nor a connected group of artists championing a particular aesthetic" (182). In 2014, *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* made a substantial contribution to the debate. In that work, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss set out to "evaluate the methods and approaches that have already come to characterise the neo-Victorian project" ("Introduction" 2), whilst noting that the field was still developing. They focused on playfulness, nostalgia, resurrection and

haunting as key areas of criticism. They suggested that neo-Victorianism "explores the changing purposes with which we fashion the past – and with it, ourselves" and that it "mimic[s] and challenge[s] the discourses of the nineteenth century" (1,2).

Challenging the discourses of the nineteenth century by co-articulating matters of socio-political concern has emerged as one of the major traits of neo-Victorianism. By co-articulating concerns, authors talk back to the Victorian era in a way that is critique rather than imitative. Reflecting on the relationship between the two eras, they foreground the lingering effect of the Victorian era including the attitudes, laws and buildings which permeate contemporary society. This lingering presence is often represented in Gothic terms, as either a form of uncanny repetition or as a kind of haunting. One of the nineteenth-century ghosts that has returned to haunt current criticism is the hierarchical view of literature. Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss highlight the fact that "general cultural debates of the nineteenth century . . . reverberate" in the discourse and go on to argue that the debate is implicitly revived by some critics' demand for self-reflexivity, since it uses self-reflexivity as "a criteria of value" ("Introduction 3, 8). The term 'self-reflexivity', like the term 'self-conscious', is used by a variety of critics without a clear definition, and interpretations of this term are not always the same, although it always has to do with a text referring to its own artificiality. It can be achieved in a variety of ways such as a character remarking that they are in a novel, or an author drawing on a range of recognisable tropes which implicitly acknowledge its own constructedness. The linked issues of self-reflexivity and the hierarchical separation between literary and popular fiction have divided critics in the last few years and produced vigorous debate.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn are the critics usually quoted when considering the debate. Extending Shiller's view that neo-Victorian novels were postmodern, they argued that "[t]o be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book [*Neo-Victorianism: the*

Victorians in the Twenty-First Century 1999-2009], texts (literary, filmic, audio-visual) must in some respects *be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (4, italics in original). The latter part of this quotation has proved extremely influential and has been oft-repeated by Helen Davies, Jessica Cox and many others. Yet in often omitting the vitally important precursor "[t]o be part of the neo-Victorianism *we discuss in this book"* (my italics) much subsequent criticism has made self-consciousness more widely applicable than Heilmann and Llewellyn originally intended. Cox points out that Heilmann and Llewellyn have somewhat ameliorated this view (*Neo-Victorian* 7), but if Heilmann and Llewellyn's original pronouncement is quoted in full then such amelioration is not so necessary.

Since Heilmann and Llewellyn are explicitly dealing with the period 1999-2009, their restrictive view of neo-Victorianism is not applicable to Holt's novels, which were written between 1960 and 1993. However, their argument has been so widely quoted without the caveat that it has now become an ubiquitous part of a general definition, albeit one which is often argued against. This thesis therefore considers 'self-consciousness' as a part of a recovery of Holt. The term 'self-conscious' is neither fully nor clearly defined by Heilmann and Llewellyn and it has been interpreted differently by different critics. Kohlke and Gutleben interpret it as 'knowing' or 'deliberate'. For example, in 2012 they argue that neo-Victorian gothic fiction is "*inherently* self-conscious" because of its use of generic conventions" (("Mis)-Shapes" 43, italics in original). My own interpretation of "self-conscious" follows Kohlke and Gutleben. For example, in this thesis Holt's novels are held to self-consciously rewrite *Jane Eyre* because her agent suggested she should write a series of novels "in a *Jane Eyre*-esque manner" (Walter). Her employment of the plot, themes and characters of *Jane Eyre* is therefore demonstrably her avowed intention. Her use of other intertexts is held to be self-conscious if the precursor text is mentioned somewhere in Holt's

oeuvre, proving that she knew of it and that the intertext is therefore likely to be deliberate. For example, Holt appropriates a plot device from Ellen Wood's *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* (1862) in her own novel, *The Silk Vendetta* (1987). This usage is held to be self-conscious because Holt mentions *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* in *The Silk Vendetta*, thereby making an explicit reference to the source.

The term 'self-reflexivity' is also often referred to by critics when evaluating a novel as potentially neo-Victorian. It refers to a novel which draws attention to its own artificiality or constructedness. This can either be openly expressed or, as is more usual in Holt's novels, implicitly expressed by the use of generic conventions. For example the creation of a Gothic text is, as Kohlke and Gutleben rightly argue, necessarily self-reflexive because the deliberate use of those conventions highlight the artificial constructedness of the novel. Similarly, Holt's use of the conventions of the Victorian sensation novel implicitly point to her novels as artificial constructs because they have been knowingly created out of recognisable parts.

As already mentioned, there has recently been a general movement away from ideas of postmodernism and self-reflexivity being essential elements of neo-Victorian fiction, and rightly so. A demand for self-reflexivity implicitly discounts popular fiction and is out of place in a discourse which valorises inclusivity. Kohlke makes this point when she remarks that it is in danger of reviving "the spectre of the highbrow/lowbrow divide" which neo-Victorianism itself deconstructs by a "dismantling of established aesthetic and discursive hierarchies" (Kohlke "Mining" 29). It is particularly inappropriate since a great deal of neo-Victorian fiction makes intertextual use of popular, rather than literary, Victorian novels. As Shuttleworth rightly points out, in "neo-Victorian fiction, the presiding genius seems less George Eliot and more Wilkie Collins" (182). To discuss neo-Victorianism without reference to popular Victorian fiction is impossible, and to allow Victorian fiction a leeway which is denied to that of the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries is contradictory.

Despite her recognition of the central place of popular Victorian genres, Shuttleworth argues for a narrow definition of neo-Victorianism, positing that without self-reflexivity "the 'Victorian' in fiction [will] become little more than outward trappings" (191). However, self-reflexivity does not guarantee a meaningful interaction with Victorian literature and culture, any more than its absence makes such an interaction impossible. The previously discussed issues of restoring marginalised voices, intertextuality and the co-articulation of socio-political concerns all provide more than outward trappings without the need for self-reflexivity and enable a meaningful response to the Victorian era.

To guard against the surreptitious return of the highbrow/lowbrow divide, or its iteration as a divide between literary and popular fiction, Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss justifiably call for "the application of the same self-reflexivity that critics have attested to the texts under scrutiny to the current academic processes of canonisation [. . .so that] we can critique constructions of what is prototypically neo-Victorian, what is situated at its margins and what cannot wholly figure under this term" ("Introduction" 4). However, whilst many critics now accept theoretically that the discourse should be inclusive, putting theory into practice is proving contentious. Kohlke valorises inclusivity and argues for a "suitably elastic and more rather than less responsive term to encompass the neo-Victorian's ongoing shape-shifting"("Mining" 27). However, when examining the popular fiction of Elizabeth Peters for possible inclusion she undermines her own argument somewhat by referring to it in a negative manner. Cox rightly takes Kohlke to task for this, remarking that "Kohlke, whilst arguing for the expansion of the neo-Victorian canon, is nonetheless somewhat dismissive of such [popular] narratives" (7).

Cox's own arguments highlight the difficulties involved. She approaches the debate from a different angle and instead of arguing for the inclusion of popular fiction, she challenges the perceived boundaries between popular and literary fiction. She does so by

highlighting similarities rather than differences and foregrounds instances of self-reflexivity in popular fiction. This is an interesting, necessary angle and she presents a well-reasoned argument. Her intervention in some ways overlaps my own, although Cox examines a wide range of authors whilst this thesis focuses solely on Holt. Referring to Tasha Alexander's popular (neo)-Victorian detective fiction, Cox highlights Alexander's "explicit references" to sensation fiction, as well as the use of recognisable "plot devices", arguing persuasively that they:

> stands in direct contradiction to critical claims that popular historical fiction does not engage self-consciously with the Victorian period, and exposes the flawed ideology of some neo-Victorian critics, for whom literary 'worthiness' is bound up with both intertextuality and self-conscious intellectualness" (98).

She further argues, equally perceptively, that:

> [t]he critical rediscovery of the sensation novel in the late twentieth century firmly established the value of Victorian popular fiction, but in overlooking the value of historical popular fiction, neo-Victorianism as a critical discourse threatens to replicate the literary snobbery of those who initially dismissed sensation fiction as unworthy of critical investigation (Cox 98).

However, whilst Cox rightly condemns the critical snobbery which seeks to limit the discourse, she continues to designate texts as either literary or popular, and therefore implicitly perpetuates the hierarchy she argues against.

Her views on Holt are similarly indeterminate. She focuses on one of Holt's novels, *The Shivering Sands*. My own work on that novel analyses Holt's intertextual use of Wilkie

Collins's *The Moonstone* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Children's Hour" (1860), interrogating the novel's response to the Victorian ideal of childhood as a 'Golden Age'. In so doing, it concludes that the novel is neo-Victorian. Cox takes a different approach and focuses on the novel's archaeological theme. She uses the novel to contest the boundaries between literary and popular fiction by arguing that *The Shivering Sands* is linked to 'serious' neo-Victorian literature by its archaeological theme. However, she refers to *The Shivering Sands* as an "unashamedly popular historical fiction" (190) rather than neo-Victorian fiction. The use of the word "unashamedly" suggests, paradoxically, that the novel's popularity can be seen as shameful, which fits ill with her persuasive, and necessary, arguments that so-called 'serious' novels such as A. S. Byatt's *Possession* are also extremely popular.[8] Whilst challenging the hierarchical approach, then, Cox at the same time implicitly reinforces it, thereby exhibiting the same ambiguity she criticises in Kohlke.

Despite the difficulties and complexities involved, Kohlke rightly insists that if the canon is to be representative, it must include popular fiction. There is obviously a willingness amongst some critics for this to happen, as Kohlke and Cox's tentative analysis of popular fiction makes clear. This thesis intervenes in the debate by further problematising the boundaries between literary and popular fiction as it reclaims Holt as a neo-Victorian author.

Chapter Breakdown

Each of the following chapters uses a different critical lenses to examine Holt's work, focusing on a prominent aspect of her novels: Intertextuality, History, Gothic and Sensation fiction, Crime, and Romance. All of these elements are present in all of her novels, and there is therefore necessarily some overlap between the chapters. However, the proportions of each

[8] *Possession* has been popular in terms of sales and appeared on international bestseller lists, for example it was in the top 20 on the *New York Times* list in November 1991. Its sales were partly driven by the fact that it was awarded the Booker Prize in 1990.

component vary from book to book, with some being more heavily Gothic and some foregrounding a crime, for example. Consequently, the texts chosen as case studies in each chapter are ones which highlight the element under discussion. Each chapter probes one, or a small number, of Holt's novels in depth, examining her specifically neo-Victorian engagement with the discourse in question. It then relates this engagement to neo-Victorian sensation fiction.

In detail, Chapter One explores Holt's prominent use of intertextuality. Arguing that the precursor texts of *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) are used with purpose, the chapter explores Holt's first novel, *Mistress of Mellyn* (1960), as a novel of female liberation. In addition, it relates the novel's theme to the aims of the Women's Liberation Movement which gained pace throughout the 1960s and which demanded equal rights for women. By placing the novel in this context, the chapter argues against a perception of Holt's novels as simply escapist reading and contends that they go further than expressing the hopes and fears of their society, by co-articulating matters of socio-political concern. It further contends that Holt's extensive use of Victorian intertextuality problematises perceptions of her as an author of 'just' popular fiction by revealing areas of overlap with literary fiction.

Chapter Two considers Holt's use of history, both as setting and as subject matter. It interrogates the place of Holt's novels in the discourses of historical and neo-Victorian fiction and employs them to test the boundaries between the two. Using *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* (1965), *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* (1972) and *Secret for a Nightingale* (1986) as case studies, it considers particularly the novels' foregrounding of historiographical issues and a consequent overlap with historiographic metafiction. It argues that *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* uses the fictional legend of the seventh virgin as a form of historiography and that it highlights the role of legend in the suppression of women; that *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* dissects the agenda of those recounting historical events, examining the things

they choose to conceal as well as the things they choose to reveal, and that *Secret for a Nightingale* uses Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and the letters of Florence Nightingale as forms of historiography which give an insight into the lives of the Victorian marginalised, namely women. The chapter places this concern in the light of changing attitudes to history and the coining of the term 'herstory'.

Chapter Three investigates Holt's reworking of Gothic and sensation fiction, with the latter being a close descendant of Gothic fiction. Using *Menfreya* (1966)[9] as a case study, it probes the influence of the Gothic in the anxious tone of the novel as well as the figure of the demon lover. Further, it analyses the sensation tropes of female madness and transgression in the lives of its four female protagonists. It considers the influence of newspaper stories on both Victorian sensation fiction and *Menfreya*, highlighting the similarities between the novel and the contemporary political scandal known as the Profumo affair. Overall, it argues that Holt's employment of motifs from both of these genres articulates the inescapable terror of life for women in a patriarchal society.

Chapter Four considers Holt's position in the history of crime writing. It argues that Holt is a missing link in the development of crime fiction, transforming traits derived from Wilkie Collins and the novels of Agatha Christie, with the resulting transformations being echoed by twenty-first-century novels such as S. J. Watson's *Before I go to Sleep* (2011) and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). The chapter goes on to analyse *The Shivering Sands* (1969) and *The Curse of the Kings* (1973), investigating Holt's engagement with the lingering Victorian influence on crime and punishment in her contemporary society. It argues that the 'execution' and 'sacrifice' carried out in *The Shivering Sands* and *The Curse of the Kings* respectively reveal her contemporary society's anxieties over capital punishment, as exemplified by the controversy surrounding the real-life execution of Edith Thompson.

[9] In some editions, *Menfreya* bears the title of *Menfreya in the Morning*.

Chapter Five takes *The Secret Woman* (1970) as a case study and argues that the novel appropriates the characters of Jane Eyre from Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel and Becky Sharpe from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847) to co-articulate socio-political anxieties surrounding love and romance, marriage and divorce, legitimacy and illegitimacy. These issues were particularly prominent in mid-Victorian fiction. In using a Victorian setting and appropriating mid-Victorian characters, *The Secret Woman* draws attention to the lingering Victorian presence in outdated laws and implicitly alludes to the changes in the divorce and legitimacy laws during the period of Holt's activity. The chapter then interrogates current critical attitudes towards romance, particularly the negative attitudes discernible in neo-Victorian criticism. Investigating unrecognised similarities between 'romances' already included in the emerging neo-Victorian canon and *The Secret Woman*, it argues that the divisions between literary and popular romance are not as rigid as is sometimes supposed and that the notable overlaps indicate *The Secret Woman* also deserves recognition as a neo-Victorian novel.

The conclusion reviews the aims of the thesis as well as the analysis, interpreting Holt's work in the light of neo-Victorianism. It considers the chapters as a whole, assessing Holt's consistent and extensive engagement with Victorian literature and society. Moreover, it assesses this engagement as a critique on Holt's part which foregrounds the lingering Victorian presence in the late twentieth-century socio-political landscape. It reflects on her importance to the genres investigated in each individual chapter and then draws together the argument put forth by the chapters as a whole: that Holt's novels are not only neo-Victorian fiction but they are neo-Victorian sensation fiction. After repositioning Holt as a pioneer of neo-Victorian sensation fiction the thesis concludes by outlining further profitable areas of investigation which will aid in the reclamation of Holt and will also contribute to the further development of the neo-Victorian project.

Chapter One: Neo-Victorian Appropriation and Intertextuality

"*Mistress of Mellyn* by Wilkie Collins out of the Brontës"

—*The Times* (1993)

The above remark, from Holt's obituary in *The Times*, foregrounds the prominent echoes of precursor texts in her work. It also highlights the fact that her use of Victorian literature was recognised in her lifetime. *Mistress of Mellyn* is, of course, written by Victoria Holt, rather than Wilkie Collins or one of the Brontës, but there are many similarities between the novel and its Victorian predecessors. When the narrator, Martha Leigh sees the name of Alice TreMellyn in her riding habit, she feels that she is losing her sense of identity. In this, she is echoing the fate of Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*, who is incarcerated in an asylum under the name of Anne Catherick. When Laura protests that she is not Anne, she is told that she must be Anne since that is the name in her clothes. Laura, like Martha, is in danger of losing her identity. Echoing *Jane Eyre*, when Martha goes to work for Connan TreMellyn as a governess and discovers that there is a mystery about his first wife, she is following in the footsteps of Charlotte Brontë's eponymous heroine.

Holt's specific use of *Jane Eyre*, rather than simply the Brontës, was also recognised in her lifetime. A contemporary review of *Mistress of Mellyn* in *Tatler* remarked:

> You'd think *Jane Eyre*, not to mention *Rebecca*, had put paid for keeps to the plot about the little governess-mouse with the lion's heart who arrives at the imposing mansion to find the place haunted by the memory of the moody Master's beautiful and mysterious first wife, now dead, or possibly not

> dead, or locked up raving in the boot cupboard or who knows what.
>
> Not a bit of it. (Hugh-Jones 222).

The review is intended to entertain rather than inform but, even so, it gives a misleading impression. Although there are similarities between the three novels, there are also notable differences. Jane Eyre is a governess but not a 'mouse', which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "a timid, quiet or retiring person"; the second Mrs de Winter, narrator of *Rebecca*, is a 'mouse' but not a governess and Martha Leigh, the narrator of *Mistress of Mellyn* is, like Jane Eyre, a governess but not a 'mouse'. Nevertheless, the *Tatler* review shows that the plot elements of governess-mansion-moody-Master-mysterious wife were firmly fixed in the public imagination as derivatives of *Jane Eyre*, and that *Mistress of Mellyn* was received as such.

Many critics have commented on the Jane Eyre connection, with Russ calling the narrators of modern Gothic novels "latter-day Jane Eyre[s]" (668) and Wallace describing Holt's novels as "a rewriting of *Jane Eyre*" (*Historical* 133), commenting on their "unashamed intertextual debts to the Brontës" (*Gothic* 132). Wallace's use of the word 'unashamed' seems to suggest that there is something negative about the use of *Jane Eyre*, as does Russ's satirical tone. However, "intertextual debts" are a long-established part of the literary tradition, as Julie Sanders points out. Sanders defines intertextuality as the study of "how texts encompass and respond to other texts both during the process of their creation and composition and in terms of any subsequent individual or collective reader or spectator response" (Sanders 2-3). For more substantive reworkings of an earlier text in terms of plot, character, structure or other easily-identifiable feature, the term appropriation is commonly used. To facilitate discussion of this procedure, Gérard Genette usefully identified the precursor text as the 'hypotext' and the new text as the 'hypertext' (Genette qtd. in Macksey

xv). So prevalent is the practice that in the twenty-first century it has given rise to Appropriation Studies. Intertextual practices go back at least as far as Shakespeare, who borrowed from Ovid and other sources. Indeed, Roland Barthes makes the point that any written work owes a debt to previous works, rightly remarking that "a text is . . . a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). Genette makes a similar point, regarding all texts as palimpsests, that is texts in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier writing.

In appropriating *Jane Eyre*, Holt was working in a tradition of rewriting Brontë's text which began almost immediately after its publication in 1847 and which went on to be of primary importance in neo-Victorianism. Patsy Stoneman notes that appropriations of *Jane Eyre* began to appear as early as 1849, with John Courtney's play "Jane Eyre, or The Secret of Thornfield Manor".[10] Stoneman goes on to list dozens of novelistic appropriations which were published subsequently, some of them being explicitly based on *Jane Eyre* whilst others "were recognized by contemporary readers as *imitating* the novel in some way" (40, italics in original). Stoneman suggests, not entirely convincingly, that Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is "[p]ossibly an answer to *Jane Eyre*'s suggestion that 'a reformed rake makes the best husband'" (256). More convincing is her suggestion that Dinah Mulock Craik's *Olive* (1850) is based on *Jane Eyre* by virtue of its "[s]mall plain heroine; hero injured in a fire" (256). Craik's later novel *The Head of the Family* (1852) was recognised at the time as "one of 'the host of followers or imitators' of *Jane Eyre*" (Oliphant qtd. in Stoneman 256). Appropriations of *Jane Eyre* are still of major interest and Stoneman's work was recently (2019) brought up to date by Kimberley Braxton. Stoneman mentions Holt's first novel, *Mistress of Mellyn*, in her comprehensive year-by-year list of appropriations (or, as she calls

[10] *Lady Audley's Secret* can also be seen as a Victorian appropriation of *Jane Eyre*.

them, 'derivatives') of *Jane Eyre*. She remarks on the 'plot similarities', which have been noted by reviewers as well as critics. However, to be considered neo-Victorian, appropriations need to be transformative rather than simply imitative. They must in some way talk back to the Victorian era and to their hypotext, rather than simply having a similar plot.

This chapter argues that *Mistress of Mellyn* is more than a retelling of *Jane Eyre* and that it is, instead, a more complex neo-Victorian appropriation. The first section presents an extended analysis of *Mistress of Mellyn*. It uses its analysis to argue that Holt's self-conscious intertextual use of both *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* co-articulates socio-political concerns. These concerns include issues surrounding female madness and the 1959 Mental Health Act, as well as those foregrounded by the Women's Liberation Movement and made manifest in the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. The chapter goes on to interrogate Holt's use of intertextuality in her work as a whole and argues that it assumes an informed readership. In doing so, it talks back to neo-Victorian criticism, in particular Heilmann and Llewellyn's view that neo-Victorian fiction, as opposed to popular fiction, requires "knowledgeable readers" (18) who will spot the metatextual play.

Mistress of Mellyn as a neo-Victorian 'Co-articulation' of Female Liberation

Mistress of Mellyn, as Kay Mussell rightly argues "deserves a place amongst the most important gothic romances of the century" (*Twentieth-Century* 368). This section argues that Holt uses the mystery of the first wife, appropriated from *Jane Eyre*, to create a novel of liberation which parallels the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement in her contemporary society. The word 'liberation' was not used by the movement in a narrow sense of freeing women from imprisonment. Instead, it was used in a wider sense to mean freeing them from gender expectations, discriminatory laws and all other forms of female oppression. The first wife in *Mistress of Mellyn* is the deceased Alice TreMellyn. During the course of the

novel, five women combine forces, either wittingly or unwittingly, to uncover her fate. The five women involved are the narrator, Martha Leigh; Alice herself, who speaks to Martha through dreams as well as through her diary; Alvean, who is Martha's pupil and Alice's daughter; Miss Jansen, a former governess at the house of Mount Mellyn, and Gillyflower, the housekeeper's granddaughter, who is about eight years old. These five women act as a sisterhood, reflecting Holt's contemporary society in which the word 'sisterhood' was a part of the language of the Women's Liberation Movement. The term denoted women who worked together as they challenged patriarchal oppression. Although Holt does not use the actual word 'sisterhood' in *Mistress of Mellyn*, the concept is present in the actions of the five women who work together to liberate the skeleton of their sixth 'sister' from the priest's hole in which she has been suffocated, and to liberate her from false representation.

The five women who 'liberate' Alice are all derived from *Jane Eyre*. Martha, like Jane, is the novel's first-person narrator. She is an orphan who takes up a position as a governess in the isolated Cornish house of Mount Mellyn, where she uncovers a secret surrounding her master's first wife and eventually marries him; Alice is taken from the first wife Bertha;[11] Alvean and Gillyflower are the counterparts of Jane's pupil Adèle, and Miss Jansen is an echo of the sensible schoolmistress Miss Temple. Martha has the most prominent role in the 'sisterhood'. She is not only the narrator but she is also the person motivated to find out what happened to Alice, whilst the other women take on smaller roles in assisting her. In appropriating the character of Jane Eyre for her character of Martha, Holt does not simply imitate Jane. Instead, she makes Martha an active liberator instead of, like Jane, a bystander in the fate of the first wife. When Jane realises there is a mystery at Thornfield Hall, she does not investigate the trail of clues that is laid before her. Mrs Fairfax hints that

[11] Alice, like Bertha, is an unloved wife. Both wives are replaced, after their deaths, by women who were temporarily employed by their husbands as governesses.

Mr Rochester “has painful thoughts” (149) and “shuns” Thornfield (150). However, Jane realises that Mrs Fairfax wishes her to drop the subject and consequently she does so. Later, she hears a “vague murmur, peculiar and lugubrious” (172) and realises “there was a mystery at Thornfield; and that from participation in that mystery I was purposely excluded” (192), but although she wonders “[w]hat crime was this that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner?—what mystery, that broke out now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night?” (243) she is not motivated to pursue the matter.

Even when, after she becomes engaged to Mr Rochester, Mrs Fairfax warns her: “all is not gold that glitters . . . I do fear there will be something found to be different to what either you or I expect” (305), she lets matters take their course. This is perhaps surprising since, earlier in the novel, Jane draws attention to the lack of stimulation available to women: “women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer”(129-130). Following these clues would have given her the exercise for her faculties she desired. Of course, if Brontë had allowed her to follow the clues she would have spoiled the dramatic scene at the altar, where the existence of Rochester’s first wife is revealed. Nevertheless, there is a rhetorical element of Jane’s plea for stimulation here. She resembles a traditional Gothic heroine in the Radcliffean mould, rather than a sensation novel’s female detective. Although Radcliffe’s heroines are not always as passive as is sometimes claimed, they are nevertheless not active in detecting the mysteries that beset them. As Cynthia Wolff rightly remarks, the business of a Radcliffean heroine “is to experience difficulty, not to get out of it” (211). Holt’s appropriation therefore shifts genres, moving away from the Radcliffean and Brontëan prototype and towards the sensation heroine, emphasising her narrator-heroine’s more active role.

Martha is, to begin with, like Jane, in that she ignores the suggestions of a mystery at Mount Mellyn. When she is collected from the station by the coachman, he tells her about the house and its inhabitants, but then stops abruptly: “The families have always been good neighbours until —” (9). Martha does not ask him for further information, narrating: “I thought it was beneath my dignity to probe into such matters” (9). However, as the novel progresses, she extends Jane’s rhetorical feminism into action and takes on the role of a detective as she tries to discover what has happened to Alice TreMellyn. She mulls over small and seemingly insignificant clues that there is some mystery until, she narrates: “[t]houghts of Alice obsessed me . . . I felt such a burning desire to discover what mystery lay behind her death” (102).

The efforts of the living Martha and the dead Alice are closely related. In keeping with the Gothic tone of the novel, Martha believes Alice is haunting her. She is prompted to investigate by a feeling that Alice has not gone and that somehow she remains. As a part of the ‘haunting’, Holt appropriates the disembodied voices from the supernatural scene in *Jane Eyre*, in which Jane hears Mr Rochester’s voice carried on the air, calling out to her: “Jane! Jane! Jane!” (*Eyre* 438). When Martha wakes in the night, she narrates: “I had a feeling that I was not alone; that there were whispering voices about me” (32). Later she narrates:

> her [Alice’s] presence seemed to haunt the place.
>
> I would wake in the night to hear what I thought were voices, and they seemed to be moaning: ‘Alice. Alice. Where is Alice?’
>
> I went to my window and listened, and the whispering voices seemed to be carried on the air (38).

In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, however, the voices do not connect a woman with a man, but instead connect two women. This gender switch is significant, placing the emphasis on the

relationship between the female characters rather than on the romantic relationship between the hero and heroine.

The connection between the two women is intensified when Martha dreams that Alice comes into her room and says: "'It is for you to find me'" (96). Martha attempts to rationalise her dreams and feelings of foreboding but finds it difficult to do so. When her eye is drawn to Alice's window, she narrates: "I don't know what I expected. Was it to see a face appear at the window, a beckoning hand? There were times when I could laugh at myself for my fancies but the twilight hour was not one of them" (101). Alice also communicates with Martha in a more realistic way through the entries in her diary.[12] This communication is mediated through the third member of the 'sisterhood', Alvean, who is Martha's pupil and Alice's daughter.

The diary itself is found as a result of a complicated sub-plot which revolves around another iteration of female liberation, in which Martha liberates Alvean from her fear of horses. She first helps Alvean to gain confidence with horses, telling her how to manage them, and then suggesting a riding lesson. Since Martha has no riding habit, Alvean lends her one of her mother's (Alice's) habits (66). When Martha puts it on, she finds a small diary which has slipped beneath the lining in the coat. Written the previous year, it casts doubt on the generally held belief that Alice ran away with her lover and was subsequently killed in a train crash. The diary entry shows that Alice was concerned her brooch might not be back from the jeweller's in time for a forthcoming entertainment in July, writing: "must have it for dinner party at Trelanders on eighteenth" (132). Martha 'exercises her faculties' and wonders

[12] Kym Brindle argues perceptively that in neo-Victorian fiction diaries are used to "stress that material traces of the past are fragmentary, incomplete and contradictory . . . as writers strive to highlight uncertain channels of communication between past and present" (4).

when, exactly, Alice died. If Alice died after the entry in the diary, as is possible, she thinks it odd that Alice was making plans when she knew that she intended to run away.

Martha visits the graveyard where Alice lies buried in the family vault. She discovers that Alice ran away, and was killed, on the seventeenth of July. Martha deduces from this that Alice did not leave voluntarily, since she would not have been concerned about the dinner party if she had known she would not be attending (133). This stimulates Martha to further action as she ponders the question: "What had happened to Alice? If she was not lying in the black marble vault, where was she?" (136). Martha feels as though she has discovered a vital clue. This is confirmed when she visits the jeweller's, a visit which again forms part of the sub-plot which liberates Alvean from her fear of riding. Martha buys a brooch shaped like a whip for Alvean, to bring her luck in the horse show for which she has been entered. In the process, she speaks to the jeweller, who was the man responsible for mending Alice's brooch. He remembered especially that she wanted to wear it at a dinner party the day after she disappeared, saying: "I couldn't believe my ears when I heard she'd left home that very evening. Didn't seem possible that she could have been telling me about the dinner party she was going to the next day, you see" (158).

It is the fourth member of the 'sisterhood', Miss Jansen, who next furthers the plot and assists Martha in her goal of discovering what happened to Alice. After a number of complicated plot developments, in which Martha becomes engaged to Connan TreMellyn and then fears that someone is trying to kill her, Martha contacts Miss Jansen as she feels in need of a confidante. In another complicated sub-plot Miss Jansen was dismissed for stealing a diamond bracelet, but protested her innocence, and Martha is curious to know more about her. The two women meet. Miss Jansen is open about the accusation against her, but says that she was framed for the theft. During the course of their conversation, Martha and Miss Jansen talk of the house, known as Mount Mellyn. Miss Jansen is interested in old houses and

remarks that the lepers' squint at Mount Mellyn is unusual. Lepers' squints, like peeps, allowed people to look from one part of a house into another; in this case, they allowed lepers to view religious services without contaminating others. Miss Jansen asks Martha to tell Celestine, who is also interested in old houses (294). By participating in the sisterhood and sharing her knowledge about old houses, Miss Jansen precipitates the climax of the criminal element of the novel. Without her contribution, the fate of Alice might never have been discovered.

The vital nature of this information is revealed when Celestine goes with Martha to investigate the squint, which is in the private chapel at Mount Mellyn. Celestine speculates that the squint may contain a secret passage leading to a priest's hole. Priest's holes were small rooms or holes, predominantly in Elizabethan mansions. They were used to shelter priests at a time when Catholics were persecuted. They were hidden from view, with the doors being disguised and often opened by means of a secret switch. Celestine presses the wall and finds a switch which opens a secret passage. She says that Martha should go first since she is to marry Connan and the house will be hers. Martha complies, whereupon Celestine shuts her in. Martha is left to suffocate in the priest's hole, which is in a remote part of the house, meaning it is unlikely she will ever be discovered. In a particularly Gothic scene, she discovers that she is not alone. Martha finds that she is sharing the priest's hole with Alice's skeleton and realises that Alice was Celestine's first victim, murdered the previous year and never discovered because she was presumed to have run away with her lover. Even in this extremity, Martha feels a bond with Alice: "I thought that at last I had found her [Alice], and that we had comfort to offer each other" (304). There is certainly no comfort to be had from Celestine, who goes away and leaves her to die. Celestine, it is finally revealed, is insane (312).

At this point, the fifth member of the 'sisterhood' plays her part in liberating Martha, at the same time liberating Alice from unjust speculation and an unmarked grave. This 'sister' is Gillyflower, a "simple" (311) child, who has seen Martha and Celestine go into the leper's squint. Without Gillyflower's keen observation, Martha would not have been found. Nor would she have been sought. In another sub-plot, Martha had been the object of Peter Nansellock's gallantry. It was known that Peter had asked Martha to go away with him, and he had left that night for Australia. If Martha's body had not been found, it would have been thought that she had decided to leave with Peter; she would have been assumed to have run away with her lover, just as Alice was assumed to have run away with her lover. However, when Martha's disappearance is noticed, Gillyflower leads the hero, Connan TreMellyn, to the leper's squint. He finds the spring which releases the door and, together, Gillyflower and Connan liberate Martha and Alice (311-312).

Current criticism emphasises Connan's role. Ignoring Gillyflower's role, Wallace remarks: "It is Connan . . . who releases Martha from the priest's hole" (Wallace Female Gothic 156). This is in line with Wallace's analysis of Holt's work as a whole (or at least those novels she includes in her sample), of which she says: "The climax of the novel is usually the heroine's entrapment in this [confined] space, from which she is rescued by the hero" (Wallace *Female Gothic* 152). Stoneman, by contrast, says that "Martha is rescued by an illegitimate girl-child" (145), but does not consider her important enough to name her. Stoneman concludes: "[t]he impact of the story is to make us feel that the world is indeed a dangerous place for women, that threats are real and women's power small, yet that all the threats can be evaded if only we choose the right man" (145). However, it is Gillyflower who plays the vital role. When it is discovered that Martha is missing, the whole household searches for her. Any one of them could have opened the priest's hole and thus released her. However, only Gillyflower knows where she is. The novel emphasises the more important

role of Gillyflower, saying that, if not for Gillyflower, "the story of Alice and Martha would never have been known" (311). It is women, working together, who release each other.

Women helping women is a recurring theme in Holt's work. In *Kirkland Revels* (1962), the narrator is abducted and taken to a private asylum where she is to be incarcerated against her will. Her maid realises what has happened and alerts the novel's hero. He then goes to the asylum and is able to prevent her incarceration. It is the maid who is the most significant member of the team here. Once the narrator had been taken inside the asylum it would have been very difficult to effect her release but the maid's prompt action enables the hero to act in time to save her. In *Menfreya* it is the doctor's daughter who, when the narrator goes missing, discovers her whereabouts and alerts the (anti)hero so that he is able to join her in rescuing the narrator from a submerged cellar. This trait continues throughout Holt's work: for example in *The House of a Thousand Lanterns* it is the narrator's maid who discovers her whereabouts when she goes missing and is instrumental in her release from an underground room. This trait of women working together to effect their release presents an extension of *Jane Eyre*'s feminism,[13] in which women's need for freedom was voiced. It is also a symbol for the contemporary beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement, in which women's need for freedom was enacted, culminating in the first Women's Liberation Movement conference in 1970.

Neo-Victorian Madness: Limited Opportunities and Female 'Otherness'

Mistress of Mellyn uses its portrayal of female 'otherness' to contest Victorian views on madness. It does so at its own "cultural moment" when existing legislation, which was a relic

[13] Feminism as a term to denote advocacy for women's rights was not in use at the time. However, Jane's claim to equality can now be described as feminism.

of the Victorian period, was being updated. 1959 saw the new Mental Health Act, which was enacted in 1960. Kate Mitchell remarks on neo-Victorianism's "compulsive reworking of nineteenth-century madness" (61). *Mistress of Mellyn*, in neo-Victorian fashion, uses this theme. It does so by introducing two 'mad women' into the narrative. The first, Celestine, is derived from both Gothic and sensation fiction and presents female madness as a reaction to the limited opportunities open to women in a patriarchal society. The second, Gillyflower (discussed in section 2i) contests the Victorian patriarchy's diagnosis of female 'otherness' as 'madness' by placing it in a continuum, of which the Victorian era is only one small moment. In doing so, it contests Victorian attitudes towards 'madness' and validates its own century's attitudes towards mental illness.

With the character of Celestine Nansellock, Holt both uses and extends her novel beyond the boundaries of Gothic romance and 'talks back' to two distinct Victorian representations of female madness. One is the Gothic madness of Bertha Rochester and the other is the type of madness which is typical in sensation fiction and which is presented through characters such as Lady Audley, who declares that she is mad and is diagnosed as having "latent insanity" (409). Celestine is Connan TreMellyn's neighbour and wishes to be his wife. She is presented throughout the novel (until the very end) as rational and sane. This type of madness is appropriated from sensation fiction. The sensation 'madwomen' were not bestial, openly violent women in the manner of Bertha Rochester from *Jane Eyre*. Instead, they were apparently normal women who lived ordinary lives, but who were (arguably) driven by circumstances to criminal acts and, ultimately, madness. The circumstances usually derived from the gender inequalities in Victorian society and the focus was on the causes and outcomes of their insanity, not on its potential for Gothic horror. As Elaine Showalter rightly remarks: "[t]he brilliance of *Lady Audley's Secret* is that Braddon makes her would-be murderess the fragile blond angel of domestic realism: not Bertha Mason" (Showalter

Literature 165). By making her murderess the apparently gentle Celestine, Holt eschews the Gothic monster and instead focuses attention on the causes of madness, 'co-articulating' the gender inequalities of the Victorian era and her own contemporary society. She demonstrates that, like Lady Audley and other sensation heroines (or anti-heroines), Celestine's madness is caused by women's oppression under a patriarchy.

At the start of the novel, Celestine is, like Lady Audley, presented as an 'angel in the house', that is, a submissive woman who thinks only of others. This archetype derives from Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name (1854-1862), which was a site of resistance for Victorian sensation authors. Patmore's poem idealised women as domestic and dutiful wives and mothers; sensation fiction showed them as ambitious and independent, often leading to criminality when society did not allow them an outlet for their passions and ambitions.[14] When Celestine is first mentioned she is described as a meek woman, having "an intense air of quiet about her . . . little personality . . . mild eyes" (27). She is portrayed as having a maternal attachment to eight-year-old Alvean, Martha's pupil and, although she is not married, she seems destined to become the wife of Connan TreMellyn. Connan is the counterpart of *Jane Eyre*'s Mr Rochester, and is a widower. At the start of the novel, Martha thinks: "[w]ho more suitable to be his wife than this neighbour who was so fond of Miss Alvean?" (20).

Like Lady Audley, Celestine succeeds in fooling those around her into believing that she is a kind and gentle person. As Martha remarks at the end of the novel: "she had tricked us all with her gentle demeanour" (304). Her apparently helpful attitude towards Miss Jansen is revealed to be a part of her deception. She helps Miss Jansen to find another position after Miss Jansen is accused of theft, saying that she believes in Miss Jansen's innocence. What

[14] Lyn Pykett identifies the two types of female as 'proper' and 'improper', with the former being exemplified by Patmore's 'angel in the house' and the latter being exemplified by sensation heroines such as Lady Audley.

she does not say is that she, herself, framed Miss Jansen for the theft in the first place. She did so in order to remove Miss Jansen from the neighbourhood. She is motivated by a fear that Miss Jansen's interest in old houses will lead her to a discovery of the priest's hole, and with it Alice's skeleton. If it is discovered that Alice has been murdered, then Celestine knows she will risk eventually being recognised as a murderess. Like Lady Audley, she descends into crime, and ultimately descends into madness.[15]

Just as Martha is imprisoned physically in the priest's hole, so too is Celestine imprisoned psychologically by the gender inequalities of her society. These inequalities are revealed by the Nansellock family, which consists of Celestine and her two brothers, Geoffry and Peter Nansellock. By constructing Celestine as mad, and her two brothers as sane, Holt suggests that it is circumstances which create Celestine's madness rather than heredity, as Brontë suggests is the case with Bertha Rochester. The circumstances which Holt highlights as differing between Celestine and her brothers, and therefore implies are responsible for her madness, are sexual experience and employment. Geoffry and Peter are both sexually promiscuous. Their promiscuity gives them an outlet for their passions which is denied to Celestine because of the sexual double standard, which endorsed sex for men but regarded it as shameful for women. The differing fate of men and women who engage in sex outside of marriage is made clear when it is related that Geoffry fathered the illegitimate girl, Gillyflower. After giving birth, Gillyflower's mother, Jennifer, committed suicide by walking into the sea. When Martha learns of this, she asks if Gillyflower's father also walked into the sea. Her question is met with a chuckle and the reply: "Not him." The different consequences

[15] Lady Audley's 'madness' has been critiqued as a sane reaction to the patriarchal limitations in which she is forced to live, for example Elaine Showalter remarks that "Lady Audley's real secret is that she is sane and, moreover, representative" (167).

are, then, starkly drawn: for Jennifer, the event leads to shame and ostracism, resulting in suicide; for Geoffry, it leads to an enhancement of his reputation as "a philanderer" (MM 52).

Holt voices the double standard through an appropriation of *Jane Eyre.* Jane is aware of the sexual double standard, and the dire consequences for women of sex outside of marriage. She thinks: "it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it; and, if discovered and responded to, must lead, ignus-fatuus-like, into miry wilds whence there is no extrication" (186-187). Jane's "miry wilds" refer to the consequences of pregnancy and childbirth for unmarried women in a society which regarded them as shameful and treated them as outcasts. Similarly, when Martha is tempted by the advances of Celestine's brother, Peter Nansellock, Martha recalls Gillyflower's mother. She reminds herself of the "unfortunate creatures who attracted the roving eyes of philanderers and found one day that the only bearable prospect life had to offer was its end" (88), and rejects Peter's advances.

In appropriating this theme, Holt was voicing one of the issues of her day. The sexual double standard was a particular concern of the Women's Liberation Movement, particularly as it resulted in such different consequences for the parties involved. Women who became pregnant outside of marriage were still considered shameful in 1960 and, until the 1959 Mental Health Act, pregnancy outside marriage could be used as evidence of "moral insanity", resulting in a woman being confined to an asylum ("Mental Health"). Holt's use of neo-Victorianism here reveals that, in some ways, society was still Victorian. In an effort to remove the sexual double standard, and certainly to remove the differing consequences of sex before marriage, the Women's Liberation Movement made free contraception and abortion on demand two of their priorities at their first conference in 1970 ("Timeline").

Sexual experience is not the only outlet denied to Celestine. Her brothers not only have the opportunity to "philander", but they also have the freedom to take employment and

to travel. When Peter hears that one of his friends has made a fortune in the Australian gold fields, he decides to go too, saying someone needs to save his family's fortunes (145-146). An opportunity to travel, and also an opportunity to save her family's fortunes through work, are denied to Celestine. As a woman from a landowning family, who was not entirely destitute, it was not socially acceptable for her to take employment of any kind. If the family fortunes had deteriorated to a point of destitution then it would have been acceptable. Although Victorian women with some education could support themselves, this was mainly through low-paid work such as a governess or schoolteacher. In *Jane Eyre*, as a governess, Jane earns a very small salary of thirty pounds a year (105). Again, Holt is here articulating one of the key concerns of her own era. The Women's Liberation Movement was concerned with the poor pay and lack of employment opportunities for women in the 1960s; so much so that they demanded equal pay and equal job opportunities at their 1970 conference ("Timeline").

Having suggested that lack of sex and lack of employment are contributory factors in Celestine's madness, Holt reveals that this madness takes the form of an obsessive love; not for Connan TreMellyn, as would be usual in a romance, but for his house, Mount Mellyn. Thwarted in other areas, Celestine fixates on the house and then murders Alice in the expectation of taking her place as Connan's wife. Martha realises:

> It was the house that she loved.
>
> I pictured her during those delirious moments looking from her window at Mount Widden across the cove – coveting a house as fiercely as man ever coveted woman or woman, man" (304).

The point is later emphasised: "[s]he was in love – passionately in love with Mount Mellyn and she wanted to marry Connan only because thus she would be mistress of the

house" (309). The last four words demonstrate the importance of Celestine's character and the criminal element of the plot, because they suggest that the ambiguous title, *Mistress of Mellyn*, refers to Celestine. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, where the title makes it clear the novel is about Jane, *Mistress of Mellyn* is not about the narrator. It is about a woman whose thwarted drives and ambitions drive her mad. In this, Holt appropriates Lady Audley. At the end of her novel, Lady Audley declares that she did not kill "treacherously and foully"; instead she did so because "I AM MAD" (374, capitals in original). As Showalter points out: "Lady Audley is devious and perfidious not because she is a criminal and mad, but because she is a lady and sane" ("Family" 113). Extending Showalter's claim, I argue that the same can be said of Celestine.

The importance of the house in Holt's novels is acknowledged by Diana Wallace, who argues that "the house symbolises the class status and security the heroine can attain through marriage, and her place within the historical narrative of generations it represents" (*Historical* 134). However, Celestine is from an old and respected family. She already has class status and security, as well as a place within the historical narrative of generations it represents. Celestine's criminality is, instead, driven by a desire for the house which is a consequence of a lack of equal opportunities. Without access to a career, Celestine can only gain a house by marrying; if the only suitable man is already married then she can only gain a house by murder. A house in this context does not simply mean bricks and mortar, it means a home, a place where she can have some independence and authority, and where she can also enjoy the (albeit limited) freedoms open to married women which are denied to spinsters.

Again, Holt is voicing one of the concerns of the Women's Liberation Movement. Whilst there had been some improvement in the area of employment by the 1960s, women's earnings were, on average, half of men's earnings. In addition, until the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, banks could refuse to give women mortgages without a male guarantor. Women

were thus effectively barred from home ownership on two counts: first, by being excluded from well-paid work and second, by being excluded from mortgages ("Sex Discrimination"). I suggest that one of the reasons for *Mistress of Mellyn's* success was that women recognised the need for their own home and, at the same time, recognised their economic disadvantages which meant that attaining that goal was difficult; and that the disparity in wages meant they were being socially coerced into marriage for economic reasons.

Once Celestine is detected as the murderer, she descends into madness and before the trial can take place she is a "raving lunatic" (312). Martha wonders if it is a scheme in order to escape capital punishment but realises that, although it may have started that way, Celestine is genuinely insane. She does not die for twenty years and all that time she is locked away (312). In creating Celestine, finally, as a "raving lunatic", Holt appropriates the more noticeable type of madness found in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha Rochester, the archetypal madwoman of Victorian fiction, is memorably described as "the madwoman in the attic" by Gilbert and Gubar. Brontë's interest in Bertha is not in creating a realistic depiction of insanity; her interest is, instead, in creating a Gothic monster who will create feelings of horror, fear and revulsion in the reader, just as they create these same emotions in Jane. To do so, Brontë depicts Bertha as bestial: "a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell . . . a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (338). The mixing of the use of the word "hair", which is commonly associated with humans, and the word "mane", which is commonly associated with animals, enhances the sense of horror by confusing Bertha's taxonomy. This confusion generates a sense of what Jentsch called the "uncanny"; that is, a feeling of unease, of uncertainty or disorientation, in this case caused by Bertha's status being difficult to

determine.[16] Bertha's behaviour is as frightening as her appearance. She has periods of extreme violence: "the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek" (338). She also has calmer moments, which nevertheless are full of menace: she goes into Jane's room at night, puts on Jane's wedding veil and then tears it in two. Although there are no scenes of Celestine in her raving state, her eventual condition and her imprisonment have unmistakeable neo-Victorian echoes of Brontë's text.

Celestine's fate is a contrast to the fate of the women who work together. Alice's liberators all have happy endings. Martha, Alvean and Miss Jansen have happy marriages; Gillyflower lives with Martha and Connan, and Alice has an ending which, if not happy, is the most satisfactory one possible when her bones are given a proper burial. Celestine, however, who works against the other women, dies at a comparatively early age having spent the rest of her life in confinement.

In contrast to Celestine's madness, which appropriates sensation fiction in order to critique its own, and Victorian, society, Gillyflower's madness is of a different order. It is used to 'talk back' to Victorian literature and society by critiquing prevalent mid-Victorian ideas on female insanity. It does so by placing them in a historical continuum, relating Gillyflower to an earlier era in order to show that other attitudes towards female madness have existed. Wallace remarks perceptively: "a temporal viewpoint allows us to see that gender itself is historically contingent rather than essential. If gender roles are subject to change over time then they are clearly socially and culturally constructed and open to the possibility of further change" (*Historical* 7). If gender is socially constructed, then so is any definition of madness based upon it. Victorian views are exemplified by prominent Victorian doctor L. Forbes Winslow. He had originally been a reformer but, by 1859, he advocated

[16] Jentsch's 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" predates Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny", which deals with the same theme.

confining “women of ungovernable temper . . . sullen, wayward, malicious, defying all domestic control; or who want that restraint over the passions without which the female character is lost” (Scull 76). His ideas reflected Victorian views on gender and madness, which promoted the ideal of women being submissive, as in Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” (1854-1862), and women who did not conform to those views as mad.

By putting Victorian ideas of female madness into a continuum of views on madness they become just one view of the subject and not an absolute truth. Whilst the Victorian views gained an air of permanence from the length of Victoria’s reign, the certainty of the men who controlled those views and the permanent stone buildings they created to contain it, their views were challenged and overturned in the late 1950s with the 1959 Mental Health Act. This was just before the publication of *Mistress of Mellyn* and the character of Gillyflower is a part of that progression.

With the figure of Gillyflower, Holt revives a positive form of female ‘otherness’ in a variation of the archetypal figure of the ‘wise woman’. Campbell, in his influential work on myth *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949), refers to this figure as the “helpful crone” or “fairy godmother”, noting that the hero who comes under the protection of this archetype cannot be harmed (Campbell 59). In reinstating the power of the wise woman, Holt responds to chapters eighteen and nineteen of *Jane Eyre,* in which Mr Rochester impersonates a gypsy woman and removes power from the wise woman by symbolically subordinating this matriarchal figure to patriarchal control. Holt’s response reinstates the power of the wise woman. Moreover, she responds to the fairy tale archetype by creating the helpful crone as a protector of the heroine, rather than of the hero.

When the ‘gypsy’ is announced in *Jane Eyre,* she is immediately presented as a figure of ridicule. Colonel Dent refers to her as “one of the old Mother Bunches” (222). Mother Bunch was reputedly an Elizabethan alehouse keeper who “gave her name to several book

titles, usually collections of folk wisdom" (Crystal 210). With his derisory attitude, Colonel Dent shows a scorn not only towards the 'gypsy' but also towards folk wisdom, particularly when dispensed by women. The mocking tone continues when Frederick Lynn says she is "a real sorceress" (223), to which his brother replies it "would be a thousand pities to throw away such a chance of fun" (223). The other young people agree, saying: "it will be excellent sport" (223). Patriarchal power is emphasised when Miss Ingram returns from seeing the gypsy and says: "I think Mr Eshton will do well to put the hag in the stocks to-morrow morning, as he threatened" (225).

Nevertheless, some of the young ladies are impressed by what they hear. Jane, too, is amazed at the 'gypsy' knowing so much: "[o]ne unexpected sentence came from her lips after another, till I got involved in a web of mystification; and wondered what unseen spirit had been sitting for weeks by my heart watching its workings and taking record of every pulse" (231). However, the perception of the 'gypsy' is finally shown to be a deception. The comments are not the perceptive wisdom of the wise woman; they are instead the mundane knowledge of Mr Rochester, who knows the details of his neighbours' lives. When he dismisses his disguise and reveals himself as a man, he dismisses female authority and reasserts patriarchal dominance, revealing his (apparently) female wisdom to be a sham.

'Talking back' to this, Holt creates the character of Gillyflower as a type of 'wise woman'. This archetype has many names. Campbell uses "helpful crone" and "fairy godmother", Brontë uses "gypsy" and "sorceress", but Holt plays on the term 'seer'. The female 'seer' is a recurring theme in Holt's novels, particularly those published in the 1960s. In *Kirkland Revels*, the narrator's aunt by marriage appears to be clairvoyant and reveals her insights through the tapestries she weaves; in *The Shivering Sands*, Miss Stacy's artwork reveals things others cannot see and her seer-like qualities are emphasised by her Christian name, Sybil. Both women attempt to warn and watch over the narrators.

Gillyflower sees things differently, both by virtue of her otherness and, literally, by her way of looking through 'peeps' in order to see. Gillyflower's otherness is referenced early in the novel and is immediately apparent through her appearance. She is "[a]n extraordinary-looking girl with long straight hair almost white in colour and wide blue eyes . . . blank blue eyes" (12). Because of her 'otherness', those around her perceive her to be insane: "because she was unlike them, [they] believed her to be mad" (39). Gillyflower's grandmother, Mrs Polgrey, who raises her, is "a conventional woman. In her mind, a person was either mad or sane, and the degree of sanity depended on the conformity with Mrs Polgrey's own character. Since Gilly was as different from her grandmother as anyone could be, Gilly was therefore irremediably crazy" (40). The link between non-conformity and supposed madness represents Victorian views on female otherness, expressed by Forbes Winslow and others, in which women who did not conform could be diagnosed as 'crazy'.

Gillyflower frequently uses the 'peeps' in the house, which gives her a differing viewpoint on events. When Martha tells Gilly that Alice is dead, and there is no use looking for her in the house, Gilly nods. However, Martha is not sure whether the nod means that she agrees, "or whether she believed that she could find Mrs TreMellyn in the house" (104). The Elizabethan aura that surrounds Gillyflower, which is in part created by her association with the peeps, is intensified by her description of her as "a wild fairy child" (186). This ties her to *Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales*, creating an intricate link between *Mistress of Mellyn*, *Jane Eyre* and the Elizabethan original of Mother Bunch. Whereas Mother Bunch and, by association, her fairy stories, are derided in *Jane Eyre*, the tone of Gillyflower's description is positive, with the word 'wild' connotating 'free'. Celestine spends most of the novel associated with indoor spaces, symbolising her imprisonment in gendered inequalities and her own growing madness; Gillyflower, on the other hand, is associated throughout the novel with open spaces

and freedom from Victorian mores. Indeed, when Martha sees Gillyflower looking like "a wild fairy child", she is in the woods "lying in a clearing, surrounded by conifers" (186).

Holt increases the Elizabethan aura surrounding Gillyflower by her evocation of Shakespeare. Gillyflower's unusual name derives from one of Perdita's speeches in *The Winter's Tale*. Whilst Holt does not mention *The Winter's Tale*, the intertext is inescapable for what Heilmann and Llewellyn call the "critical reader" (18); that is, a reader with a wide knowledge of English literature. Holt links the flower name and its connection with bastardy in both texts. Perdita declares she will not grow "gillyvors" (a variant spelling of gillyflowers), "[w]hich some call Nature's bastards" (*The Winter's Tale* 4.4.6-7). Holt reflects this speech metatextually. The uniting of the *Mistress of Mellyn* and *The Winter's Tale* comes in Gillyflower's name, which is unusual and derives from the fact that her mother went "lying in the hay – or maybe the gillyflowers – with someone" (9). The texts are also united by the notion of bastardy because Gillyflower is illegitimate, with Holt intensifying the link by using Shakespeare's term when it is related that Gillyflower's father, Geoffry Nansellock, "left a trail of bastards wherever he went" (9).

There is a more self-conscious use of Shakespeare when Gillyflower is likened to Shakespeare's character, Ophelia. The similarities are at first implicit. Gillyflower's otherworldly air is reminiscent of Ophelia: she rarely speaks, but sings to herself as she wanders about alone. Like Ophelia, Gillyflower is haunted by a sense of loss. Like Ophelia, who is thought to be suffering from her father's death, Gillyflower is still suffering from Alice's death. Both Gillyflower and Ophelia are associated with flowers. Ophelia, in Act 4 Scene 5 of *Hamlet*, talks of fennel, columbines, daisies and violets. Gillyflower, beyond the flower association of her name, "has always been taken with birds and flowers" (109). Gillyflower, like Ophelia, is associated with drowning. In Act 4 Scene 7 of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is drowned; one day, when Gillyflower wanders off, Martha imagines she has drowned (185).

The link between the two is then made explicit when Miss Jansen refers to her as "[a] strange, mad Ophelia-like creature. I always felt that one day we should find her floating on the stream with rosemary in her hands" (291). Having united the two texts without mentioning Ophelia, Holt then "summons" *Hamlet* by actually mentioning Ophelia and confirming the echo she has already suggested.

In this self-conscious self-reflexivity, Holt displays one of the acknowledged signifiers of a neo-Victorian novel. She is not, however, quoting a Victorian text here, but an Elizabethan text. By doing so, she emphasises a view of madness which runs counter to prevailing mid-Victorian views. Foucault notes the change in literary portrayals of madness, saying: "Not so long ago, it [madness] had floundered about in broad daylight: in King Lear, in Don Quixote. But in less than a half-century, it had been sequestered and, in the fortress of confinement, bound to Reason, to the rules of morality and to their monotonous nights" (60).

By placing female madness in a historical continuum, Holt shows that Victorian attitudes were under threat in Holt's contemporary society, and not only under threat but being overturned. Instead of Gillyflower being locked away in an asylum, with her otherness being diagnosed as madness; instead of being subjected to various aggressive treatments; her fate in *Mistress of Mellyn* is quite different. In keeping with the new attitudes towards 'madness' in the twentieth century, and enshrined in law with the 1959 Mental Health Act, Gillyflower spends the rest of her long life with Martha and Connan, becoming a part of their family. She is "still a little different from other people, still speaking rarely, singing as she works, in that off-key voice that makes us think she is a little out of this world" (314). This reflects the 'care in the community' aspect of the Act, where female 'otherness' was not defined as madness or used as a reason to lock women away (unless, like Celestine, they were a danger to themselves or others). Gillyflower escapes Ophelia's fate as a (probable) suicide. She also escapes Lady Audley's fate as an inmate of an asylum. Instead, she finds herself as a

part of a family who owe their lives to her 'otherness'. With this ending, Holt is moving her own brand of the Gothic novel away from the Victorian ideals of uniformity and segregation, and towards the late twentieth-century ideals of diversity and inclusivity.

Mistress of Mellyn: A Novel *Of* and *About* Appropriation

Mistress of Mellyn is not only a novel *of* appropriation, but it is also a novel *about* appropriation. At the end of the novel, Martha reflects: "I think of the story of Jennifer, the mother [of Gillyflower] who one day walked into the sea, and how that story was part of my story, and how delicately and intricately our lives were woven together" (314). Her reflection on the weaving together of stories is, symbolically, a reflection on intertextuality, and the stories which are "delicately and intricately woven together" in *Mistress of Mellyn*. These include *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White, Lady Audley's Secret, Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Hamlet*, all of which are discussed above. Holt's self-reflexivity extends beyond these already-mentioned texts. *Mistress of Mellyn* also appropriates Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and *Rebecca* (which is itself an appropriation of *Jane Eyre*). Both of these novels influence the plot of the missing and disfigured wife, and the woman who is buried in the wrong grave. In *East Lynne,* Isabel Vane runs away with her lover and is involved in a train crash, after which she is believed dead. This is a precursor of Alice TreMellyn, who is believed to have been killed in a train crash whilst running away with her lover. In *Rebecca*, the eponymous first wife of Daphne de Maurier's novel goes missing and it is assumed that she has gone sailing and drowned. Her husband, who knows what has happened to her because he murdered her, identifies another body as that of Rebecca. He is able to falsify the identification because the body has been in the water for so long that it is unrecognisable. He knows that Rebecca's body lies on the bottom of the ocean but, nevertheless, he buries the unnamed body in the family crypt under his wife's name. In

Mistress of Mellyn, the body involved in the train crash is so badly disfigured that it can only be identified by means of a locket. Celestine makes the identification, knowing full well that the body cannot be that of Alice, because she has murdered Alice and left her body in the priest's hole. The misidentified body is then buried under Alice's name in the family vault.

Both of these false burials raise the issue of identity. This issue is crucial to neo-Victorianism as critics continues to define its identity, in particular by deciding what are, and what are not, neo-Victorian texts. Period, appropriation of Victorian texts, themes, socio-political relevance and genre are all factors in deciding what does, and does not, belong in the discourse. The Victorian setting of *Mistress of Mellyn*, its appropriation of Victorian texts, its typically neo-Victorian theme of madness and its socio-political relevance demonstrated by its related themes of female 'sisterhood' and liberation, all indicate a neo-Victorian text. More problematic is the issue of genre. There is currently a resistance amongst some critics, including Heilmann and Llewellyn, to include texts which are regarded as popular, as opposed to literary, fiction. This raises the question of what does, and what does not, constitute literary fiction and, relatedly, what does and does not constitute genre fiction. I argue that the question of female identity in *Mistress of Mellyn* symbolises the question of literary identity. Both are slippery notions and both were under threat in the 1960s. Traditional notions of female identity were being challenged by the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement and traditional views on literary identity were being challenged by post-structuralism. Stoneman remarks that "[i]in place of a canon of great works . . . post-structuralist theories encouraged us to see high and low culture as a continuum of textuality in which texts were determined by an intersection of cultural forces" (1).

Mistress of Mellyn foregrounds the nature of identity at the start of the novel when the narrator, Martha Leigh, reflects on her different names. Her aunt calls her Martha but her

dead father called her Marty. “I could not help feeling that Marty was a more lovable person than Martha . . . and I was sad and a little frightened because I felt that the river Tamar would cut me off completely from Marty for a long time . . . In my new post I should be Miss Leigh, I supposed; perhaps miss, or more undignified still - Leigh” (3). ‘Martha’ represents a neutral name. It is her given name, unchanged by affection or scorn, and represents her aunt’s fair but not particularly loving attitude towards her, in keeping with the close, but not very close, family tie. The diminutive ‘Marty’ used by her father has been personalised, showing his perception of her as an individual. The less formal sound of the name reveals the closer family tie and his love for her, which in turn makes her see ‘Marty’ as more lovable than ‘Martha’. The less personal ‘Miss Leigh’ will rob her of her individuality and acknowledge only that she is a spinster member of the Leigh family. Even worse, she fears she will be depersonalised entirely by the curt ‘Leigh’. The focus on names reflects that Martha is at the start of her life’s journey, symbolised by her train journey into new territory. She does not yet know if her life will be that of the loved ‘Marty’, the respected governess ‘Miss Leigh’ or the despised servant ‘Leigh’. In a similar way, *Mistress of Mellyn* is on a journey, but whether to the loved identity of Gothic romance, the respected identity of a neo-Victorian novel or the despised identity of popular fiction is not yet determined.

At the end of the novel, there is again a focus on her name in its different forms as she discovers how the hero, Connan TreMellyn, sees her. When he declares his love for her he says that Martha is “a stern name for such an adorable creature! And yet, how it fits!” (259). When she reveals that her sister calls her Marty, he rejects it, saying it “sounds helpless, clinging . . . feminine. You can be a Marty sometimes. For me you will be all three. Marty, Martha, and Miss Leigh . . . How enchanting! I shall marry not one woman but three!” (259, first set of ellipses in original). Both readers and critics, in becoming one with *Mistress of Mellyn* as they read or analyse it, must now decide whether it is a neo-Victorian text (a stern name for such an

adorable creature! And yet, how it fits!); a romance (sounds helpless, clinging) or the 'modern Gothic' which is used by critics including Wallace and Russ and equates to the proper Miss Leigh.

When Martha is in the priest's hole, suffocated by a symbol of patriarchy, her issues of identity come to a crisis. She later recalls: "During that time I spent in the dark and gruesome place I was not sure who I was. Was I Martha? Was I Alice?" (303). The merging of Martha and Alice is a recurring theme throughout the novel. When Alvean gives Martha an old riding habit of Alice's to wear, she finds the name, Alice TreMellyn, embossed on the waistband (70). When Martha sees herself in the mirror, wearing the habit, she narrates: "'That might be Alice . . . apart from the face. Then I half-closed my eyes and let the face become blurred while I imagined a different face there" (87). This scene appropriates a scene from *The Woman in White*, as mentioned above, Laura Glyde is confined to an asylum and made to wear the clothes of Anne Catherick in an effort to convince her, and those around her, that she is Anne. With Laura, as with most sensation fiction, the issue of identity is legal; if she can prove that she is Laura then she will be released from the asylum and returned to her family. Holt extends this common trope of sensation fiction by relating Martha's confusion to an existential, rather than a legal, issue of identity.

Martha, then, is not only wearing the borrowed riding habit of Alice TreMellyn, but she is also wearing the borrowed literary clothes of Laura Glyde; that is, one of the plot elements concerning Laura has been draped over her. She is also wearing the literary clothes of her other literary predecessors, Jane Eyre and the second Mrs de Winter. She is, like Jane, a governess narrator; and, like the second Mrs de Winter she discovers that the 'first wife' is dead. My argument, based on appropriation, is in contrast to Wallace's argument that "the heroine fears that she is repeating the fate of a woman from the past", which "suggests that for women 'history' is not a matter of progress but rather a series of cyclical patterns of victimisation, as

daughters repeat their mothers' fates" (*Historical* 135-136). Wallace quotes Tania Modleski, who interprets this not only as women fearing being like their mothers and sharing their fates, but also *being* their mothers by failing to separate. However, the repetition is neo-Victorian, self-reflexively asking an unvoiced series of literary questions: 'Am I Laura Glyde? Am I Jane Eyre? Am I the second Mrs de Winter?' I further argue that Martha's subsequent reflection that "[o]ur stories were so much alike. I believed the pattern was similar" (303) is a reflection on the process of appropriation itself. Martha's musing on their similarities leads the reader to ask whether Martha will go on to marry her hero and live happily ever after, matching Jane Eyre's fate; whether she will live in exile, as is the fate of the second Mrs de Winter, or whether she will forge a new fate. In the event, she repeats the fate of her avowed hypotextual character, Jane Eyre by marrying the hero and going on to live a long and happy life.

Her life is so long, in fact, that it suggests that she is possibly telling her story in 1960, the year of the novel's publication. By the end of the story, it is revealed that Martha is a great grandmother who is telling the story of her life to her great-grandchildren. It is impossible to date the novel's events, beyond saying that it is set in the Victorian period. However, it is possible that the novel is set in the 1890s, in which case Martha's early life would have been lived in the Victorian era. If so, in 1960 she would be in her late eighties, which is a realistic age for a great grandmother. This is the final twist in the novel's 'tale': that Martha's story is in itself neo-Victorian, connecting both Martha's contemporary present and her Victorian past as she not only "co-articulates" the issues of both eras, but articulates her own co-presence, and the co-presence of her story, in the contemporary present and the Victorian past.

Talking Back to Criticism: "Nearly All the Victorians" and the "Knowledgeable Reader"

When Holt acknowledged her literary influences in a 1981 interview she named Dickens, Zola and the Brontës. She then referred collectively to other influences as "nearly all the Victorians" (op. cit.), without further specification. So far, only a few of those authors have been uncovered, namely Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. To these, overlapping this thesis, Jessica Cox has added Ellen Wood. However, there is a much wider range of previously unrecognised Victorian intertexts in Holt's work. This section draws on Julie Sanders's remark that "[a]ny exploration of intertextuality, and its specific manifestation in the forms of adaptation and appropriation, is inevitably interested in how art creates art, or how *literature* is made by *literature*" (1, my italics) in order to problematise a view of Holt's novels as popular fiction. It then uses Holt's prolific intertextuality to talk back to neo-Victorian criticism, contesting the boundaries between literary and popular fiction and therefore their relative importance for the emerging canon. In particular, it talks back to Heilmann and Llewellyn's argument that "[a]daptation is a fundamental part of neo-Victorianism" (244) and that neo-Victorian fiction requires "knowledgeable readers" (18) who are able to understand the metatextual play.

Heilmann and Llewellyn assert that "[t]here are 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 differing knowledge of the act of appropriation" (17). This holds true for Holt's novels, as well as other neo-Victorian fiction. A wide knowledge of Victorian fiction is necessary to recognise and understand the intertexts in Holt's work. A few examples here from Dickens, the Brontës, Wilkie Collins and Ellen Wood will serve to emphasises the point. In *Mistress of Mellyn* the narrator, Martha Leigh, uses Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836) as a means of winning the trust of her young

pupil, Alvean TreMellyn. Alvean loves reading, and Martha chooses *Pickwick Papers* as one of their shared texts because "I had thought [it] would bring light relief into my pupil's rather serious existence" (80). Martha decides, however, that "we could not read together the nightly adventure concerning the elderly lady in curlpapers. That would be most unsuitable for a child of Alvean's age" (80). The readers' assumed knowledge of *Pickwick Papers* helps them to understand that Martha is trying to create a warm and friendly bond with her pupil, but also that Martha is rather prim since she considers the story about the elderly lady in curlpapers unsuitable. In *The Shivering Sands,* Holt employs Dickens in a different fashion, when she appropriates the character of Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* (1861) to create her own character of Sybil Stacy. Miss Havisham and Sybil Stacy are both elderly women who have attempted to stop time after they were disappointed in love. Miss Havisham was jilted at the altar and wears her wedding dress for the rest of her life; in similar fashion, Sybil's wedding did not take place and she continues to dress and behave in the manner of a young girl. T. S. Eliot rightly argues that "[n]o poet, no artist, of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (T. S. Eliot qtd. in Sanders 11). The echoes of Miss Havisham therefore reverberate around Sybil, providing further layers of disquietude to the already strange aura surrounding her. For the knowledgeable reader, Miss Havisham's ghost can be seen haunting Sybil.

The influence of *Jane Eyre* is widely acknowledged. However, it is usually commented on with regard to the plot, particularly with reference to *Mistress of Mellyn*. Yet *Jane Eyre* is revisited in a variety of ways through Holt's work as a whole. In *Menfreya, Jane Eyre* is used to reflect on the character of the narrator, Harriet Delvaney (later Harriet Menfrey). Harriet regards *Jane Eyre* as a book of endurance, emphasising the fact that she sees her own life as one of endurance. By contrast, in 1990's *Snare of Serpents*, the narrator's governess sees *Jane Eyre* as a source of hope and inspiration: if Jane, the lowly governess,

can marry the master of the house then perhaps she might do the same. There is a more subtle reference to *Jane Eyre* in *Menfreya*, when the narrator warns her husband against the governess, saying: "[n]ursery governesses have figured so frequently as the heroines of romance that they are becoming so in ordinary life" (197). She does not specifically mention *Jane Eyre* at that point in the novel, but the inference is inescapable for the knowing reader.

In *The Shivering Sands*, a discussion of *Jane Eyre* gives a subtle insight into the mind of a murderess. In Brontë's novel, Jane's first-person narration shows her to be unaware that her employer, Mr Rochester, keeps his mad wife, Bertha, confined to the attic. She only discovers the fact when dramatic events reveal the truth. However, in *The Shivering Sands*, Alice Lincroft points out that Jane is a first-person narrator and that therefore the reader can only know what Jane chooses to tell them. Alice argues that Jane knew Bertha was kept in the attic, but that the first-person narration allows her to pretend that she was unaware of it. Alice's interpretation of Jane as sly and duplicitous is therefore used by Holt to subtly reveal Alice's character as being similarly sly and duplicitous. The full extent of Alice's nature is revealed in the horrific denouement of *The Shivering Sands*, when the apparently gentle Alice is unmasked as a murderess. Holt's variety of engagement with *Jane Eyre* requires a thorough knowledge of the source text to fully appreciate the echoes of endurance, hope and deception that Holt employs in her novels.

Holt's appropriation of novels by Emily and Anne Brontë have received far less attention. Nevertheless, her novels reflect Emily and Anne's novels in multiple ways. *Kirkland Revels* echoes *Wuthering Heights* in its setting on the Yorkshire moors, a major character named Catherine and the marriage of a confident young woman to a sickly young man: in *Wuthering Heights* the young Catherine Linton marries the ailing Linton Heathcliff and in *Kirkland Revels* Catherine Corder marries the dying Gabriel Rockwell. In *Menfreya*, *Wuthering Heights* is specifically mentioned as one of the novels from which the narrator,

Harriet Delvaney, cannot be separated. She regards it as a novel of endurance, emphasising her character as a woman who has much to endure. In *Secret for a Nightingale*, discussed in detail in Chapter Two, Holt appropriates Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in terms of plot and character, but also in terms of the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society. In all of these instances, the readers' experience is altered by a knowledge of the hypotexts.

A full exploration of all the intertexts in Holt's work is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, close study reveals that "all the Victorians" she referred to encompass an enormous range. It includes Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Richard Burton, Robert Browning, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Stephen Hawker, Thomas Hood, Henry James, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Arthur Wing Pinero, Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Oscar Wilde and Ellen Wood. In addition, if the 'Victorian' in neo-Victorianism is extended to the long nineteenth century, as is mooted in current criticism by Kohlke (*Trauma* 10) and Cox (*Neo-Victorianism* 165), Holt's intertexts also encompass Lord Byron, John Keats, Mary Shelley, the Newgate Calendar and Newgate fiction.[17]

[17] Many examples of intertextual use of these authors can be found. The following is not an exhaustive list but it serves to support the claim. Holt's prominent use of transgressive women throughout her novels echo Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley; Richard Burton is explicitly referred to in *Secret For A Nightingale* (124, 147); Robert Browning's poem "Pippa's Song" is explicitly given as the source of the narrator's name in *The Judas Kiss* (15); Wilkie Collins is a primary intertext for Holt and some examples of explicit mentions include *The Shivering Sands* (219) and *The Silk Vendetta* (118), whilst themes of domestic abuse echoing *The Woman in White* are investigated in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis; Charles Dickens is explicitly mentioned in *Mistress of Mellyn* (80) and the character of Sybil Stacey in *The Shivering* Sands is clearly a derivative of Dickens' Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's mention of the real-life poisoner Dr Edward Pritchard in "The Speckled Band" is echoed by Holt's creation of transgressive doctors including Dr Damien Adair in *Secret for a Nightingale* and Dr Deveril Smith in *Kirkland Revels;* Robert Stephen Hawker's "The Song of the Western Men" is quoted in *Mistress of Mellyn* (165); Thomas Hood's poem "The Song of the Shirt" is quoted in *The Shivering Sands* (246) and *Secret for a Nightingale* (226); Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is echoed by Holt's creation of a transgressive child, Alice, in *The Shivering* Sands; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Reaper and the Flowers" is quoted in *The Judas Kiss* (13), "The Children's Hour" is quoted in *The Shivering Sands* (58) and "Hiawatha" helps to form a bond between the narrator and her charge in *Mistress of Mellyn* (163); Arthur Wing Pinero's "Two Hundred a Year" appears in *Time of the Hunter's Moon* (159); there are echoes of Edgar Allen Poe's anthropomorphised houses in many of Holt's novels including *The Secret Woman* and there are also echoes of the link between the family name and the name of the house in, for example, *Mistress of Mellyn* and *Menfreya*; songs based on Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poems appear in *Mistress of Mellyn* (58); Oscar Wilde's "A Woman of No Importance" appears in *Lord of the Far Island* (40) and Ellen Wood's *The Channings*, *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* and *East Lynne* are all read by the narrator, Lenore, in *The Silk Vendetta,* leading her to think that her situation is "really like something out of Mrs Henry Wood's books" (22). In addition, if the 'Victorian' in neo-Victorianism is extended to the long nineteenth century, as is

The intertexts are more than simple mentions or quotations. They show an assumption of a knowledgeable reader who will be able to interpret the intertexts and use them as guides, or sometimes false guides, through the novels. Heilmann and Llewellyn raise the point when they suggest that the knowledgeable reader "will acknowledge these points of reference and may, at some moments in the narrative, be led astray (or prevented from being led astray) by assumptions" (17). Holt often uses intertexts to help the reader, for example by giving an insight into character as mentioned above, or by suggesting a particular reading of a novel. In *Lord of the Far Island* (1975), for instance, the narrator, Ellen Kellaway, goes to the theatre and sees Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893). The theme of Wilde's play is illegitimacy and this calls attention to the same theme in *Lord of the Far Island*. Moreover, it points the reader to Silva, who is apparently a woman of no importance in the novel since she does not appear until the last few pages of the novel, although she is mentioned throughout. This clue alerts the knowing reader to the importance of the seemingly unimportant woman, which helps them to discover the motive, and therefore the criminal, behind the attempted murder which features in the novel.

At other times, intertexts are employed to deliberately mislead the reader. In *The Secret Woman* Holt assumes a reader who is familiar with *The Moonstone* and uses that knowledge against them, suggesting that the narrator, Anna Brett, murdered her aunt whilst sleepwalking. In *The Moonstone*, Franklin Blake commits a theft whilst under hypnosis; in *The Secret Woman*, Anna wakes up to find herself standing next to her bed on the night her aunt is murdered and wonders where she has been in her somnambulistic state. To a reader

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mooted in current criticism by Kohlke (*Trauma* 10) and Cox (*Neo-Victorianism* 165), Holt's intertexts also encompass Lord Byron, John Keats, Mary Shelley, the Newgate Calendar and Newgate fiction: Byron's *Don Juan* provides the title for *Spring of the Tiger*, a fact revealed by the novel's villainess (369); Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is quoted in *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* (43), with Holt talking back to Keats' poem by creating the female narrator as the counterpart of Keats' knight ; Shelley's *Frankenstein* is perceptively revealed as an influence, by Bayer-Berenbaum, of *On the Night of the Seventh Moon*, as previously mentioned in this thesis, and the Newgate calendar, together with Newgate fiction, can be seen to influence the crimes in Holt's novels, as discussed in Chapter Four.

unfamiliar with *The Moonstone* the information about Anna's sleepwalking seems trivial and unimportant, even extraneous. However, to the knowing reader it provides a red herring, pointing to Anna's guilt when in fact she is innocent.

In *Spring of the Tiger* the title is used both to help and hinder the reader. "Spring of the tiger" is an excerpt from Byron's "Don Juan" (1819). If the Victorian era is to be strictly applied then the poem falls outside the scope of neo-Victorianism. However, its importance for *Spring of the Tiger* lends support to the arguments of critics including Kohlke and Cox, that neo-Victorianism should refer to the nineteenth-century as a whole. Part of Byron's poem is quoted by the murderess Celia Herringford (also known as Celia Hansen):

> Alas! the love of women! it is known
> To be a lovely and a fearful thing;
> For all of theirs upon that die is thrown,
> And if 't is lost, life hath no more to bring
> To them but mockeries of the past alone,
> And their revenge is as the tiger's spring,
> Deadly, and quick, and crushing . . . (368-369)

Those readers who recognise the title as an allusion to "Don Juan" are given a clue that the novel is about a woman's revenge from the start, but they are misled by being prepared for the revenge of a lover. At the end of the novel, Celia declares: "The poet speaks of the love of a woman for a man. The love of a daughter for her parents can be as great" (368-369). The novel's title is therefore a clue as to the motive for murder, love, but an exercise in misdirection when discerning the identity of the murderer.

Whether giving the readers helpful clues or misdirecting them, Holt relies on the reader's knowledge of the precursor texts in order to manipulate them, suggesting that Holt

was targeting a knowledgeable readership.[18] This is not the only element of her work which problematises the perception of her as an author of popular fiction, however. *Spring of the Tiger* is also notable for a further and more complex engagement with neo-Victorianism. It foregrounds the practise of 'gaslighting' which features in Patrick Hamilton's 1938 neo-Victorian play *Gaslight*. In Hamilton's play, Jack Manningham tries to convince his wife that she is going mad by hiding or moving things and then claiming that she is responsible. When she protests that she does not remember moving anything, he claims that, if she cannot remember it, then she must be going mad. In *Spring of the Tiger*, Celia 'gaslights' the narrator, Sarah Ashington, in order to inflict psychological torment. She is seeking revenge because Sarah's mother had an affair with her father, which eventually resulted in her mother's madness and her father's suicide. *Spring of the Tiger* therefore has an intertextual engagement with both Victorian and neo-Victorian literary endeavours as it draws on both Byron's "Don Juan" and on Hamilton's neo-Victorian play.

In a similar way, informed readers can spot a double layer of appropriation in Holt's *The Secret Woman* since it echoes *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well as *Jane Eyre*.[19] Similarly, Holt's use of *Rebecca* echoes an appropriation of an appropriation, as well as the source text. *Rebecca*'s 1938 publication date means that Holt cannot mention it in her Victorian-set novels. However, it is mentioned in publicity material, reviews and criticism. A 1961 advertisement in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, placed by the publishers, promotes *Mistress of Mellyn* as a "[s]uperb new novel with that rare and appealing 'Rebecca' touch" (William Collins). In all three novels, a young woman goes to an isolated house where she uncovers a

[18] The novels can be read on two levels. They can be enjoyed without this information. However, they can only be fully understood with this knowledge.

[19] This double appropriation can be extended to include *Lady Audley's Secret*, itself influenced by *Jane Eyre*.

mystery surrounding the hero's first wife. In *Jane Eyre* the first wife is still alive, albeit mad and confined to the attic, whilst in *Rebecca* and *Mistress of Mellyn*, the first wife is dead. In the latter two novels, a mutilated body from a tragic accident, the first a drowning and the second a train crash, is knowingly misidentified by the murderer. In these double appropriations, Holt puts different iterations of Brontë's seminal text in dialogue with each other as well as with her own novel, creating a three-way conversation.

A further complication of Holt's current status is that her authorial interests have an unremarked convergence with late twentieth-century literary criticism, problematising the perception of her as an author of popular fiction. Her intertextual use of authors such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood presents an artistic and imaginative counterpart to the activities of critics as they turned their attention to sensation fiction. Since Holt turned her intertextual attention to these authors in the 1960s, some of her novels predate critical interest. Others appear alongside criticism concerned with the same authors. Jessica Cox draws attention to the fact that "[t]he 1970s was a pivotal decade in terms of scholarship on sensation fiction – and in particular in the process of recovering the female sensationalists and their work" (*Victorian* xi). Cox cites William H. Marshal's *Wilkie Collins* (1970), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Robert Lee Woolf's biography of Braddon, *Sensational Victorian* (1979) and Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar* (1980) as pivotal criticism. The 1980s saw further interest in the sensation novel, particularly with Patrick Brantlinger's "What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel?'" (1982) Jonathan Loesberg's "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction" (1986), all of which were contemporaneous with Holt's period of activity. Shortly after Holt's death, whilst her novels were still appearing on the bestseller lists, Kelly Marsh's "The Neo-Sensation Novel: A Contemporary Genre in the Victorian Tradition" (1995) continued the critical interest.

Marsh's article was particularly significant in establishing neo-sensation fiction as a subgenre.

The interests of both Holt and literary critics cluster around certain texts, particularly *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley's Secret* and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*. Holt's novels contain frequent echoes of *Lady Audley's Secret*, not only in Celestine Nansellock from *Mistress of Mellyn*, but also in other transgressive female characters such as Chantel Loman in *The Secret Woman*. Echoes of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* can be heard in *Mistress of Mellyn*'s train crash, as previously mentioned, but there are further echoes in the characters of *East Lynne*'s Mrs Hare and *Menfreya*'s Lady Menfrey. Mrs Hare does not even feel able to order tea without her husband's approval because "she had no will; his, was all in all" (21) and Lady Menfrey habitually looks to her husband before giving an order. *East Lynne*, as well as some of Wood's other novels, are mentioned by name in Holt's *The Silk Vendetta*. The narrator, Lenore, habitually reads to her employer Lady Sallonger and they enjoy a variety of novels together, including Ellen Wood's *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* (22), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (118) and *The Moonstone* (130), as well as Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (22). When Lenore discusses *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* and *East Lynne* with her friend Cassie, they "wept quietly for the tribulations of those unfortunate ladies" (27). There is here an expectation that readers will be familiar with the tribulations and will therefore understand why the girls weep.

East Lynne also appears in *The Time of the Hunter's Moon* (1983). One of the minor characters, Marcia Martindale, is an actress who has acted in the stage play of *East Lynne*. The narrator, Cordelia Grant, recounts a visit to the actress:

> Her greatest success had been Lady Isabel in *East Lynne*. She stood up and burying her face in her hands declaimed: 'Dead. Dead. And never called me Mother.'

> ‘That was the deathbed scene,’ she told me. ‘It used to entrance the house. There wasn’t a dry eye in the place. I played Pinero’s *Two Hundred a Year*. Lovely. I liked drama best. But there was nothing to touch *East Lynne*. That was a certain success’ (188).

The fact that Holt makes Marcia an actress in *The Time of the Hunter’s Moon* shows the depth of her knowledge concerning Victorian novels and stage plays. The line: ‘Dead. Dead. And never called me Mother’ is the most famous line from the play, but does not appear in the novel. Criticism in Wood points this out explicitly, but in making Cordelia an actress who recites the line, Holt subtly makes the same point.

Holt’s novels, then, demonstrate the two layers of readership identified by Heilmann and Llewellyn. Some readers will not be familiar with the intertexts and will therefore not hear all the echoes of earlier novels. Others will be familiar with them and will therefore have a different reading experience. Heilmann and Llewellyn “recognise that an assertion about divided readerships, between the ‘ordinary’ reader and the more ‘knowledgeable’ reader, is potentially controversial” but defend their view by saying that “[t]his differentiation into diverse reading experiences and the emphasis on the ‘knowing’ reader, however, is prompted by the games-playing of the novels themselves” (17-18).

It is not Heilmann and Llewellyn’s acknowledgement of the difference between readerships that is controversial, but their elitist assumption that ‘professional’ readerships are more knowledgeable than unprofessional readerships. The limited and dismissive amount of critical attention given to Holt demonstrates that professional readers are not always adept at spotting intertexts. Conversely, Holt’s assumption that her general readers’ will be familiar with Victorian fiction and will therefore be able to spot the intertexts suggests that Heilmann and Llewellyn’s assertions about general readers’ ignorance are also

overstated. Their final argument, that "metafictionality [is] at the core of the neo-Victorian *modus operandi*" (18) unwittingly presents one of the strongest arguments for recognising Holt's early manifestation of neo-Victorianism, since metafictionality is at the heart of her work.

Chapter Two: The Meaning of History

"What happened a hundred years ago is still having
its effect on today."

—*The Shivering Sands*

The past is a haunting presence in all of Victoria Holt's novels. When Napier Stacy tells Caroline Verlaine that "[w]hat happened a hundred years ago is still having its effect on today" (168), he could almost be offering a prophetic comment on neo-Victorian fiction. At the time of the novel's first publication in 1969, "a hundred years ago" was the middle of the Victorian era; Napier's comment therefore draws attention to the lingering presence of the Victorians, which is one of the main concerns of neo-Victorian fiction. At the time, though, neo-Victorianism had not been mooted in literary criticism and Holt's novels could therefore not be claimed to a neo-Victorian discourse. Historical fiction, on the other hand, was a recognised genre and critics such as Kathryn Sutherland and Diana Wallace[20] position Holt as an author of historical fiction. This chapter therefore interrogates the role that history, and particularly the Victorian era, plays in Holt's novels. It investigates the similarities and differences between the two discourses, with particular reference to *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* and *Secret for a Nightingale*. As a part of this differentiation, it draws on the novels that Eleanor Hibbert produced under the pseudonym of Jean Plaidy as well as the novels she wrote under the pseudonym of Victoria Holt. It then uses Holt's work to test the boundaries between historical and neo-Victorian fiction and draws conclusions as to the most fitting discourse for her work.

[20] Wallace also considers Holt as an author of Gothic fiction, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Overlaps and Discontinuities: Historical and neo-Victorian Fiction

Historical fiction has, until recently, received relatively little critical attention when compared to other genres. Sutherland and Wallace attribute this neglect to gender bias. Rightly pointing out that the genre has been dominated by women writers and readers, Sutherland argues that the prevalence of female authorship has been "an obstacle to the form's serious valuation" ("Scott"). Diana Wallace concurs, saying: "any form associated with women readers and writers [. . . has] been neglected in critical terms" (*Historical* 3). Sarah Waters, herself an author of neo-Victorian fiction, agrees, remarking that "one of the reasons why the historical novel has received such poor and patchy critical attention" is that it has been "a genre dominated by women" ("Woolfskins" 176).

Although there is limited critical work to draw on in this field, some twentieth-century critics including Herbert Butterfield, George Lukács, Avrom Fleishman and Harry Shaw have turned their attention to the genre.[21] In the twenty-first century, Diana Wallace has notably focused on female-authored historical fiction whilst James de Groot's *The Historical Novel* (2010) considers historical fiction as a whole. Of the aforementioned critics, Diana Wallace is the only one to mention Holt. Although de Groot does not mention the novels Eleanor Hibbert wrote under the name of Victoria Holt, however, it does mention the novels she wrote under the pseudonym of Jean Plaidy.

Her novels written under the name of Plaidy differ from those written under the name of Holt in that they deal with history's real-life (in)famous women rather than fictional historical 'everywomen'. However, they share a theme of female-centric history and an interest in women's sacrificial role in a patriarchal society. The Plaidy novels rectify the

[21] Butterfield, Lukács, Fleishman and Shaw were writing in 1924, 1923, 1972 and 1983 respectively. Butterfield approaches historical fiction as a form of historiography whereas Lukács adopts a Marxist approach. Fleishman and Shaw view the historical novel through the lens of literary criticism.

gender imbalance of traditional historical thinking by placing women at the centre of events. Significantly, as Plaidy, she drew on the scholarship of Victorian *female* historian Agnes Strickland for her research.[22] For much of the twentieth century, and certainly when Holt (and Plaidy) were writing, male-centric history and historiography relegated women to supporting roles, if they mentioned them at all. Additionally, the domestic and social spheres in which they were traditionally most dominant (because they were denied entry to public spheres) were regarded as unimportant and 'lightweight'. Plaidy, by contrast, puts women at the centre of the action by writing fictionalised biographies of real historical women, usually the Queens of England. The *Sunday Times* remarked: "Jean Plaidy, by the skilful blending of superb storytelling and meticulous attention to authenticity of detail and depth of characterisation, has become one of the country's most widely-read novelists" (qtd. in Dalby 17). Her work is important in redressing the gender balance by demonstrating that women occupied positions of authority and power throughout history, not simply as child-bearing consorts but as powerful women in their own right.

Wallace argues that Plaidy's portrayal of England's queens is "reductive", saying that "[i]n Plaidy's novels the shaping forces of history are reduced to inter-personal relations. . . . History is narrowed down to the family relations of Royalty" (Historical 137, 138). De Groot offers a more perceptive view, arguing that "Plaidy's work is politicised" (73). He refers particularly to her 1949 novel *Murder Most Royal*, in which "she gives [Anne] Boleyn agency as a mover of history and as an individual woman literally brought down by jealous and unscrupulous men" (73). He points out that Plaidy "explicitly" calls Anne Boleyn's treatment at the hands of Henry VIII "murder, and likens him to a common criminal preying upon innocent women" (71). By presenting Anne as a victim of men, Plaidy is foregrounding

[22] Holt may have been influenced by the late Victorian Eminent Women Series, which consists of biographical volumes concerning famous women, written by women.

one of the recurring themes in Holt's work, a subject discussed particularly in Chapter Four. Under both pseudonyms, then, her work is deeply concerned with gender and power relationships, showing the vulnerability and indeed victimisation of women in a patriarchal society.

It is further important to note that Plaidy was writing at a time when women were largely excluded from history altogether and that her work as a whole represents a mammoth undertaking, retelling several centuries of English history through the eyes of its notable female characters. As she herself commented in an interview: "I am gradually . . . filling in the tapestry of history, and if I live to be 120 I shall probably finish it" ("Inside London" 4). In a further interview, she said that she was "[b]ringing knowledge and understanding of the past, especially insights into unchanging human nature. I have one ambition to complete before I die. To cover a panorama of English history from the Norman Conquest to the death of Victoria. After that I feel you're too close for a proper perspective" (Smith 14). De Groot rightly argues that defining Plaidy's novels as historical romances is "problematic" because of their complexity and political engagement (73). Similarly, her concerns with perspective show a thoughtfulness that is at odds with the novels' pejorative label as romances.

There are some areas of overlap between historical and neo-Victorian fiction. At its broadest definition, historical fiction is simply fiction which is set at least two generations (between forty and sixty years) in the past (Fleishman 3); or, alternatively, sixty years or more before its publication date (Wallace *Historical* 133-4). Shaw avoids specifying a date, providing a deliberately vague definition that "historical novels are works that in some way represent historical milieu" which "leaves open the possibility that history may mean different things in different works" (20, 22). De Groot remarks: "[h]istorical novelists concentrate on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived" (3). All of

Holt's novels can be deemed historical fiction by these reckonings. However, their Victorian setting and their focus on marginalised characters also suggests that they are neo-Victorian.

Acknowledging the setting of many of Holt's novels, Wallace asks why the basic plot of *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* (the former with its almost contemporary setting and the latter with its contemporary setting), should be set in the past (*Historical* 133). Although Wallace's question is pertinent, she does not go far enough. The plot, when used, (and it must be remembered that many of Holt's novels do not use this plot) is not simply rewritten as history, it is rewritten as *Victorian* history. The answer to Wallace's question, then, is bound up in the difference between the term 'historical fiction' and the rise of the term 'neo-Victorian'. Shaw rightly says that "we cannot make sense of historical fiction unless we recognize that history plays a number of distinctly different roles in historical novels" (Shaw 22), and to understand Holt's novels it is necessary to recognise the role that the Victorian setting plays.

Whilst neo-Victorian texts can be broadly considered as historical fiction, historical texts set in the Victorian period are not always judged to be neo-Victorian. A further complication is that, as Andrea Kirchknopf rightly points out, 'historical fiction' is itself constantly being redefined (60). Of the twentieth-century critics, Herbert Butterfield's views on historical fiction are closest to Holt's own, perhaps unsurprisingly as they were of the same generation (Butterfield was born in 1900 and Holt in 1906). Butterfield defines historical fiction as "a 'form' of history . . . a way of treating the past", going on to argue that the era is conveyed by an "atmosphere" rather than a recital of historical events (Butterfield 3, 97). He takes the view that the nebulous quality of atmosphere "eludes the analyst" and that "[p]robably the novelist most successful in producing it would be unable to describe how the thing is done" (Butterfield 97). Coming very close to Butterfield's attitudes, Holt reveals that she never uses research assistants but always does her own research because "delving

into the past is not merely collecting facts, but actually absorbing the spirit of the age. I feel it is very necessary for me to capture that. It is something vague, intangible, which must be suggested; and is entirely a personal feeling that I have to discover and impart to the reader" (Harris n.p.). Holt's "spirit of the age" and Butterfield's "atmosphere" define what is, for them, one of the most important elements of historical fiction.

Holt's early novels, published in the 1960s, display this spirit of the age rather than a historical background.[23] Speaking on the radio programme *Desert Island Discs* in 1972, Holt said of the novels she had written by that time: "I don't call them historical novels . . . they have fictitious characters, set against a period background. It's an authentic background, but it's period, as compared with historical." When the interviewer suggests that she means a "vague" background, she responds: "Vague background. Yes. Everything, the things they used are the things that would be used at that time, but history does not really play a big part in it" (Plomley n.p.). Her novels show a distinct change after 1972, however, when some of her novels have specific historical backgrounds including notable people and events.[24]

In contrast to Butterfield, Georg Lukács influentially relates historical fiction to historical process. Lukács is using historical novels to illustrate his argument that historical events arise from the conflict of social forces, rather than offering an analysis of historical fiction *per se* (Fleishman 3). Nevertheless, Fleishman builds on Lukács when he attempts to define the historical novel by formalising "unspoken assumption[s]" about the genre (Fleishman 3). He argues that, as well as being set at least two generations in the past, the

[23] The exception to this is *The Queen's Confession: The Story of Marie-Antoinette*.

[24] There is no clear reason for the change. It is possible that the vocalisation of women's demands at the 1970 First Women's Liberation conference made fictionalising the issues less urgent, so that Holt felt able to venture beyond the purely domestic settings and include a broader view of life. It is also possible that, after the anachronous *The Queen's Confession: The Story of Marie-Antoinette* in 1968, Holt and her publishers were hoping to attract (or retain) readers of her Plaidy novels. It could also be that, having written so many novels, Holt felt the need for new geographical backgrounds to keep her writing fresh and to keep her readers engaged.

historical novel "must include a number of 'historical' events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters [. . . and] on *prima facie* grounds . . . include at least one [. . . real historical] figure" (Fleishman 3). He goes on to argue that historical novels need to show "the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force" (Fleishman 15), explaining that this should involve a "sociological sense of both past and present, a recognition that societies are interrelated systems which change through time and that individuals are profoundly affected by their places within those systems" (Shaw 25). However, such narrow views put a great deal of pressure on the historical novel, forcing it into an almost fictional recounting of fact; or, as Harry Shaw rightly points out, expecting "the historical novelist [to] accomplish[es] something more like the task Butterfield sets the historian" (Shaw 25). Indeed, Butterfield differentiates between the historian and the historical novelist by arguing that: "to the historian the past is the whole process of development that leads up to the present; to the novelist it is a strange world to tell tales about" (Butterfield 113).

Feminist critics offered a radical interpretation of 'history' when, in 1970, the term 'herstory' appeared. 'Herstory' is a play on words, highlighting the apparently gendered nature of the word 'history', which implies that it tells 'his story'. In doing so, it regards history as a series of masculine personages directing masculine events. 'Herstory', on the other hand, tells 'her story', privileging women's experiences of the past. The term 'herstory' was coined by Robin Morgan in *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), and is used in "academic scholarship, in feminist discourse, and on popular feminist artefacts" (Mallinson 430). It has been criticised because 'history' is derived from the Latin historia, rather than being a composite of 'his' and 'story', but its intention is not etymological. It is, instead, meant to "stir attitudes about language and history-writing, to signal a re-envisioning of language and history by and for women" (Mallinson 431).

Whether Holt considered herself a feminist is difficult to determine, although she was not a feminist activist. However, as Susan Rowland rightly points out: "A writer need not call herself a feminist . . . for her writing to be concerned with 'feminist' questions of power, gender and the social roles of women" (157). Holt's novels lend themselves to feminist readings as they foreground feminist themes of women's oppression; furthermore, by focusing on the female narrators and other female characters, they tell 'herstory' rather than 'history'. Holt was certainly aware of the concept of patriarchy and its ramifications for the women it controlled, as evidenced by the fact that one of the girls in *The Judas Kiss* gives her puritanical, controlling grandfather the nickname "Patriarch" (56).

Wallace considers the role of 'herstory' in her analysis of British woman writers from 1900-2000. However, she uses Fleishman's views to determine whether Holt's novels can be justifiably described as historical. She determines that "[a]ccording to Fleishman's definition of the genre, Holt's modern Gothics are barely 'historical novels' at all" (*Historical* 133) because "[t]here are no real historical personages . . . or 'historical' events" (134). However, Wallace's arguments here need to be treated with caution, not only because they rely on one critic, but also because her consideration of Holt is necessarily limited: Holt is only one of many authors considered in her huge survey of the woman's historical novel and, moreover, her focus is primarily on the novels Holt produced between 1960 and 1972.

Wallace is largely right in saying that Holt's novels contain no real historical personages since most of the novels do not include historical personages or events. Most of Holt's novels are therefore not examples of historiographic metafiction as Hutcheon defines it, since Hutcheon's definition concerns novels which "lay claim to historical events and personages" (*Poetics* 5). A few of Holt's novels refer briefly to historical figures but these figures are not the focus of the novels. However, a small number of Holt's novels which are excluded from Wallace's consideration do portray historical events. *On the Night of the*

Seventh Moon is set against a backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871; *Secret For A Nightingale* sees the narrator becoming a nurse in the Crimean War of 1853-1856; *The India Fan* involves its major characters in the events of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857[25] and *Snare of Serpents* includes elements of the Boer War of 1899-1902.

The degree of self-consciousness in these novels is debatable. *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* and *The India Fan* can, with some justification, be regarded as historiographic metafiction, since they are both intertextual and can be regarded as laying claim to past events whilst at the same time dealing with the unknowability of the past. *On the Night of the Seventh Moon*, discussed more fully below, is self-conscious implicitly and its status as historiographic metafiction is therefore open to question. *The India Fan*, however, explicitly reflects on the fact that the truth of history can never be truly known: the narrator draws specific attention to different accounts of the English Civil War, concluding that the individual must make up their own mind when trying to decide which version is closest to the truth (135). It then relates the notion of questionable historical 'fact' to conflicting views of the Indian Mutiny (which is also known as the Sepoy Rebellion and India's First War of Independence). This explicit questioning of historical accounts provides the self-consciousness that Hutcheon includes as a part of her definition of historiographic metafiction. *The India Fan* is also highly intertextual, with *The Moonstone* being an obvious influence (Jones 16), and so it can with some justification be considered an example of historiographic metafiction, since Hutcheon includes intertextuality as one of the features of historiographic metafiction in its awareness of fiction as a "human construct" (*Poetics* 5). However, the main body of Holt's work cannot be regarded as historiographic metafiction as Hutcheon defines it because it does not include real historical personages and events. Holt's

[25] For more on *The India Fan* see Jones, Amanda. (2019). "Madness, Monks and Mutiny: Neo-Victorianism in the Work of Victoria Holt." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 12(1), 1–27. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3470919

entire *oeuvre* being regarded as pioneering neo-Victorian fiction rests on wider, more recent definitions of neo-Victorianism.

Significantly, Holt's choice of events in these novels anticipates the post-colonial interests of neo-Victorian fiction: many later novels, by a variety of authors already identified as neo-Victorian, cluster around the same historical nodes. For example, Holt's *Secret for a Nightingale*, discussed more fully later in this chapter, anticipates Beryl Bainbridge's Booker-nominated *Master Georgie* (1998) and Katharine McMahon's *The Rose of Sebastopol* (2007) in their revisitation of the Crimean War; *The India Fan* anticipates Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny* (2007) in its portrayal of the Indian Mutiny (which is also known as the Sepoy Rebellion, the Indian Rebellion and Indian's First War of Independence) and *Snare of Serpents* anticipates neo-Victorianism's concerns with the Boer War. Whilst Holt's use of historical events helps to qualify her novels as historical according to Fleishman, the specific events chosen ally her more firmly with the neo-Victorian discourse.

More importantly, however, Wallace argues that Holt's novels have no concept of "history as a shaping force" (*Historical* 134). She specifically includes *Menfreya* in this analysis. However, as Chapter Three of this thesis demonstrates, *Menfreya* shows gender history to be a shaping force: Harriet's life is shaped by living in a patriarchal society, as are the lives of the other predominantly female characters. Fleishman himself includes gender in his thinking when discussing some of the historical novels written in the early twentieth century. He remarks on their theme of "lovely womanhood cruelly broken by the force of historical movements and men" (208). He perceptively notes that novels featuring "suffering womanhood" are not simply demonstrating "a sentimental period taste or a predilection for fictional romance, but an attitude towards history that derives from an attitude toward man –

or at least toward woman" (209). He goes further, arguing persuasively that "[h]istory is seen here as mechanical, greed-directed, and masculine; human values are feminine" (209).[26]

Holt's work is therefore closer to Fleishman's arguments than Wallace acknowledges. Holt's novels demonstrate the shaping force of history in the public sphere by scrutinising the legal framework of laws dealing with marriage, divorce and property, as well as other similar laws which are devised by men and which shape, and indeed control, women's lives down the generations. Where Holt differs from Fleishman's views is in her presentation of ordinary women rather than the Queens to whom Fleishman refers. Holt instead filters the historical 'suffering womanhood' through the lives of the historical 'everywoman', showing history as a shaping (and indeed limiting) force on all women, regardless of position in life. Moreover, Holt's novels reveal and recreate the atmosphere of fear this second-class citizenship generates, permeating her novels with a feeling of anxiety and dread.

Although some of Holt's novels contain historical events, Wallace is right in pointing out that many of them do not. However, recent criticism in historical fiction has moved away from a demand for historical personages and events. In doing so, it overlaps with neo-Victorian criticism by foregrounding the experiences of marginalised characters. Sutherland's revisitation of Holt, as well as other female authors in the latter half of the twentieth century, points out that they were using historical novels as "a space for mapping alternative histories, for expressing dissatisfaction with History's orthodox and professional faces, and for supplementing the official record with the lives of the marginalized or those who appear not to have been there at all. Whose story will history tell? How many stories will it tell?" ("Scott", capital in original).

[26] Fleishman is here specifically referring to Hewlett's *The Queen's Quair: Or, The Six Years Tragedy* (London and New York, 1904).

Wallace's focus on historical events and historical detail in Holt's novels, or the lack thereof, leads her to conclude that "the shaping forces in these texts are desire and fear: the desire for a man, and the fear that he will turn out to be a murderer" (*Historical* 134). The historical setting, for Wallace, is "a fantasy space for romance but it is a romance which will ensure the heroine her place in (family) 'history'" (*Historical* 135). Her conclusion is both limiting and unconvincing. A plethora of detail, as Kate Mitchell rightly points out, simply "produces the past in terms of its objects, as a series of clichés . . . playing nineteenth-century dress-ups" (Mitchell 3).[27] Holt's novels show the shaping force of history in terms of gender politics. Reducing the novels to a fantasy space for romance places too much emphasis on the romance, which is often in the background of Holt's novels. It fails to acknowledge the extent of the literary traditions in which Holt was knowingly working, shown by her extensive use of intertextuality and it gives no weight to the novels' gender concerns or indeed the more noticeable elements of their plots including prominent crimes. Relegating history to 'family history' takes no account of the wider historical concerns of the novels, including the prominent historiographical concerns discussed later in this chapter.

The work of Butterfield, Lukács, Fleishman, Morgan, Shaw and Wallace demonstrates that Kirchknopf is right to suggest that the term 'historical fiction' is constantly being redefined. The question arises as to whether Holt's novels, as with other novels which are now usually defined as neo-Victorian, could simply be embraced within a redefinition of historical fiction. However, as Kirchknopf rightly points out: "[t]erms like historical novel or historiographic metafiction . . . do not specify the age that is being refashioned" (Kirchknopf 66).

[27] Mitchell is here engaging with questions of pastiche.

The early twenty-first century saw a number of attempts to address this issue, specifying not only the Victorian age but also the kinds of engagement which merit a specialist term. Bormann argues that "[a] neo-Victorian novel is a fictional text which creates meaning from the background of awareness of time as flowing and as poised uneasily between the Victorian past and the present" (qtd. in Kirchknopf 63). The advantage of this definition, as Kirchknopf rightly points out, is that it establishes a relationship between history and fiction with particular reference to the Victorian age, instead of a less specific historical period.

Arguably the greatest difference between the two discourses, however, is neo-Victorianism's focus on intertextuality. Whereas historical fiction explores any period of history, neo-Victorian fiction explores the Victorian era *and its literature*. Historical fiction may be set in the Victorian era but it has no requirement to interest itself in literature. However, revisiting, recreating, challenging or otherwise talking back to Victorian literature is one of the key features of neo-Victorian fiction. For example, Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trilogy adopts the form of Victorian sensation fiction, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* creates a history for the minor character Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, and *Possession* creates a fictitious Victorian poet.[28]

The following sections will therefore investigate the extent of Holt's distinctly neo-Victorian use of history in three representative novels. All three novels focus on marginalised characters and privilege 'her story' over 'his story'; all three have a prominent use of intertextuality. *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* engages with the trope of standing stones, which appears in a range of canonical Victorian fiction. It uses the trope to create a legend,

[28] *Possession* features two fictional Victorian poets, R H Ash and Christabel LaMotte, and intertwines their stories with those of two fictional twentieth-century academics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, who are studying the poets.

which is presented as a mode of historiography that oppresses women. *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* concerns a woman's struggle to uncover the truth, and the true historiography, about an eventful seven-day period in her life. Her history is filtered, first through the lens of fairy tales, and then through the lens of the Gothic. *Secret for a Nightingale* uses Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a form of historiography which reveals the lived experience of a Victorian woman's life. It talks back to Brontë's novel by interrogating the Victorian myth of The Angel in the House. Specifically, it investigates the role of woman as carer, emphasised through the person of Florence Nightingale and her 'Nightingale' nurses during the Crimean War. In using the Crimean War as a background, Holt anticipates the neo-Victorian interest in this critical historical juncture.

Encased in Stone: Historiography as Oppression in *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*

The Legend of the Seventh Virgin is Holt's fourth novel and her third neo-Victorian novel. It follows *Bride of Pendorric*, which is her only contemporary novel. The reasons for the contemporary setting for *Bride of Pendorric* are unclear. So, too, are the reasons for her returning to the historical setting, although it was probably inspired by her love of history. Certainly, *Bride of Pendorric* was a success in terms of sales and so the return to the Victorian era was not necessary from a commercial point of view. The 1963 *Kirkus* review of *Menfreya* makes this clear: "When the author tried the same vaporous approach in a modern setting, it was so bad we tittered over our typewriters--and watched it careen up the bestseller lists" ("Menfreya").

The narrator of *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, Kerensa Carlee, is marginalised by both gender and class. Her parents are very poor people and, when she is orphaned as a child, she takes her younger brother to stay with her grandmother, who lives in a small cottage on

the edge of a wealthy estate. The novel is not concerned with historical events or famous people. Instead, Holt foregrounds the role of history in the oppression of women. Notably, she uses prehistoric standing stones as her method of engagement, with the stones forming both a setting and a symbol.

Holt's fascination with standing stones, or megaliths, has not been recognised and yet it is a recurring trope in her work. As their name suggests, standing stones consist of slabs of stone standing on end which typically date from approximately 2,000 to 1,000 BC. They vary in size and are often arranged in a line or a circle, with arguably the most famous example in Britain being Stonehenge. In featuring megaliths Holt is working in a long literary tradition which flourished particularly in the Victorian era; indeed, the word 'megalith' was coined in 1853. Joanne Parker's analysis of the relationship between megaliths and nineteenth-century literature is particularly illuminating. Pointing out that: "[f]rom a literary perspective . . . the nineteenth century is of crucial importance in the reception history of standing stones" (Parker 61), Parker examines the different uses to which megaliths are put in a variety of Victorian texts. In particular, they are used as symbols of transience, permanence and sacrifice.

In *Ivanhoe* (1819), Sir Walter Scott uses a fallen stone circle to show "the perpetual replacement of one civilisation by another" (Parker 54). He does so by introducing the Saxons sitting on a "'fallen druidical monument' [. . . which] has been dislodged and rolled down a hill" (Parker 54). Similarly, Grice's "Inscription for Lanyon Cromlech in its fallen state" (1832), uses the fallen megaliths to "represent the ephemeral, and the transience of human cultures" (Parker 54). By contrast, Coventry Patmore uses the stones to symbolise permanence: in "The Angel in the House" the poem's narrator:

> despised the Druid rocks
>
> That scowl'd their chill gloom from above,

Like churls whose stolid wisdom mocks

The lightness of immortal love (8:5 ll9-12).

Parker argues cogently that the stones here "seem[ing] to mock his earnest ardour with their long, antiquarian view of history and prehistory" (54).

Wordsworth's "Guilt and Sorrow" (1842) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) both use the stones as a symbol of sacrifice. Parker argues persuasively that, in the former, the stone circle of Stonehenge "is associated with a variety of oppressive forces . . . which together have conspired to crush the poor sailor and the other individuals he meets on the plain" whilst in the latter: "Stonehenge is also aligned with the patriarchal powers that destroy Tess" when she is arrested (57). In both instances, "the megalith comes to represent a cruelty intrinsic to human society at all periods – particularly in the present" (Parker 58).

Holt echoes and extends the work of Victorian authors by using the stones as symbols for the concerns of her own era. She presents them as symbols of permanence but also of sacrifice, thereby talking back to the "associations between megaliths, tyranny and the sacrifice of innocents, in nineteenth-century literature" (Parker 57). In *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* the stones become symbols of patriarchal cruelty and power which the narrator must rebel against if she is to find fulfilment and her true destiny. Instead of using the stone circle at Stonehenge, however, Holt creates a fictional stone circle in Cornwall where it seems a convincing feature of the landscape, since Cornwall is home to many such circles. Holt's use of a Cornish setting, then, is not simply a case of appropriating *Rebecca*, as Wallace suggests, but it is also a case of adding realism to the subject matter. On Cornwall's Bodmin Moor, for example at Minion, there are three stone circles known as the Hurlers; there is a line of standing stones near St Columb Major known as The Nine Maidens and at St Buryan there is a stone circle known as The Merry Maidens of Boleigh. The Hurlers are,

according to legend, men turned to stone for hurling (a traditional Cornish sport) on the Sabbath, whilst both sets of Maidens are, again according to legend, girls turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath. The legends in general, then, can be seen as a part of Sabbatarianism, which seeks to enforce the Christian commandment forbidding working (and, by extension, playing) on the Sabbath as it is a holy day.

Holt's concern, however, is gendered. She focuses exclusively on the petrification of women and invents her own legend which uses the women's fate as a symbol of female oppression by men. Although her stone circle and attendant legend are fictitious, they are nevertheless recognisably based on existing Cornish stones and tales. Her circle consists of six standing stones near the house of St. Larnston Abbas. The stones, known as the six virgins, are foregrounded on the first page of the novel: "it was not the house which was unique, for interesting as it was, there were many more in England, and even Cornwall, as interesting and as antiquated. It was the Six Virgins who made St. Larnston Abbas different from all the others" (5). The novel goes on to explain its own legend: "The story was that six novices and a nun had ceased to be virgins and the novices were driven from the convent. As they left they danced in the nearby meadow to show their defiance and because of this were turned into stones" (5).

Instead of being turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath, then, the women are turned to stone for losing their virginity. In creating this variation, Holt is extending female self-expression and pleasure to include not only dancing but also sex, using her invented legend to comment on the suppression and punishment of female sexuality. This oppression was an ongoing concern in the 1960s, when the sexual double standard was still very much apparent. The novel's narrator, Kerensa Carlee, rebels against this. In keeping with the novel's feminist concerns, Holt condones the virgins' defiance through Kerensa's reaction. When she stands by the stones, Kerensa thinks: "Standing there in the stillness of a hot

afternoon, I could believe that I was one of those poor virgins. I could well imagine that I could have been as sinful and having sinned and been found out I should have danced my defiance on the grass" (9).

Whilst using the legend to symbolise male dominance, Holt also uses it to turn a feminist eye on the gendered nature of 'history' and its claim to be an accurate view of the past. Holt's choice of the word 'legend' in the title is particularly apposite. Legend, rather than myth or tale for example, is defined as "a traditional story from the past which may or may not be true" (*OED* 414), giving it a blurred status between literature and history. The legend attached to her fictitious stones suggests that women who lose their virginity before marriage are subject to punishment, and that this has always been the case. The novel is used to first assert, and then challenge, the inevitability of patriarchal rules and attitudes from which there is no escape.

The assertion comes from the legend. The challenge comes from the Reverend Charles Martin, one of the minor characters, who points out that the story is "nonsense" because "the stones must have been in the meadow years before the convent was built for . . . they were older than Christianity" (6). The character of the Rev Martin represents one of Holt's comparatively few benevolent clergymen, since many of her novels feature the church as a repressive institution and present grim portraits of clergymen who derive from Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*. Holt's deviation from her grim clergymen is not without purpose. By absolving the church of responsibility, she traces the oppression of women further back in time to pre-Christianity. She then intensifies the notion of men crushing women by introducing and explaining the Cornish word for standing stones. They are: "the Menhirs – 'men' being the Cornish word for 'stone' and 'hir' for 'long'" (5). Holt's decision to include and translate the Cornish word is important here. By linking the word 'men' with 'stone', she plays on words and highlights the gendered significance of 'men' crushing women. In using

the standing stones in this way, Holt answers back to the Victorian era's patriarchal ideologies, particularly the way the era usurped history to present its ideologies as absolute: as being written in stone.

By challenging the truth of the legend, then, Holt engages directly with the nature of 'history' and shows that women have not only been oppressed *throughout* history but they have also been oppressed *by* history. As Sutherland and Wallace note, conventional history was traditionally written by men and therefore presented a masculine view of history, with masculine values.[29] Moreover, it enforced the erroneous idea that these values have pertained throughout time and are therefore an inescapable part of the natural order. Mid-twentieth century history implicitly put forward the view that women were unimportant by relegating them to minor roles or excluding them altogether from historical accounts. History's disservice to women is one of the recurring themes of Eleanor Hibbert's work and one she seeks to redress through her writing, not only under the pseudonym of Victoria Holt but also under the pseudonym of Jean Plaidy, as discussed earlier.

In the case of *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, the narrator Kerensa Carlee conforms and then rebels against the constraints put upon her by Victorian ideologies, which are represented by the unyielding standing stones. Coming from a very poor background, she aspires to greater things. As a young child, she wants to rise in the world both socially and economically, to marry and to become a mother. When the son of the landowning family takes an interest in her, she sees a chance to achieve her goals. Rejecting his advances, she makes it clear that she will only surrender her virginity to her husband. At this stage Kerensa is trapped by the written-in-stone rules of her society, despite her attraction to the rebellious

[29] The differences between masculine and feminine history are raised by Kristeva, who argues that men's time is linear whereas women's time is cyclical. Wallace persuasively applies this to Holt's work. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis, Holt's work also contains a suggestion that time is not only cyclical but also contemporaneous. Since contesting accepted views on time has obvious implications for history and the historical novel, more work needs to be done in this area.

virgins of the legend: her aspirations are frozen by the megalithic grip of Victorian patriarchy and its expectations for women. The son of the house finally offers her marriage and she is convinced that it is her own virtue that caused him to propose. So far, it seems as if Victorian ideologies of virginity and marriage have been successful for her. She possesses a strong character and the novel follows her through many years of her life as she becomes a wife and mother, ruling the neighbourhood. Kerensa is seemingly a Victorian success story. The poor cottage girl is now a married mother and the lady of the manor.

However, from this point onwards the novel unravels. The complicated plot leads her to eventually realise that her husband proposed to her because he thought, wrongly, that she had witnessed him committing murder. He therefore proposed in order to buy her silence. Knowing that she was aspirational, he saw marriage as a bribe to prevent her from telling what she had witnessed. He also knew that, as the law stood, wives could not testify against their husbands. Kerensa discovers, then, that her married life has been a lie. Once her eyes are opened to the realities of her situation, she sees her possessions and her position as a hollow shell. Her relationship with her son sours because he rejects the aspirational future she has mapped out for him in favour of becoming a country vet. When her husband dies, it seems as if she has lost everything. However, a male friend from her youth returns and she thinks that he will propose.

The novel once again looks set to conform to Victorian ideologies, and particularly the happy ending of Victorian fiction with a marriage for the heroine. Instead, however, he proposes to her friend. The novel reaches its climax when a madman tries to wall her up alive, subjecting her to the fate of the seventh virgin. It is only when she is rescued that she realises she has metaphorically walled herself up alive in her pursuit of wealth, marriage and motherhood and that she must, like the legendary virgins, reject the ideologies which have crushed her in order to discover her own form of happiness. No longer having the rigid

confines of society to guide her, she must make her own way into the future, seeking genuine fulfilment instead of that offered to her – or indeed imposed on her – by her society. Kerensa's escape from being literally walled up alive, then, symbolises her escape from being walled up alive in the patriarchal expectations which she has internalised. On the last page of the novel (depending on edition) she narrates: "So I have come out of the darkness. I am no longer walled in by the bricks which I laid with my own hands" (286). The bricks she has laid with her own hands are not physical but metaphorical, the confining and stifling walls of patriarchy. Whilst not rejecting the possibility of love in the future, she ends the novel as a happily single woman, who is open to the new experiences the future will bring. This ending is unusual for Holt, which normally ends with some sort of romantic relationship at least implied for the narrator; as such, it provides an example of the variety in her work.

The parallels with the 1960s are obvious here, as women begin once again to reject the confining roles of wife and mother and to seek fulfilment outside the home. By having Kerensa conform, and then rebel, Holt shows that change over time is possible and that succumbing to patriarchal petrification is not inevitable. Significantly, the man who wants to wall Kerensa up alive is described as mad: only a madman, the novel implies, would want to wall a woman up alive and, by extension, hold her in the rigid grip of outmoded ideologies. The end of the novel sees the madman defeated and the woman released, emphasising the possibility of escape from the 'madness' of patriarchal control.

The standing stones therefore show Holt responding to a literary tradition that flourished in the Victorian era, which she reshapes for the needs of her own age. She portrays literature and history as being inextricably linked through the legend of the seventh virgin. The particular meaning given to the stones demonstrates the longstanding nature of patriarchal control, but also the possibility of rebelling against it. When Kerensa realises, at the end of the novel, that she has symbolically walled herself up brick by brick, Holt shows

her taking back control. Shaking off the stifling Victorian attitudes, Kerensa looks forward to a future of her own making. For women in the 1960s, caught up in the throes of early second wave feminism, the message is one of self-determination and female empowerment.

The Problem of Historiography in *On the Night of the Seventh Moon*

Unlike *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, which has a period background, *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* has a specific historical background, that of the Franco-Prussian Wars. In the novels published in the 1960s, the period background is usually conveyed in the first few pages. *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, for example, conveys the historical era by mentioning Jack Toms being "caught with a pheasant in his pocket and it was transportation for him" (7). However, *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* makes the dates clear by mentioning the years on the Contents page. The novel covers a long period, from 1859-1901, although most of the action takes place between 1859 and 1870, and it culminates in the Battle of Sedan (1870-1871). It represents a transitional phase in Holt's work. Unlike her later novels, *Secret For A Nightingale* and *The India Fan*, the narrator is not caught up in the events of the war. Although there are small references to it throughout the novel, they are few and far between. However, the war is directly relevant to the characters' personal histories, as well as being relevant to the wider European political situation.

The novel foregrounds three distinct types of historiography: personal memory, received history which is told to an individual, and orthodox history of the kind that is enshrined in non-fictional accounts and which focuses on masculine events such as wars. Setting these three types of historiography against one another, the novel draws attention to three different possible narratives, or histories, of the years between 1859 and 1901. There are five named sections and an epilogue. "The Forest Idyll 1859-1860" concerns the narrator's own personal memory of events. "The Nightmare 1860-1861" presents a different

set of events covering the same span, which are told to the narrator by those close to her, and which she is expected to accept. Details of orthodox history are scattered through the background of these two sections and become more prominent in the subsequent sections, "The Years Between 1861-1869"and "The Reality 1870". The epilogue, which is titled solely with the date "1901", establishes the narrator in her new life, where all the different historiographies can be understood.

The elements of orthodox history remain largely in the background and provide information about the fragmentation of Prussia in the mid-nineteenth century, leading to its unification in the late nineteenth-century after the Battle of Sedan. The war is foreshadowed in the first section of the novel when the narrator, Englishwoman Helena Trant, goes to stay in the Black Forest. She narrates: "[t]he country abounded in small dukedoms and principalities" (4) and "there are so many German Princes and dukes and little kingdoms" (22), to which the novel's hero, Maximilian, Count Lokenburg, replies: "One day there will be one mighty Empire. The Prussians are determined on that" (22). In the second section, small historical details are inserted into the background: "[t]here had been some plot to replace Duke Carl by his brother Ludwig" (88) leading to a "crisis of affairs in the country" (89). The Duke here is not a real historical personage but a fictional character who rules over the fictional Rochenstein. However, he reflects the real dukes who ruled over small dukedoms in the region at the time. Creating fictional dukes allows Holt the freedom she needs for her story whilst at the same time representing the historical intrigue of the small dukedoms and principalities which was a feature of real life in the area at the time.

The historical details disappear in the third section, when the narrator leaves the Black Forest and returns to England. The historical content then increases in the fourth section when she returns to the Forest. Real historical figures begin to appear, although they do not play a prominent role. Instead, they are mentioned in order to increase the sense of time and

place. There is talk of the real-life Crown Prince and Princess of Prussia (146) and of Queen Victoria's visit to Prussia (146). Bismarck, the Prussian statesman who was instrumental in bringing about the unification of Germany from disparate Prussian states, is also mentioned. His general policy is commented on by one of Helena's friends, Frau Graben: "[i]f the French attacked us, all true German states would stand together" (217). Her view reflects the real Franco-Prussian relations at the time, when Bismarck presented France as the aggressor so that the German states would unite behind the King of Prussia.

Despite the long build-up to the Battle of Sedan, Holt provides very little information about the battle itself, even though Maximilian is directly involved as he leads his state's army into war with Napoleon III. Instead she skips over it. The epilogue opens with the sentence: "What followed the Battle of Sedan is well known history. The French were utterly defeated; and the result was the unification of the German states under the leadership of the King of Prussia who had become the Emperor. He lived only a few months as Emperor and then his son William took the imperial title" (327).

This lack of historical detail at such an important juncture is one of the indicators that Holt is not interested in orthodox history here, showing that it is not a historical novel as Fleishman understands the term. Holt was certainly capable of supplying this detail, as her novels written under the name of Jean Plaidy testify. That she chose not to include it demonstrates that the novel is interested in Helena, and the effect the war has on her life, rather than the war itself. By focusing on a woman's lived experience, Holt precedes both Sutherland's more recent definition of the historical novel as well as neo-Victorian attitudes towards engaging with the Victorian period.

Holt uses two competing historiographies to recount the pivotal seven days in Helena's life. The first of these, contained in the first section of the novel, is memory. Here Holt is anticipating Kate Mitchell's views that neo-Victorian fictions are "memory texts" and

is presciently exploring Mitchell's pertinent question: " what attitudes toward historical recollection are manifest in [. . . neo-Victorian] novels and what particular versions of the Victorian past do they invoke?" (Mitchell 3). Holt's answer is to invoke three competing versions of the past.

Significantly, Holt links both personal memory and received accounts of events to forms of literature, emphasising the literariness of her engagement with the Victorian era. She self-consciously relates Helena's memories of the vital seven-day period of her life to a fairy tale by calling the section "The Forest Idyll". In this section, Helena narrates her memories of 1859-1860. The setting, events, language and intertexts are all chosen to enhance a fairy tale feeling. Helena's mother and father met when her father was a student taking a walking tour of the Black Forest, where he "had met and fallen in love with a beautiful maiden . . . It was like something out of the fairy tales which had their origin in that part of the world" (4). Her father was a poor student with a "romantic nature" (4) and her parents both thought "the world was well lost for love" (4). When Helena's mother talks to her about the Black Forest it seems to be an "enchanted place" (6) and when her mother makes sketches of the forest "they seemed to have a fairy-tale quality" (7). Helena is sent to the Black Forest when she is fourteen and she is "soon under the spell of the forest" (8).

Both Helena and the reader are therefore primed for the fairy tale-like events that follow. One fine October day, Helena and some of the girls from the convent school go on a picnic in the forest, together with some of the nuns. There are twelve girls, a number which recalls fairy tales such as "The Twelve Dancing Princesses", and the setting is explicitly related to fairy tales:

> In such a setting Hansel and Gretel were lost and came upon their gingerbread house; in such a wood the lost babes had wandered to lie down and be covered by leaves. Along the

> river, although we could not see them here, castles would appear to hang on the edge of the hillside – castles such as the one in which the Beauty slept for one hundred years before she was awakened by the kiss of a Prince. This was the forest of enchantment of woodcutters, trolls, princes in disguise and princesses who must be rescued, of giants and dwarfs; it was the fairy-tale land (10).

Helena wanders off by herself. A mist descends and she becomes separated from the others. She calls to them but there is no answer. After about half an hour, she hears something and calls again. The hero is then introduced in terms from fairy tales and romance, riding a white charger: "He loomed up out of the mist like a hero of the forest on his big white horse" (12). Helena likens him to Siegfried (14) because his horse resembles Siegfried's horse, Schlem, which adds a mythical resonance. The mist is too thick for him to return her to her convent school and so he takes her to his hunting lodge. The following morning, his housekeeper drives Helena back to her finishing school in the trap and soon afterwards, on the death of her father, she returns to England. However, she still thinks of the man she met in the forest: "I was like the knight-at-arms who had met the belle dame sans merci. 'Alone and palely loitering' I would wander the Earth ever more until I found him" (43).

She does not remain in England for long. When she is nineteen, Ernst and Ilse Gleiberg appear in Oxford, claiming to be cousins of her mother. They are from the Black Forest, from the Lokenwald, and they invite Helena to go back with them for a holiday. Helena arrives in Lokenberg in time for the Night of the Seventh Moon, the seventh full moon of the year. It is a night which traditionally sees a festival of revelry and abandonment. Ernst is ill that night and cannot escort Ilse and Helena. Fearing the mayhem of the night, Ilse feels they should not go to the market square, but at last relents and says they can go for a

short while. Helena becomes separated from Ilse in the crowd and meets Siegfried again. He offers to take her back home but instead takes her towards his hunting lodge. She protests and he kisses her. Although she is attracted to him, she tells him to take her home. The following morning he visits her and reveals that he is Maximilian, Count Lokenburg, before asking her to marry him. For a short time, Helena lives in a fairy tale where "we were alone in our enchanted world" (61). However, on the morning of the fourth day after the wedding, Maximillian says he has to leave as his father needs him, but he will be back. Soon afterwards, Ilse and Ernst arrive. They say the Count called on them and suggested Helena should stay with them until he returned, so she will not be lonely. Helena goes to stay with them but when she awakes the next morning she feels ill: "the forest idyll was over and the nightmare had begun" (66).

The second section of the novel, "The Nightmare", now begins. Helena is told that her memories of her blissful marriage are false, and instead Ilse presents her with a competing view of events. The story Ilse tells is one of Gothic horror. She claims that on the night of the seventh moon, when she and Helena became separated at the carnival, she was frantic. She looked everywhere for Helena but could not find her. When Helena at last returned, Helena was "in a pitiable condition . . . dazed with shock . . . incoherent" (71). Ilse says that Helena had been taken into the forest and raped, and had then lost her memory with the shock. Ilse says that Helena's memory of a marriage is a hallucination brought on by the drugs she has been given to help her recover, and which have kept her sedated for six days. The line between reality and unreality is blurred as Helena thinks: "I am dreaming. I shall wake up in a moment and find this is a nightmare" and even though she is exhausted she is "convinced that at any moment I would wake up to reality" (73).

Helena is now faced with two very different historiographical accounts of her last week, namely her own memory and Ilse's story. Her confusion is intensified by the fact that

Ilse has no reason to lie and has always been a good friend to her. However, Helena clings to her memories: "They were saying that instead of the man I loved, the noble count, who to me was the very essence of romance and my own husband, was a man who took women and forced them to submit to him and then abandoned them. I will not believe it" (73). The confusion engendered by the two very different version of events adds to the fear and disorientation of the nightmarish storyline and dark, Gothic imagery. In an effort to prove her claims, Helena persuades Ernst and Ilse to take her to the hunting lodge in which she stayed with Maximilian, saying the servants there will know her, but when they arrive at the hunting lodge it is a burnt-out shell. Ilse sorrowfully suggests that Helena saw the ruined hunting lodge on the night she was raped and, in her imagination, turned it into a thriving place.

The self-conscious links Holt makes to literary genres foreground the similarities between orthodox historical accounts and literature. In making these links she is expressing concerns akin to those voiced by Hayden White in 1973. White argues compellingly that non-fiction historical accounts have more in common with fiction than might be supposed:

> It is sometimes said that . . . the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations . . . The historian arranges the events in a chronicle into a hierarchy of significance . . . with a discernible beginning, middle, and end (White 6).

The truth, when it is finally revealed, combines elements from all three modes of historiography: personal memory, received information and orthodox history. Helena's memories of meeting and marrying Maximilian are true. Ilse's story of the ruined hunting

lodge is also true, but her story of rape is a lie intended to cover for the eventuality that Helena is pregnant. Both histories are affected by the political history of the time: those who needed Maximilian to make a suitable, political marriage bombed the hunting lodge after Maximilian left, in an effort to kill Helena. Believing Helena to be dead, Maximilian then went on to make a political marriage that was of benefit to his country. Only by combining aspects from these different forms of historiography, the novel suggests, can a true picture of those years be discovered. Further, it suggests that personal history is as important as received history or orthodox history in establishing events. Moreover, it suggests the three are intertwined.

In reinscribing Helena's fictitious yet personal memories of the years coinciding with the build-up to the Franco-Prussian war, Holt provides a counter history that shows the effect of political history on the life of 'everywoman', albeit in sensational form. The novel demonstrates that history is neither a dry recitation of facts, a fairy tale or a nightmare, but a combination of all three. Similarly, it is a combination of orthodox history, memory and received history. Only by knowing history in all its facets can we fully understand the past. By presenting Helena's interaction with history as a search for her own identity, the novel suggests that only by understanding all the facets of history can women understand themselves and their own place in history. Whilst orthodox history has written them out or reduced them to minor roles, and whilst received history is not to be trusted as it distorts the truth in favour of what it wishes to be known, personal memory refuses to be silenced. When given voice by literature it provides a key to reinscribing women's history.

The novel's extensive and very noticeable use of the tropes and vocabulary of different genres of fiction, together with its presentation of several very different accounts of the past, give it some claim to be considered as historiographic metafiction. It shows a "self-awarenesss of history and fiction as human constructs" and it "works within conventions in

order to subvert them" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 5), using the conventions of the historical novel in order to question the nature of history. Its self-awareness is implicit rather than explicit, however, and its status as historiographic metafiction as Hutcheon defines it is therefore debatable. Nevertheless, its concerns with historiography, its restoration of silenced voices and its intertextuality all align it with wider definitions of neo-Victorian fiction.

Women's Writing as Historiography in *Secret for a Nightingale*

Secret for a Nightingale continues the concerns of *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* in reinscribing women's history. Set mainly in England and the Crimea, the first part of the novel follows the narrator, Susanna Pleydell (later Susanna St. Clare), through the days of her courtship and her disastrous marriage. On her husband's death, the novel moves to Germany and from there to its second major setting of the Crimea. It explicitly involves Susanna in the Crimean War (1853-1856), where she goes to nurse, becoming the 'Nightingale' of the title: that is, a woman who nurses under the auspices of Florence Nightingale. It also, implicitly, co-articulates the gender war taking place between the Victorian ideal of a woman as an 'angel in the house' who lives to serve her family, and a woman who works outside the house where she develops her own career. The latter war was a matter of particular concern in the 1980s, when society was going through a major upheaval which saw women's traditional place in the home being eroded as society moved towards a new configuration. It was becoming normal for women to have jobs outside the home (Roantree and Kartik 2,3) in addition to their traditional role as the primary carer for their family (Scott and Clery 116).

The novel again focuses on the voices of its marginalised female characters. Susanna is marginalised by her gender, and two of the significant minor characters, Ethel and Eliza, are marginalised by class as well as gender. The novel has a more obvious historical background than *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* and *On the Night of the Seventh Moon.* It

includes more historical detail, but the detail is still extremely limited. The historical information is provided in short sections placed at irregular intervals in the second half of the novel, intermingled with details of Susanna's reactions to it. At first, Holt provides enough information for readers to understand that there is to be a war, and to have a basic understanding of the causes, but no more. As Susanna has been at Kaiserwald and has had little contact with the outside world, her friend Lily tells her that "[t]he papers have been full of it. Something about Russia and Turkey" (213). Susanna reads the newspapers for herself: "Lord Palmerston should come back . . . we could settle the Russians in a week. . . . Russia was not only threatening Turkey, but us. Aberdeen's policy of peace at any price was the reason for Russia's intransigence . . . we heard of the victory of the British and French at Alma" (213-215).

There is nursing news, too, of the cholera epidemic which affected the army, as well as censorious articles in the press about inadequate hospital facilities and supplies. Florence Nightingale is mentioned and Susanna decides to join her. Later, when Susanna is in the Crimea, readers are brought up to date with the war in a short section which summarises the progress of the war, mentioning the Battle of Balaclava and the charge of the Light Brigade (244). The charge is mentioned as foolish, but it is not dramatised and none of the characters are directly involved. The summary continues, interspersed with brief reflection:

> Life went on grimly. After the Battle of Inkerman was won by the British and French, we had thought Sebastopol would fall into our hands and that, we guessed, would be the turning point of the war. Alas, the powers that be had made another misjudgement. Sebastopol was under siege and that was how it was going to remain for some time to come. There would be no easy victory (245).

As the above extract shows, there is enough detail for readers to understand the background, but the war is not the focus.

Whilst there is some historical information, then, it is not the purpose of the novel. Nor is the sensational plot, including murder, the novel's main focus. Its main theme is instead women's relationship with nursing. Drawing on Victorian women's writing as a form of historiography, the novel constructs a counter-history of the 1840s and 1850s in which women's day-to-day lives are foregrounded. In this, it contrasts with orthodox history which more usually recounts the exploits of men. Holt draws on Florence Nightingale's life writing, in the form of letters, for detailed information about women's lives as nurses during the Victorian era, and particularly during the Crimean War. She also draws on Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a form of historiography which reveals the lived experience of women in the Victorian era. The usefulness of novels as historiography was implicitly acknowledged in 1867, when an unsigned review in *The Argosy* remarked that the novelist "has generally proved himself the social historian of his times" (qtd. Ascari 120).

There is no direct evidence that Holt used Nightingale's letters for research; however, there is compelling indirect evidence that this was the case. Holt revealed, in interview, that she used letters as a part of her research: "I have to do such a lot of research. I spend my time at libraries, going through letters and so on" (Plomley n.p.). That she used Nightingale's letters in particular is suggested by small details from Nightingale's letters appearing in *Secret for a Nightingale*. For example, when Susanna is training to be a nurse at Kaiserwald she remarks that they drink tea brewed from rye and eat broth made from vegetables. In a letter written by Florence Nightingale to Fanny Nightingale on 16 July 1851, from Kaiserwerth-am-Rhein, Florence says: "we drink tea, (i.e. a drink made of ground rye) between 2 & 3 - & sup at 7. We have . . . broths at 12 & 7. breads [sic] at the two former, vegetables at 12" (Smith *Selected* 53).

The first half of *Secret for a Nightingale* mirrors the plot of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* novel and talks back to the theme, and Victorian ideology, of woman as healer and saviour of her husband. Holt explores and challenges this ideology through the context of Susanna, the narrator of *Secret for a Nightingale*, who talks back to Helen Graham (also Helen Huntingdon), the female protagonist of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* The similarities between the two novels are striking. Both feature naïve young women who fall in love with handsome, charming but worthless men. Susanna is eighteen (*Secret* 33) when she falls in love with Aubrey St. Clare and Helen is also eighteen (*Tenant* 131) when she falls in love with Arthur Huntingdon. The names, Aubrey and Arthur, are themselves similar. Susanna is struck by Aubrey's "charm and good looks" (*Secret* 23) and Arthur is implicitly referred to as "the handsomest, and most accomplished and superficially agreeable man in the world" (*Tenant* 132). However, both women have cause to regret their marriages. Susanna realises that she has fallen in love with Aubrey "without really knowing much else about him . . . Now I saw him differently" (54). Helen thinks: "I must confess, in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him" (203).

Susanna discovers that her husband is an opium addict who holds orgies in a cave on the family estate, reflecting Helen's discovery that her husband is a licentious drunkard who invites his louche friends to stay. Arthur's club, a common place of congregation for Victorian upper-class men, is described as a "*devil's den*" (196, italics in original). The term is used metaphorically, to mean an evil place, but in *Secret for a Nightingale* Holt takes the idea further. She makes matters more sensational and increases the shock value for her late twentieth century audience by having Aubrey indulge his licentious tastes in a cave on his estate. When Susanna finds the cave she describes the scene:

> The cave opened into a square room. There was a table which looked like an altar and I almost cried out in terror, for on it was a large figure – life-sized, and for one horrified moment I had thought someone was sitting there.
>
> The figure on the altar seemed to leer at me. It was evil. I saw then that it was meant to represent the Devil – the horns, the cloven feet were evidence of that; the red eyes seemed to be fixed on me.
>
> There were drawings on the walls. I looked at them. At first they were incomprehensible – men and women in coupling groups in strange positions – and the significance of this was brought home to me.
>
> Now I had one desire and that was to get out of this place as quickly as I could. I ran. I kicked the stone away from the door and shut it behind me. I ran through the wood as though pursued by the Devil – and I really felt that I had come face to face with him (105-106).

Holt prepares for this revelation by previous use of Victorian intertextuality. Earlier in the novel, her brother-in-law, who is an armchair traveller, lends her some books written by real-life explorer and traveller Richard Burton (1821-1890). Burton notably translated and printed the *Kama Sutra* (1883) and *The Perfumed Garden* (1886), variously described in the novel as erotica (147) or pornography (124). Both Susanna and Helen are horrified by their discoveries and wish to leave their husbands. When Susanna confronts Aubrey and tells him she is leaving, he says: “Why don’t you throw aside your inhibitions? Why don’t you join us?”, taunting her by calling her “conventional, straitlaced, a prude” (108, 109). Similarly,

Arthur suggests that Helen joins in with his licentious parties and offers her to his friends: "look you, gentlemen: I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome: you may, by Jove, and my blessing into the bargain!" (355).

When Susanna and Helen announce their wish to leave, both husbands remind their wives of their duty, sanctioned by both law and custom in the Victorian era. Aubrey says to Susanna: "If you were the virtuous woman you make yourself out to be you would obey your husband. That is a wife's first duty" (109). The matter is further complicated by the fact that Susanna and Aubrey by that time have a son. When Susanna replies: "My duty is to get away from this place and take my child with me" (109), Aubrey chillingly responds by saying:

> You may leave. Of course, the world does not look too kindly on the married woman who deserts her husband . . . but you cannot take my son away with you . . . I am his father. This is a man's world . . . If you went and took our son with you, I would soon have him back in his rightful place. The law would see to that (112).

Aubrey's words to Susanna, saying that she must obey him, echo Arthur's words to Helen: "You promised to honour and obey me" (235). Aubrey's words that the world does not look too kindly on married women who leave their husbands recalls the vicar's words in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: once Helen's story is fully known in the neighbourhood the vicar still maintains that Helen was "wrong to leave her husband; it was a violation of her sacred duties as a wife, and a tempting of Providence by laying herself open to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step" (459). Helen, too, by that time has a son.

Both women are therefore called upon by the law to stay with their abusive husbands, and are expected to care for these men. They eventually manage to leave their husbands.

Susanna's young son dies of pneumonia (120) which means she is no longer confined to her marriage for his sake. She inherits a small amount of money from her father and this allows her a degree of financial independence (155). Helen turns to her brother for help and goes to live at one of his properties, Wildfell Hall. Both women change their names. Susanna shortens her name to Anna and reverts to her maiden name of Pleydell; Helen takes the surname Graham, which was her mother's maiden name.

During this period, Susanna begins to use her gift for healing. When her carriage accidentally knocks down a young woman, Lily Craddock, she takes Lily to hospital. Being dissatisfied with the filth on display, she takes Lily home to care for her. "I no longer felt that I had finished with life. It was like being born again. I could see a purpose in my life. It was as though I had had a divine revelation" (140). Remembering that her Ayah had said she had healing hands, Susanna decides to develop her healing skills and put them to use. She discovers her vocation for nursing from this point onwards. However, when her husband is on his deathbed and she is called to see him, she does not take on the responsibility of caring for him. Despite her interest in, and skill for, healing, she leaves him to the care of a male nurse. [30] In this, she talks back to Helen Huntingdon, who returns to her husband and nurses him out of a sense of duty when he is dying. Instead, Susanna uses her nursing skills professionally outside the home.

Importantly, the novel gives voice to characters marginalised by class as well as gender. The working-class Eliza is able to profit from her nursing talents. She plays a central role in one of the many sub-plots when she tries to murder Dr Damien Adair, who is Susanna's chief love interest after the death of her husband. Dr Adair is an amoral character and Eliza, believing that Dr Adair will make Susanna unhappy, attempts to shoot him. As

[30] From this point on, Susanna takes the name of Anna Pleydell. However, this chapter continues to refer to her as Susanna in order to avoid confusion.

discussed in Chapter Four, Holt's novels often show sympathy to the criminal, particularly the criminal who is disadvantaged by their society. Dr Adair forgives Eliza. Recognising her nursing and organisational skills, he recommends her for a prestigious position running Rosenwald, a place which trains nurses. Eliza is therefore rehabilitated rather than punished.

By using the theme of nursing, Holt is not only talking back to Victorian ideologies of a woman's place being in the home, but she is also tracing the history of the nursing profession. The Crimean War, in Holt's hands, is only tangentially a time of masculine conflict with its temporarily important battles. More importantly, it is a vital node in the development of nursing as a profession. Whereas in other novels she holds the Victorian era to account for introducing the problems that tormented women in her own era, for example confining women to lunatic asylums if they did not conform to masculine ideals of womanhood as in *Kirkland Revels*, here she also shows the era in a more positive light by focusing on it as originating the profession of nursing. Its history is therefore a key factor in the rise of the professional woman in the late twentieth century and, consequently, in their release from financial dependence, which in turn allowed them to govern their own lives. The history of the war, as related by Holt, is its place in the development of women's financial independence, and its permanent legacy is the progress of women as they break free of the Victorian ideal which confined them to the house.

In using the Crimean War as a setting, Holt is anticipating later neo-Victorian fiction. Vanessa Guignery has identified Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* (1988) and Katharine McMahon's *The Rose of Sebastopol* (2007) as neo-Victorian novels, both of which are set during the Crimean War. Guignery draws a persuasive distinction between historical and neo-Victorian novels, arguing cogently that historical novels set during the Crimean War focus on well-known personages and events, whereas neo-Victorian novels set against the same background focus on marginalised characters and tell more personal stories. By focusing on

Susanna, *Secret for a Nightingale* has a similarly neo-Victorian, rather than a historical, focus.

The three novels have other elements in common. As well as privileging the voices of everyman and, particularly, everywoman, all three novels feature nurses and yet they resist foregrounding Florence Nightingale. Nightingale's well-documented place in traditional historical accounts makes her more suited to the historical novel than neo-Victorian fiction. Speaking of *Master Georgie* and *The Rose of Sebastopol*, Guignery rightly notes:

> although nurses occupy centre or middle stage in both novels, the historical heroine Florence Nightingale remains a distant figure, thus confirming that the focus is on ordinary women and on private stories rather than on the grand historical narrative peopled with heroic figures (198-199).

Similarly, Holt's focus is not on Florence Nightingale. Instead, it is on Susanna and her experiences, with nursing forming an important part of her later life. It is also on the women Susanna meets as a nurse, including the working-class characters, Ethel and Eliza.

Like Susanna, Ethel and Eliza are marginalised characters by virtue of their gender, but they are also marginalised because of their lower class. They have not been drawn to nursing by a vocation, but by a lack of employment opportunities elsewhere. Ethel was previously a seamstress who was unable to make a living sewing shirts. Her plight is made clear through Thomas Hood's poem, which Susanna recalls:

> Stitch, stitch, stitch
> In poverty, hunger and dirt,
> Sewing at once with a double thread
> A shroud as well as a shirt (226).

Eliza encouraged Ethel to become a prostitute, since being a seamstress would have likely led to her death in poverty, and as a result Ethel had a much-loved child. However, because she could not afford to feed him, he died. Ethel and Eliza are resentful of the upper-class women who are going to the Crimea to nurse, and are initially resentful of Susanna. However, Susanna and Ethel bond over their grief as Susanna, too, lost a dearly-loved child. Susanna narrates: "we were an incongruous sight sitting there – representatives of the opposing camps [different classes], silently weeping" (227). The three women go on to become friends, and the nursing abilities of Ethel and, particularly, Eliza are contrasted favourably with the abilities of the upper-class women. Foregrounding marginalised characters, then, links *Secret for a Nightingale* and *Master Georgie* and *The Rose of Sebastopol*.

All three novels have further features in common. They all have a long time span covering many years and all three involve a shift in setting from England to the Crimea. Guignery suggests that the two settings act as a contrast, showing peaceful domestic scenes in England before relocating to the violent scenes of the war (193). Whilst Guignery's view has some validity, since the characters' lives are more peaceful at home than abroad, their domestic lives are not as blissful as they might seem. The characters in both *Secret for a Nightingale* and *Master Georgie* are trying to escape from problems at home. *Secret for a Nightingale*'s Susanna is running away from an abusive marriage and George, the 'Master Georgie' of Bainbridge's eponymous novel, is running away from his homosexuality, which is condemned by Victorian society. The two novels therefore use the Crimean War to mirror the smaller wars taking place in the character's lives. Both Susanna and George are involved in a war against Victorian ideologies on gender, albeit in different ways. George is fighting against oppressive Victorian ideologies on human sexuality, whilst Susanna is rebelling

against an ideology which dictates that she should be an ‘angel in the house’ whose care should be given to her husband, despite the fact that he is abusive.

By foregrounding Susanna’s rebellion against Victorian expectations, Holt co-articulates the growing rebellion against the ideology which declared that a woman’s place was in the home. The idea was so firmly fixed that when Florence Nightingale went to nurse in the Crimea, she was absorbed into the ideology of woman as angel, immortalised in “The Angel in the House”. An 1855 mezzotint of Nightingale bears the title ‘An Angel of Mercy’.

When she was not portrayed as an angel with a lamp, Nightingale was portrayed as a ‘lady with a lamp’ who walked the wards late at night in a comforting role. Whilst she did undoubtedly comfort many soldiers, the image reduces her achievements to one of quiet domesticity, whereas she was a woman with a formidable brain who was a gifted organiser and mathematician. As Jil Matheson of the Office for National Statistics points out:

> Florence is an inspirational figure for many women in particular, the 'lady with the lamp' was also a lady with powerful ideas with the commitment and passion to put them into practice. As a consequence, she made a lasting and important impact in the fields of both medicine and statistics.

In the late twentieth century, the idea of a woman’s place being in the home was increasingly challenged as more women went to work outside the home and developed their own careers. This was facilitated by a number of Acts of Parliament which made it easier for women to enter higher education and to gain better paid employment. In 1971, The Equal Pay Act was passed, which meant that men and women were to be paid equally for doing the same work. In 1975, The Sex Discrimination Act was passed, which declared that women were to be treated in the same way as men with regard to education and employment. There was consequently “a large rise in the proportion of working-age mothers in paid work”,

which went from 50% in 1975 to 72% in 2015, and "this increase was most rapid over the late 1980s, with the employment rate rising by 10 percentage points between 1983 and 1990 alone" (Roantree and Kartik 2, 3). *Secret for a Nightingale*, published in 1986, coincided with this rapid phase. Its sensational plot co-articulates women's rebellion against ideas of a woman's place, which lingered on from the Victorian era in outdated attitudes and laws. Moreover, it shows their rebellion as being successful and leading on to happier, more fulfilling lives.

The novel's setting means that there is some justification for calling it a historical novel. There is some brief detail of the Crimean War and the main characters indirectly take part by joining Florence Nightingale and tending to the soldiers. However, the focus of the novel is not on the war and its political ramifications. It is, instead, the opportunities presented to women because of the war, namely nursing, which allow them to achieve some degree of independence. Its interest in marginalised characters, its historiographical concerns and, most importantly, its intertextuality, mark it out particularly as a neo-Victorian novel.

Chapter Three: The Legacy of Gothic and Sensation Fiction

"*Neo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially Gothic*"

— Marie-Luise Kohlke

When criticism to date has considered Holt in relation to the Gothic, it has regarded her either as an author of Gothic romance, the female Gothic or the modern Gothic. However, none of these subgenres account for Holt's most noticeable innovation, which is that she set (most of) her novels in the Victorian era. By setting her novels in the past, she is continuing the Gothic tradition established by Walpole, whose novels are set in the medieval period and reveal anxieties about Catholicism and the fear of its return. However, she also innovates because, instead of returning to the medieval past, her novels return to the Victorian past. In doing so, they make an important statement about the twentieth century's site of fear and horror. The site is no longer the medieval age, and the threat is no longer Catholicism. Instead, the new site of fear and horror is the nineteenth century and the new threat is its dominant source of power, the patriarchy, which lingers on in the twentieth century. Holt makes a further innovation in that she also draws on one of the Gothic's literary descendants, sensation fiction, as she pioneers neo-Victorianism.[31]

Using *Menfreya* as a case study, this chapter foregrounds the vulnerability of women in a society where familial, political, religious and economic power is held exclusively by men. In particular, it highlights the price middle-class women pay for conforming to the angel in the house stereotype, and the strain placed on working-class women who conform to the ideal of the devoted servant. It investigates the blurring of boundaries between the three

[31] Holt's place as a pioneer of neo-Victorian fiction is the primary contention of this thesis.

genres as Holt appropriates Victorian literary traditions but also innovates. Neo-Victorianism, the Gothic and sensation fiction are all difficult to define, as many scholars have noted, and there is a range of critical approaches. However, the neo-Victorian elements that are highlighted in this chapter are the restoration of marginalised voices, especially those of women and the working classes, and the co-articulation of socio-political concerns. Also important are the sensation fiction intertexts, since *Menfreya* has prominent echoes of both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Gothic novels are often identified, at least in part, by their use of typical themes. The themes are played out in an atmosphere of fear. *Menfreya* foregrounds what Keech calls the "ultimate Gothic fear", which he defines as the "surrealistically horrible recognition of a world of moral chaos where only power has meaning" (Keech 136). Particularly pertinent to this chapter are the themes of thresholds, antiquated buildings, degeneration, demon lovers, obsession, superstition, faithful servants, madness and death. Hogle identifies a pull between the old and the new as a feature of the Gothic, with characters being "haunted" by "deep-seated social and historical dilemmas [. . . which] so contradict each other, and in such intermingled ways, that only extreme fictions of this kind can seem to resolve them or even confront them" (4). Holt's 'deep-seated' feminist concerns are here expressed through the Gothic.

Sensation fiction is similarly difficult to define with exactitude. Mangham highlights the genre's concerns with "the 'in-between' spaces that provide a no-holds-barred area for asking controversial questions [. . . and saying] searching things about some rather tense issues" (Mangham 4). Sensation fiction can be partially defined by its unifying features. Particularly relevant for this chapter are themes of transgressive female characters, female madness, the influence of newspapers, the inclusion of sensational, dramatic scenes and issues of identity. There has already been some recognition of Holt's use of sensation fiction.

Francesca Billiani remarks perceptively that Holt "looked for inspiration to the early, *sensational*, and sentimental inceptors of the genre" ("European" 221, my italics), although she does not go so far as to call Holt an author of sensation fiction. Cox has more explicitly linked Holt to neo-Victorian sensation fiction, although she only refers to one of Holt's novels, *The Shivering Sands*, whilst this thesis explores Holt's work as a whole.

The three genres are inextricably linked. Many critics have remarked on the close relationship between Gothic and sensation fiction. Cox, for example, notes that the sensation novel has its origins in the Gothic (*Victorian* 1). The innate connection between the Gothic and neo-Victorianism has been rightly highlighted by Kohlke and Gutleben, who remark that "their union [was] almost predestined by their common revivalist premise" . They go on to argue persuasively that "*neo-Victorianism is quintessentially Gothic*: resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life," ("(Mis)-Shapes" 2, 4 emphasis in original). Neo-Victorian fiction is not only 'quintessentially' Gothic it is also 'quintessentially' sensational. Marsh notes that neo-sensation novels "are actually concerned with the present, and the influence of the past upon that present . . . the neo-sensation novel and its Victorian ancestor … share an agenda: both use the formal conventions of the sensation novel to challenge popular philosophical stances in their very different historical periods" (108). Although Marsh uses the term 'neo-sensation' and not 'neo-Victorian', the link between sensation fiction and neo-Victorianism is conceptually present in her perceptive arguments. She argues persuasively that "[t]o write off the sensation novel as conservative because it was popular would be to ignore some radical aspects central to the novels" (110). Cox justifiably contends that "neo-Victorianism continues the legacy of the sensation novel, both explicitly and implicitly" (*Neo-Victorianism* 2). Neo-Victorian texts are frequently bound to sensation fiction by an intertextual relationship, whether that relationship is explicit in terms of a hypertextual bond

or is simply implicit in the revisiting of typical sensation themes. A net, rather than a line, is then formed between the three genres as they mesh with each other.

By using traditional Gothic tropes, Holt is implicitly working self-consciously. As Kohlke and Gutleben rightly affirm:

> neo-Victorian Gothic's inevitable resort to and reiteration of well-established generic, even clichéd motifs and themes is *inherently* self-conscious — that is *it cannot be anything else, if it tried* — regardless of whether these elements are employed imitatively or parodically, conservatively or subversively, for stylistic effect or deconstructive technique" (Kohlke and Gutleben "(Mis)-Shapes" 43, italics in original).

Their comments can be applied to Holt's novels, in which motifs of Gothic and sensation fiction are inevitably used self-consciously. Examining the innovative neo-Victorian slant Holt brings to these legacies, the chapter places the novel in the context of contemporary gender and class anxieties, legislation, and political scandals which dominated the newspaper headlines and which exemplified the socio-political concerns of the 1960s. It then investigates the spectacular success of Holt's novels as a neo-Victorian Gothic event which mirrors the similar success of sensation fiction a hundred years earlier, thus establishing further ties between the three genres. In doing so, it "tries to understand the nineteenth century as the contemporary self's uncanny *Doppelgänger*, exploring the uncertain limits between what is vanished (dead) and surviving (still living)" ("(Mis)-Shapes" 4, italics in original). The chapter then talks back to neo-Victorian criticism by querying the thresholds between Victorian and twentieth-century sensation fiction, as well as literary and popular fiction, focusing particularly on the issue of authorial voice.

The Past as Gothic Horror

The Gothic themes in *Menfreya* were remarked upon when it was first published, although they were typically ridiculed, as in the *Kirkus* review:

> the book is filled with lively, hoity-toity names — Bevil and Endelion Menfrey, Jessica Trelarken, Benedict Bellairs. Harriet Delvaney, catching her breath in many a little sob, tells all about life in late Victorian England . . . And through an entertaining Mellowdrahmah, everything that can happen to Harriet happens--deaths by misadventure, old legends coming to life and the darling Cornish peasantry being terribly Cornish about ghosts ("Menfreya").

Whilst the 'hoity-toity' names are traditional Cornish names suitable for the Cornish setting, and Harriet Delvaney, the narrator, neither catches her breath nor sobs, the review is right to foreground Cornwall, legends, death and a suggestion of ghosts. Most of the novel takes place in Cornwall, which is a liminal space. Although it is a part of the English mainland, it is almost entirely surrounded by water. Its traditional language is closely related to Breton and Welsh, rather than English, and its association with the Arthurian legends obscures the thresholds between reality and unreality. It is therefore a particularly apposite setting for a Gothic novel and an atmospheric background for the legend attached to the house of Menfreya. The legend concerns one of the previous owners of the house of Menfreya who, centuries before, had taken a fancy to the governess and had kept her as his mistress, confining her to a secret room in the buttress. No one else knew of her existence, so that when she went into labour during a period of his absence there was no one to help her. He returned to the house to find that both she and the child had died. The abuse of masculine

authority featured in the legend sets the scene for the abuse that returns in a variety of forms throughout the novel.

Menfreya opens when Harriet is thirteen years old and covers a span of approximately ten years, excluding brief flashbacks to her earlier childhood. The novel follows her life as she grows up and marries. The action mainly takes place in London and Cornwall. As a child, she lives in London with her widowed father who is an M.P. His constituency is in Cornwall and so some of her childhood scenes are also set there. It becomes the main setting when she marries Bevil Menfrey and goes to live at the Cornish house of Menfreya Manor, usually known as Menfreya. The novel is marked by a Gothic atmosphere of fear and claustrophobia. The tone derives in part from Harriet's fatalistic narration, which traps the reader in Harriet's anxious and defensive mind, and in part from her patriarchal society, which has a devastating impact on her life. It has an equally devastating effect on the lives of her nurse Fanny Carter (who is later her lady's maid), and her best friend Gwennan Menfrey.

Harriet's childhood is marred by her father's authority which allows him to control all aspects of her life. He openly hates her because her mother died in childbirth and when she can stand his emotional cruelty no longer she runs away from home. However, she is discovered and returned to her father. His reaction is vituperative and he upbraids her, saying, "When I think that it was to give you birth that your mother died . . .. When I saw you . . . when they told me your mother was dead I wanted to throw you out of the house" (34, second set of ellipses in original). As a punishment for running away she is locked in her room, echoing a similar scene in *Jane Eyre*. In the latter novel, the young Jane is locked in the red-room as a punishment for attacking her cousin. Both girls have bitter thoughts of death whilst they are incarcerated, emphasising the Gothic atmosphere. Jane thinks "it was in this chamber he [my uncle] breathed his last; here he lay in state; hence his coffin was borne by the undertaker's men" (17). Harriet thinks "dark" and "gloomy" thoughts of the day of her birth,

with the "death chamber; the shrivelled-faced baby" (36). She recalls her father's words which "had crystallised the scene. I saw the ugly baby in the nurse's arms; I saw the dead woman on the bed; and his face. I could even hear his voice: 'Throw it out of the house'" (34). Her use of the word 'it' rather than 'her' as she imagines the scene emphasises her lack of self-worth and the crushing effect her father's cruelty has on her.

He later visits her in her room and he deliberately terrifies her with thoughts of the afterlife, echoing a similar scene in *Jane Eyre* when Mr Brocklehurst attempts to terrify Jane in the same manner. Harriet's father asks: "Has it occurred to you that your life might be cut short at any moment? . . . you are heading for eternal damnation" (36). In *Jane Eyre*, Mr Brocklehurst tells Jane that she is in danger of falling into the pit of hell and "burning there for ever", adding: "Children younger than you die daily" (39). Both men attempt to frighten the girls with thoughts of imminent death. Both men also threaten the girls with eternal damnation and the pit of hell if they do not conform to Victorian standards of feminine obedience. Harriet's father and Mr Brocklehurst therefore attempt, not only to exert authority in this world, but also to extend masculine authority into the next life. For Harriet and Jane, if they accept this doctrine, not even death can release them from patriarchal control.

In showing the extensive reach of masculine authority, which attempts to extend its control into the afterlife, *Menfreya* mirrors Holt's previous novel, *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*. In the latter novel, the legend attempts to demonstrate that men have always held dominion over women in the past by representing the centuries-old standing stones as women who have been petrified for breaking social taboos. The two novels taken together, show masculine attempts to portray patriarchal authority as never-ending, and therefore right and proper, extending from pre-history and on into eternity. In both novels, the girls and women are blamed for their persecution, which is presented as a richly deserved punishment. Kari Winter rightly points out that "[i]n any society where there is an unequal distribution of

wealth and power, blaming victims for their own suffering serves the interests of the dominant group" (27). The dominant group in both these novels consists of men. Jane Eyre is able to resist and makes a spirited retort when Mr Brocklehurst attempts to terrorise her. However, Harriet does not have the spirit to resist, particularly when her father dismisses her governess and she fears that he might dismiss Fanny as well. Fanny is the only loving presence in Harriet's life. Having come to Harriet as a wet nurse, she has taken the emotional place of a mother, and there is a strong bond between them. Her father's ominous last words set the seal on her obedience: "should you ever feel tempted to be so wicked again, pray consider, for you will not find me as indulgent next time" (37).

As Harriet grows up, her father's ability to control her life declines, but a new controlling force emerges when Bevil Menfrey begins to court her. Bevil is a politician, like her father, and he takes over her father's constituency. Both men are therefore not only symbols of the familial authority, which is used to control her in the home, but also a symbol of the political authority that controls her society. However, the novel complicates the issue by making Bevil magnetic and sexually attractive as well as controlling. Hogle identifies the "attractions or terrors of a past once controlled by overweening aristocrats" (3) as a part of the Gothic. Bevil combines both attractions and terrors. He is not an aristocrat but he is a member of the upper classes. A part of the novel's tension comes from the push and pull of attraction and terror that Bevil exerts, both as a sexually attractive man and as a member of the upper classes.

Bevil is introduced to the reader in the first few pages of the novel. Harriet meets him when she is hiding overnight in an abandoned house on a small Cornish island, where she has taken refuge after running away from home. Once it is light, she means to contact her Cornish friends. Late at night she hears voices and hides, but she is discovered by Bevil who has brought one of his many sexual conquests to the house for a night of lovemaking. When he

asks her why she has run away, she says: “I heard Aunt Clarissa talking about the difficulty of finding a husband for me” (29). Harriet’s aunt disapproves of her because she is unprepossessing and, because of a difficult birth, has a limp. Bevil, who is older than Harriet, jokingly replies: “Well, don’t let that worry you. Who knows, I might marry you myself” (29). Harriet becomes compulsively attached to him because of his moment of careless kindness. Her obsessive love recalls that of Catherine Earnshaw for Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*.

The ability of Bevil and Heathcliff to inspire this kind of obsessive love comes from their common root of the Gothic archetype, the demon lover. Indeed, Bevil’s name emphasises his literary descent because of its similarity to the word ‘devil’. The demon lover is traditionally a magnetic, sexually attractive man who is surrounded by an aura of danger. He is often referred to as the Byronic hero, and both Mr Rochester and Heathcliff embody the type. Anne Williams argues that the type should be taken back further, to Milton’s Satan. She makes particular reference to Holt’s heroes and argues that, like Milton’s Satan, they are capable of compassion and have a ‘softer’ side. She takes Connan TreMellyn from *Mistress of Mellyn* as a typical Holt hero, arguing that “[a]ccording to conventional literary history, we should recognize Connan TreMellyn as the great-grandson of Charlotte Brontë’s Mr. Rochester or possibly of his ‘cousin’ Heathcliff. Their father was the Byronic hero, son of those notorious Gothic ‘others’, Radcliffe’s Montoni or Schedoni, and they, in turn, may claim Milton’s Satan as their own progenitor and as founder of the family” (142). She goes on to say, “the Byronic hero is driven by erotic love, however fatal. Indeed, a capacity for feeling in the conventional man of action is this character’s most potent source of mystery”(144). However, there is no softer side to Bevil. Harriet’s love for him is a trap and it is all the more inescapable because it is internal, fuelled by her obsession, as well as

external due to her disadvantaged position, both legally and economically, in her patriarchal society.

The novel uses Harriet's feelings for Bevil to co-articulate dilemmas about the institution of marriage and the stresses placed upon it by unrealistic expectations. As an ideal, it is meant to satisfy a range of different needs which, in practice are very difficult to reconcile within one relationship. Harriet is drawn by Bevil's sexual magnetism but at the same times hopes for him to be faithful. When she suspects he is paying court to other women she thinks, "I had had a foolish idea that once he was my husband he would miraculously become all that I desired him to be. And what I asked of Bevil was that he should be exactly as he was and had always been except in one respect – he should be faithful to one woman, and I was that woman" (128). Although she recognises the hope as foolish, she does not abandon it and the stresses caused by her attempts to reconcile the reality of a sexually profligate man with the hope of him becoming monogamous help to create the novel's tense atmosphere. Marriage was not only meant to satisfy sexual desires but it was also meant to provide stability and security, not only financial but emotional. Harriet reflects that "[t]hat was what I had needed, what I had always missed. Security. The desperate desire of the young and vulnerable" (128). However, her hopes there are also unfounded.

When she becomes engaged to Bevil, his controlling nature becomes evident. Fanny sees it and is alarmed by it. Before he has even proposed, he starts making arrangements for the wedding. On the day of his proposal, he says that he means to marry Harriet whether she accepts him or not. When she does accept him, he comments: "Dearest Harriet, you belong to us [the Menfreys]" (136). Harriet takes this to be romantic, but his suggestion of ownership has an ominous ring. Fanny issues a warning, saying: "I reckon he'll be making all the arrangements in the future" (142). However, Harriet berates Fanny for making "doleful prophecy" (142) instead of congratulating her on her engagement. Nevertheless, Fanny's eyes

remain “dark with fear and suspicion” (143). Whilst Harriet does not hold marriage in high esteem, telling her friend Gwennan that some husbands can be jailers (93), she nevertheless marries Bevil. She then finds herself trapped in an abusive relationship.

Bevil’s controlling nature soon descends into sexual violence, which the novel explicitly relates to power. After an argument one night, Harriet says she will sleep in the dressing-room. Bevil physically detains her. He takes her arm and shakes her. She narrates: “His grip on my arm was painful . . . the more I struggled the more determined he became to subdue me” (168). She goes on to narrate: “He was cruel; he was brutal” (168). She tries to argue with him, telling him that he must not rape her, explicitly using the word “rape”, but “I was useless against him. I was in his power. It was the most shattering experience of my life” (168).[32] After the rape, Harriet realises that their relationship had changed. The force he used “was meant to be symbolic of our relationship. He was the master, he was telling me. He expected obedience from me, and as long as I gave it I should be treated with respect; but if I had to be taught a lesson, he was ready to do the teaching however unpleasant” (169). The gendered nature of this power is made abundantly clear when Harriet realises: “he was the all-powerful male” whilst she was “only a woman” (170). Harriet’s obsessive love continues despite his ill-treatment of her. She narrates: “My love for him was unchanged [. . .] Whatever he was, I wanted him” (169). The romance itself is therefore Gothic, being dark and dangerous. Harriet herself links her feelings of obsession to imprisonment later in the novel, saying: “once having loved a Menfrey there was no escape”.

The feeling of entrapment is further emphasised by the enclosed structure of the novel, in which the final sentence echoes the novel’s first page. The novel begins, on the first page, with a hopeful image. When Harriet hides in the island house she hopes to remain in

[32] The discussion of sexual abuse provides a clear link to the neo-Victorian project which unearths the abuses that Victorian literature does not articulate.

Cornwall, away from her father's influence. She looks at Menfreya and narrates: "To see Menfreya at its best was to see it in the morning . . . all that beauty" (5). The final sentence recycles the central idea of the first page: "And look at Menfreya . . . It's so beautiful in the morning" (251, ellipses in original). Whilst these sentences suggest hope, since morning is traditionally a time of day associated with feelings of promise, the repetition creates a feeling of circularity and confinement. It suggests that Harriet ends as she begins, nurturing feelings of hope that will prove to be unfounded.

The house of Menfrey, like Poe's house of Usher, is a family as well as a house. The Menfreys, like the Ushers, are degenerate. The Ushers are physically spent, their line worn out. Roderick Usher "suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror" (95). Madeline Usher suffered from a "settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character" (97). The Menfreys, by comparison, are physically robust. Gwennan Menfrey "had that immense vitality and the arrogance which appeared to be inherent" (6). However, the Menfreys are morally degenerate.

Their degeneracy does not show on their faces and bodies. Instead, echoing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it manifests itself on their house. In Wilde's novel, Dorian Gray leads a debauched life and notices that instead of the signs of that debauchery appearing on his face and body in the form of bloodshot eyes, for example, they instead appear on a portrait of himself. The decay of the Menfreys does not manifest itself on the house in such an explicit way. However, the connection between family and building implies a link between the former's moral decadence and the latter's physical decay. The east wing is shut

up because it “needs so many repairs that until they can be done we can’t live in it” and the passages “smelt of age and damp” (44). The furniture in the buttress room, a scene of Menfrey depravity, is rotting: “there was a mirror propped against the wall; its glass was mottled, its frame tarnished. And there was a trunk, green with mildew” (45).

The house is anthropomorphised, further echoing Poe’s seminal text. Gwennan Menfrey describes it in repellent terms, contesting the house’s superficially attractive appearance in the morning light. “It’s an old monster”, Gwennan warns Harriet, adding: “Monsters demand the blood of innocent young virgins like you” (43). The image here is of female sacrifice, a recurring theme in Holt’s novels. Harriet’s ‘blood’ is the money she brings into the family on her marriage, which will enable Bevil to ‘feed’ the monstrous house in order to restore its monstrous ‘strength’. Gwennan’s remark gives warning that Harriet will be figuratively consumed by the house rather than protected by it, sacrificed not only to the house but also to the family that shares its name. Yet there is a subtle move towards the more female-centric concerns of sensation fiction with the name of the house. It is called Menfreya, rather than Menfrey. The addition of the ‘a’ feminises it, in the manner of Paul, for example, which becomes feminised as Paula.

Ancient houses are important in both Gothic and sensation fiction but their treatment is not the same. Whilst Gothic houses are typically introduced in an unsettling manner, sensation houses are initially presented as beautiful. *The Fall of the House of Usher* opens with the narrator visiting the house and relating their horrifying impressions: “I looked upon the scene before me — upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain — upon the bleak walls — upon the vacant eye-like windows — upon a few rank sedges — and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees — with an utter depression of soul” (90). *Menfreya*, on the other hand, opens in a similar style to Caroline Clive’s *Paul Ferroll* (1855)

and *Lady Audley's Secret* by presenting an image of a house which has Gothic features such as turrets and buttresses which is nevertheless presented as beautiful:

> The house was like a castle with it turrets, buttresses and machiolated towers – a landmark to sailors who would know where they were when they saw that pile of ancient stones. They could be silver grey at noon when the sun picked out sharp flints in the walls and made them glitter like diamonds: but never did Menfreya look so splendid as when touched with the rosy glow of sunlight (5).

The protective nature of the house is emphasised by the reassurance it offers to sailors, and its beauty is highlighted by its stones becoming like jewels in the sunlight. The first sentence of *Menfreya* is particularly close to the opening of *Paul Ferroll*: "To see Menfreya at its best was to see it in the morning" (*Menfreya* 5) and "Nothing looks more peaceful and secure than a country house seen at early morning" (*Paul* 3). It is certainly possible that Holt had read *Paul Ferroll*. Being an avid reader and library user, Holt would have been able to find *Paul Ferroll* in the library system as late as the 1930s, when she would have been of an age to read the novel. Like the houses in *Paul Ferroll* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, however, the apparently idyllic house in Menfreya is the site of violent transgressions. Paul Ferroll's house, which looks so beautiful at the start of the novel, contains the body of his wife, whom he has just murdered. Lady Audley's house becomes the site of attempted murder when Lady Audley pushes her husband down a deep well and leaves him for dead, and Menfreya becomes the site of Harriet's abuse.

The house in *Menfreya* is therefore an amalgamation of its Gothic and sensation fiction precursors. Other themes, however, are less ambiguous in their provenance and are related more closely to sensation fiction. One of these themes is newspapers. The relationship

between newspapers and sensation fiction was highlighted by Victorian critics. Henry Mansel, writing in the *Quarterly Review* in 1863 remarked: "Let him [the author] only keep an eye on the criminal reports of the daily newspapers, marking the cases which are honoured with the especial notice of a leading article, and become a nine-days wonder in the mouths of quidnuncs and gossips; and he has the outline of his story not only ready-made, but approved beforehand as of the true sensation cast." (qtd. in Maunder *Victorian* 89).

In the early 1960s, the most sensational newspaper story concerned John Profumo, the Secretary of State for War. Known as the Profumo affair, it dominated the newspaper headlines in 1963, just three years before the publication of *Menfreya*. On March 24 1963, *The Sunday Telegraph* called it "the worst scandal in living memory" (Sawer n.p.). It went on to spawn numerous headlines, books and screen adaptations throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Farmer n.p.). *Menfreya* echoes the affair in its political theme. Unusually in Holt's work, the narrator's father and husband are both politicians. Many of *Menfreya*'s plot points also echo the affair. Harriet's widowed father marries a chorus girl of about twenty years old, whilst John Profumo has an affair with 'showgirl' Christine Keeler, who is nineteen years old; Bevil Menfrey knows that if he can distinguish himself in the Boer War it will be good for him when he stands for Parliament (65) and Profumo has a distinguished military career; Bevil and Profumo both come from titled families; both Bevil and Profumo are married but promiscuous; for both of them, their gender and class entitle them to licentious behaviour; both represent traditional political power, which was vested in the hands of upper-class men, and both are vulnerable to the newspapers, whose exposure of their affairs can destroy their political careers; both Menfreya and the Profumo affair contain 'unbelievable' events.

The *Kirkus* review of *Menfreya* quoted above calls attention to the novel's 'Mellowdrahmah'. Similarly, Mr Harold Wilson (Puyton) said of the Profumo affair: "if it

were published as a fiction paperback in America hon. Members would have thrown it away, not only for what it contained, but as being overdrawn and beyond belief even as credible fiction" ("Security"). Reading *Menfreya* in the context of the Profumo affair therefore reduces its melodrama to realistic proportions, since the Profumo affair was as melodramatic as *Menfreya* in its own way. Profumo, married to a leading actress, had an affair with a showgirl, which he denied. He later admitted it, and the fact that he had initially lied to Parliament forced his resignation. The sensational nature of the affair was intensified by the possibility of spying, as Keeler was also suspected of having an affair with a Russian naval attaché and this could have presented a security leak. Not only did the affair lead to Profumo's resignation, but it also led to the suicide of Stephen Ward, who had arranged the party at which Profumo and Keeler met. Adultery, spying, and suicides are all found in sensation fiction as a part of the dramatic events but, as the Profumo affair shows, they are also aspects of real life.

Newspapers themselves feature in *Menfreya*, strengthening the link with sensation fiction and also strengthening the link with the Profumo affair. When Harriet runs away from home at the start of the novel, on the night of a political ball which her father is hosting, her disappearance makes headlines: "M.P.'s daughter missing. Foul Play cannot be ruled out, say police" (9). The report goes on to say: "Henrietta (Harriet), thirteen-year-old daughter of Sir Edward Delvaney, M. P. for the Lansella district of Cornwall, disappeared from her London home two days ago. It is feared that she may have been kidnapped and will be held to ransom" (9). Whilst Harriet is not kidnapped, the mention of it heightens the novel's sensationalism. Both Bevil and Profumo are vulnerable to the newspapers. The Profumo affair was widely reported, dominating the newspaper headlines in this country and abroad. The newspapers' determination not to drop the story was a partial cause of Profumo being forced to admit the affair. Harriet warns Bevil that as a man "he can go his own wilful way;

but should he be a Member of Parliament, guardian of public morals, a figure of righteousness, he's sitting on a powder keg" (198). The mention of a powder keg again heightens the sensationalism, recalling the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in which Guy Fawkes attempted to blow up Parliament. Harriet knows that, if she speaks out about Bevil's rape of her, then it will 'blow up' his career. She has a chance here to fight back against the gender and class distinctions which give him control over her.

Her opportunity to denounce him comes soon after the rape, as she is engaged to give a speech in support of him from a political platform. Bevil is tense as he waits for her to begin, wondering what she is going to say as a scandal would destroy his chances for political power. Harriet understands his fear of scandal. She knows that the electorate think: "Are they the sort of people you want to represent you in Parliament" (166). As she stands on the platform she is at a watershed: "at any moment now I would be called upon to say those few words which would show the audience that I adored my husband, that I supported him in everything he did, that we were devoted to one another and that there would never be a scandal surrounding us" (170). Harriet must decide whether to act as Bevil's supportive wife or whether to break away from accepted Victorian wifely behaviour and forge her own independent path by denouncing him. She cannot bring herself to condemn him, however. Whilst she attributes Bevil's tenseness as he sits in the audience to the fact that he knows "I had a will of my own" (170), her spirit has been broken: although she can think of betraying him, she cannot bring herself to do it. Harriet remains a loyal, if obsessed, wife. The novel therefore shows that there is a price to pay for being an angel in the house. Conforming to the ideal is possible, but only at the cost of a woman's spirit and indeed her identity.

A neo-Victorian reading here is in direct contrast to the Gothic readings of Abartis and Wallace. Both critics interpret the endings of Holt's novels as optimistic. Abartis argues that "every spirited heroine needs a lover – if only to save her at the end. Certainly one of the

implications of such a plot is that in a husband and in love there is safety" (262). Wallace, following Radway, suggests: "While voicing female fears of male violence within the domestic space, the texts suggest that the only way of breaking this cycle of violence is to find the 'right man'" with the house "symbolis[ing] the class status and security the heroine can attain through marriage" (Wallace *Historical* 136, 134). However, reading *Menfreya* as neo-Victorian sensation fiction reveals a darker picture. The novel shows that neither a husband nor the house of Menfreya offers Harriet security. Instead, the husband here is abusive and the house is a prison in which she is controlled and raped.

In Bevil's rape of Harriet there are echoes of Victorian sensation fiction, in particular *The Woman in White*, which "is an important source text for neo-Victorian authors" (Cox *Literature* 137). In *The Woman in White*, the villainous Count Fosco rules his wife with "the rod of iron . . . [which] never appears in company – it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs" (244). Although Collins uses non-specific terms, he implies that sexual abuse has taken place, with the 'rod of iron' suggesting rape. Count Fosco "has tamed this once wayward English woman", his wife (240). Fosco is a villain, and his actions are presented as evil, not simply for their sexual violence, but also for the way they have destroyed his wife's sense of identity. At one time a supporter of "Rights of Women", she turns into a woman who says "I wait to be instructed . . . before I venture on giving my opinion in the presence of well-informed men" (392). Collins here foregrounds the effect of gender and class in creating his sense of entitlement to her body. This entitlement was enshrined in law. As Pykett notes: "the chief duty of woman . . . was to sacrifice herself to the physical and emotional needs of others and, above all, to submit to her husband" (Pykett *Improper* 13). Holt's novel is even darker, because it presents Bevil as the hero, rather than the villain. It also presents him as a politician who rules not only Harriet's life, but also, through his position as a lawmaking M. P., the lives of all women.

The novel notes that "the duty of a politician was to make laws which would improve the well-being of the country" (157). It also notes that Bevil "had very strong feelings about looking after the elderly. He said it was inherent in the old landowning classes and had been bred over the generations" (165). However, his ideas on improving the country do not extend to gender equality. Whilst he remarks that it is a pity women cannot enter parliament, he does not engage with the issue. Given his controlling personality, it is unlikely he would support women's rights. Instead he expects Harriet to work on his behalf. He remarks that her support will be welcome at the next election because "[a] woman can be a great help – particularly the daughter of the late Member" (103). He points out that an M.P.'s daughter will make a good M. P.'s wife (137), and that he will expect her to help in elections and in the process of nursing the constituency in between (138). Although she is interested in politics, educating herself about Free Trade and Protection (149) she can hope for nothing more than to assist Bevil: as a woman, she cannot seek political power on her own account. The novel therefore implicitly suggests that a belief in women's entitlement to an equal share in political power, unlike care for the elderly, is not inherent in the old landowning classes because it would challenge their own authority.

Nevertheless, Bevil does say that although women cannot enter parliament, "[p]erhaps they will one day" (148). *Menfreya*'s timeline is important here. Unusually for Holt, it straddles two centuries, beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending in the early twentieth century. Although the date is never specifically given, it can be deduced from small clues scattered throughout the book. Early on in the novel there is mention of the fact that, in the previous year, the law declaring that a man had to walk in front of a "horseless carriage" holding a red flag had been abolished (50). The law was repealed in 1896, making the year at this point 1897. From this it can be deduced that the novel begins in 1894, when Harriet is

thirteen. Later on, there is mention of Balfour resigning (157), which dates the novel at that point to 1902. It therefore begins in the Victorian but ends in the Edwardian era.

This dual timescape is significant. The novel, in keeping with neo-Victorian fiction, is Janus-headed. It both looks back to the Victorian era, when women were excluded from political power, but it also looks forward to the new twentieth century and a time when women will be allowed into Parliament. Harriet herself (allowing for the fact that she is a fictional character), will live to see major changes taking place in the relationship between women and politics during the new century. In 1907, she will see that women can be elected to borough and county councils and as mayor. In 1918 she will see the Representation of the People Bill passed, allowing women over 30 to vote, as long as they were "married to or a member of the Local Government Register" ("Mind"). In the same year she will see the passing of The Parliamentary Qualification of Women Act, which allows women to become MPs. Born in 1881, Harriet will be able to vote at this point, and she will also be able to stand for parliament in her own right. In 1919 she will see Nancy Astor becoming the first female MP and, in 1928, she will witness everyone over the age of twenty-one being given the vote.

It is possible that she will live long enough to see the strength of female political power and its fundamental importance in the Profumo affair. In that notorious affair it was a female M. P., Barbara Castle, who played the decisive role. Castle refused to let go of the affair and she asked Profumo a direct question which forced him to lie to parliament instead of equivocating. It was this act of lying to parliament, rather than his affair, which led to his downfall and his resignation. The affair was then responsible for the toppling of the government. *Menfreya*'s explicit reference to women not being allowed to enter parliament, and its implicit references to the Profumo affair, articulate the changes in women's status between the Victorian era and the 1960s. In doing so, it shows that change is possible,

indicating that further change is possible and that women do not have to accept a subordinate role.

One of the areas in which change took place in the second half of the twentieth century was that of social, legal and political attitudes towards domestic violence, including marital rape. At the time of *Menfreya*'s first publication, a husband was still legally entitled to his wife's body. The law in the 1960s did not recognise the concept of marital rape since marriage had long been held, by masculine authority, to constitute sexual consent *in perpetuum*. This dictum originated in the eighteenth century and was not successfully challenged until 1991, in the case known as R vs R. The Law Commission's review, "Criminal Law: Rape Within Marriage", concluded that Sir Matthew Hale's longstanding dictum from 1736, that a husband could not rape his wife because, "by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind to her husband which she cannot retract" was "wholly unsupportable" (UK Parliament "Criminal" 1). The review proposed that "the marital immunity should be entirely abolished" (2). This proposal was accepted. Changes to the law inevitably took time but marital rape was finally outlawed by the Sexual Offences Act of 2003. Holt's *Menfreya* participates in changing opinions by showing the devastating effect that Hale's pronouncement has on women's lives, including the life of the fictional Victorian, Harriet, as well as (potentially) on the lives of *Menfreya*'s late twentieth-century female readership. By highlighting the unjust, gendered nature of the political power which supported such legislation, and by foregrounding the fear, pain and sense of entrapment experienced by women subject to the unjust laws, Holt can be seen as contributing to the challenge mounted by second wave feminism, which made domestic abuse one of its main concerns.

The position of women is one of the most prominent themes of sensation fiction, not only in terms of their power (or lack thereof) but also in their behaviour. Mid-Victorian

women from the middle classes were expected to conform to the ideals presented in "The Angel in the House", satisfying themselves with domesticity and devoting their lives to making a home for their husband and children.[33] Lyn Pykett has identified two distinct types of women in sensation fiction, the 'proper' female who conforms to her Victorian society's expectations, and the 'improper' or 'transgressive' female who rebels against them. Harriet remains a 'proper' female, despite her interest in politics, because she conforms to her society's expectations. She fails to denounce Bevil's rape and she accepts a supporting role in his political life. However, *Menfreya* also features four transgressive women: Gwennan, Fanny, Jenny Jay and the governess, Jessica Trelarken.

Gwennan Menfrey's transgressions are sexual and the sexual double standard is foregrounded through the characters of Gwennan and her brother, Bevil. Bevil, "like his father and most of the male Menfreys, seemed to believe it was the natural order of things to fly from female to female like a bee whose duty in life was pollination" (99). Gwennan, with all the same energy and drives of the male Menfreys, is expected to be sexually pure. However, she refuses to be limited by her gender and indulges in affairs. Before either girl is married, Gwennan draws attention to the differences between herself and Harriet, describing herself humorously as "wicked" and Harriet as "a good little girl" (65). This explicit use of wicked and good to describe the two characters suggests that Holt is not only responding to Victorian literature but also to Victorian society. The humorous tone in particular emphasises that the ideas are being mocked. In playing with notions of wicked and good women, Holt is voicing arguments which were later noted in criticism, particularly in the 1990s with Pykett's convincing ideas that in Victorian sensation fiction: "[a]ctive and autonomous sexual feeling . . . denotes . . . a deviant, 'improper' femininity" (Pykett *Improper* 16). As evidence of

[33] The 'Angel in the House' stereotype was expected of middle-class women in the mid-Victorian period.

Victorian attitudes, Pykett quotes William Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1857). In this work, Acton asserts that women do not desire sex on their own account, but rather they submit to sex in order to gratify their husbands (qtd in Pykett *Improper* 15-16).

Menfreya, however, talks back to such notions by endorsing Gwennan's rebellion against the double standard and showing Gwennan's enjoyment of her many affairs. For example, Gwennan describes her nocturnal sexual adventures as "the spice of life" (80). Harriet accuses her of "being engaged to one man and dallying with others" (82). Gwennan is engaged to Harry Leveret, a wealthy young man she is agreeable to marrying because her family needs his wealth. However, she does not accept that her behaviour should be limited because of her engagement. She retorts, "I shall shortly settle down at a very early age. Don't you think I'm entitled to sow a few wild oats" (82). The term 'sowing wild oats' was used in Victorian literature to denote men who indulged in dissolute behaviour, particularly sexual behaviour. For example, in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Huntingdon is told that Walter Hargrave "meant to marry you himself, once he had sown his wild oats" (184).

When Gwennan takes for herself the freedoms allowed to men, *Menfreya* is voicing the 1960s' growing rebellion against the Victorian hangover of the double standard. This type of rebellion is a feature of Holt's work. There remained, in the 1960s, a need for rebellion since the double standard was still apparent. When Parliament discussed the Profumo affair, Mr Harold Wilson, M.P, for Huyton, said: "We are not here as a court of morals". Nevertheless, during the House of Commons debate, various M. P.s referred to Christine Keeler as a "harlot", a "dirty little prostitute" and a "little slut", whilst John Profumo, who was a partner in the transgressions, was not referred to in any correspondingly derogatory language ("Security").

The double standard was not limited to derogatory comments. When the contraceptive pill was first made widely available on the NHS in 1961, it was only available to married women. This ruling carried with it the suggesting that unmarried women did not, or should not, experience sex outside of marriage. However, the 1960s was an era of liberation and attitudes were changing. The rate and level of this change is evidenced by that fact that in 1967 the contraceptive pill became available on the NHS to women irrespective of marital status. *Menfreya*, first published in 1966, comes between these two milestones, when attitudes towards women's sexual behaviour were on the cusp of change, and the novel reflects this state of affairs. Harriet, the narrator, is not sexually transgressive. However, she does not condemn her friend Gwennan, who is.

As in Victorian fiction, however, the transgressive woman comes to a bad end. By the close of the novel, Gwennan is dead. Yet Gwennan's fate is more ambiguous than it might seem. It is not Gwennan's rebelliousness that causes her downfall, it is her attempt to conform. When indulging in pre-marital affairs she comes to no harm. It is only when she marries that her problems begin. She elopes with an actor, Benedict Bellairs, but later she learns that her marriage is a sham as the 'clergyman' who performed the ceremony is one of her 'husband's' actor friends. Benedict's motive for marrying her is money. When he learns that she is not wealthy, as he thought, he abandons her. Unable to swallow her pride and return home she dies in squalid circumstances. The sexual woman has been brought low, but she has been brought low by her 'marriage' rather than her promiscuity; her attempt to conform rather than her attempt to follow her own desires. The ending, then, far from being conservative, sends out a powerful message about the importance of challenging the status quo, rather than acquiescing to its demands.

Whilst Gwennan's transgressions are sexual, Fanny's transgressions are violent. They are brought about by her growing madness. In this, she is descended from the mad women in

sensation fiction rather than the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*. The sensation 'heroine' Lady Audley, for example, is apparently sane but declares herself to be mad, whilst the Gothic madwoman Bertha Mason is created as a Gothic monster. Brontë defended her creation, which was based on ideas of 'moral insanity' appearing in the work of the physician James Cowle Prichard, as well as that of Bucknill and Tuke (Shuttleworth *Charlotte* 14). She said that her depiction of madness is "but too natural. There is a phase of insanity which may be called moral madness" although she goes on to say that she should have shown more pity and that she had "erred in making horror too predominant" (qtd. in Smith 96). Sensation authors, however, presented a different view of madness by creating women who were less obviously mad and who were, arguably, driven to their actions by inequalities in society. They were therefore implicitly resisting the patriarchy by rebelling against its dictates.

As a working-class woman in a society dominated by upper-class men, Fanny is disadvantaged by class as well as gender. Orphaned as a child, Fanny "spoke with the tongue of the London streets" (12) and ate "inadequate meals" in the orphanage where, with hands "mottled with cold and blotched with chilblains" she was "bobbing curtsies to those in authority and learning how to be humble" (13). When she sees Harriet being repeatedly abused by Bevil she feels she must rescue her. However, she has no way of doing so. Without financial resources, she cannot take Harriet away from the house. Neither has she friends or family to turn to. She cannot appeal to the law, since the law is written and controlled by upper class men and it is enforced in their interests. Indeed, Bevil himself controls the law as both a politician who legislates for it and a magistrate who enacts it. Affected by her growing insanity, Fanny therefore takes the only route she can see as being available to her in her disadvantaged position: she attempts to remove Harriet from Bevil's power by murdering her.

In order to give Harriet warning of her death, Fanny brings the legend of Menfreya to life. The legend states that the clock in the tower in the courtyard stopped when the woman

secreted in the buttress room died in childbirth. Nothing could make the clock go again until the master of the house came home and found her body. If the clock stops again it will supposedly signal a coming death in the family. The Menfreys profess not to believe the legend but even so they employ a man whose job it is to make sure the clock keeps running. There are echoes here of both Gothic and sensation fiction. The portentous use of a legend recalls the family curse in *The Castle of Otranto*, in which an ancient prophecy foretells the end of the line of Manfred, Prince of Otranto. The specific motif of a clock which is linked to death recalls Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), in which a nobleman seeks to escape from the plague stalking the land by locking himself in his abbey. He gives a masked ball, at which the clock prominently chimes the hours. After the last stroke of twelve fades, death arrives. "He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay" (211). The idea of a clock stopping and life stopping at the same time is present in both texts. In mingling a transgressive woman with a Gothic use of legend, Holt is again mingling the two heritages. In appropriating Victorian fiction to do so, she moves both the Gothic and sensation fiction into a new genre of neo-Victorian fiction.

When Fanny arranges for the clock to stop, Harriet sees it and narrates: "It was obvious that some portentous event was about to take place" (226). Further Gothic tropes are added when Fanny goes on to give Harriet a more specific warning by sending a letter to an undertaker, saying that Harriet is dead. When the undertaker arrives at Menfreya to remove the body, it becomes evident that Harriet is the Menfrey who is threatened (230). It is after these warnings that Fanny attempts to drown Harriet in an act of murder-suicide. She does so by luring Harriet to the small house on the island, and then taking her down to the cellar. In stormy weather, at high tide, the cellar floods. Once Fanny has locked both herself and

Harriet in, her madness is revealed. She tells Harriet that they will both die together. Harriet realises with horror that Fanny "is going to commit suicide and kill me because she loves me" (242). The flooding cellar is foreshadowed in the first few pages of the novel, when Harriet hides in the house on the island as a child and narrates that the garden is neglected because it is prone to flooding. The foreshadowing has echoes of *Lady Audley's Secret*, where a well is mentioned in the first few pages and then becomes a significant location later in the novel when Lady Audley pushes her husband into its depths.

Whilst the tropes of death, documents and legend are Gothic, the sympathy shown to Fanny is again more typical of sensation fiction. The narration tries to understand the reasons for her madness rather than condemning her for it. Sympathy for the criminal echoes *Lady Audley's Secret*, where the reasons for Lady Audley's crimes are explored. Moreover, Lady Audley's crimes are linked to gender inequalities. In trying to understand Fanny's reasons, *Menfreya* tries to understand her crime. "When . . . had the madness started to canker her brain? Was it with those early tragedies – the loss of husband and child? Poor Fanny, the gentle murderess who had killed for love" (245). Fanny's gentleness is emphasised through her similarity to a portrait of the Christian Martyr which is foregrounded earlier in the novel. This symbolic use of portraiture again echoes *Lady Audley's Secret*, but whereas the portrait in that novel reveals the eponymous character's wickedness, the portrait in *Menfreya* reveals Fanny's essential goodness.

As Harriet faces death, she thinks:

> A picture of the Christian Martyr flashed into my mind. I remembered that calm face; the hands which were bound at the wrists palm to palm in prayer, the wooden stake to which she was bound and the water up to her waist as she awaited the rise of the tide.

> With such serenity was poor simple Fanny facing death (245).

Fanny is therefore characterised not as an evil murderess, but as a sacrificial victim and martyr; someone who is willing to die for her beliefs. Unlike the Christian martyr in the portrait, Fanny is not dying for her religious belief. Fanny's belief is that she is killing in order to protect Harriet, and this exonerates her in Harriet's eyes. Harriet is eventually rescued by Bevil and Jessica. Fanny, however, refuses to be rescued and allows herself to drown.[34]

Fanny's death shows the devastating effect on servants if they conform to their society's expectations that they will be loyal. Janet Todd draws attention to the fact that in Gothic fiction and "in Ann Radcliffe's novels in particular, male servants are . . . endlessly devoted, never thinking of pay-day . . . At the end of *The Italian* the servant is offered a reward; he refuses, for it has been his glory to serve and, since there is no economic basis of his servitude, he has no need of independence" (270). Holt recreates the archetype of the faithful retainer as a woman. Fanny never thinks of pay-day and she serves Harriet because she loves her. However, the result of her devotion is madness and suicide, as well as her attempted murder of Harriet. *Menfreya* talks back to this ideology by showing that there is a price to be paid when dominant groups demand an unswerving loyalty from those beneath them in the hierarchy. Victorian men demanded subservience from women; the upper and middle classes demanded subservience from the lower classes and in particular from servants. But conformity comes at a cost, as *Menfreya* reveals, and it is those at the bottom of the power hierarchies who pay.

[34] There are echoes of *The Moonstone*'s Rosanna Spearman in Holt's depiction of Fanny.

Class is a source of tension in the novel, particularly when the thresholds are crossed, and Harriet herself is a product of social mobility. Her family acquired their wealth because her grandfather, who came from humble beginnings, made a fortune in steel. This new-found wealth allowed her father to live as a wealthy gentleman and enter parliament, but his life did not prosper as he lost his beloved wife in childbirth. Eventually he married again but he died shortly afterwards. Jenny Jay, his second wife, also moves between the classes. She is a chorus girl before her marriage and rose in society by marrying well. Unlike the stepmother of fairy tales, Jenny is young, pretty and friendly. Barely six years older than Harriet, "she was like a piece of confectionery the cook had made for one of Papa's parties" (69). Harriet's father changes completely, made kind by love. However, Jenny does not prosper. When Harriet's father dies of a heart attack, Jenny is suspected of murdering him. An autopsy clears her of suspicion but she dies soon afterwards, accidentally poisoned by the arsenic in her face cream. Jenny's movement between the classes is therefore punished by an early death.

Jessica Trelarken's indeterminate class also creates tension in the novel. She is the daughter of the local doctor and as such she lives in comfortable circumstances. After economic reverses, however, she needs to earn a living. Bevil's father, Sir Endelion, appoints Jessica as a governess to Gwennan's son in order to make trouble between Harriet and Bevil, as he knows that Bevil is attracted to Jessica. When a place is laid for Jessica at table, it becomes apparent that Sir Endelion expects her to eat with the family and a discussion about Jessica's social position ensues:

> Lady Menfrey looked uneasy. "But Endelion, she's the governess now."
>
> "*Now*! But her father used to come here to dine. You can't banish people below stairs when in the past they've dined at your table."

> "She isn't banished below stairs," pointed out Lady Menfrey. "She has a tray in her room. That has always been the custom with governesses" (182).

Sir Endelion counters by saying that Jessica is a lady. Harriet sides with Lady Menfrey but the women are overruled and Sir Endelion has his way.

Jessica's social mobility does not end there, however. Jessica has no intention of remaining a governess. She sees an opportunity when Gwennan jilts Harry Leveret and, unbeknownst to anyone, she begins an affair with him. Whilst *Menfreya* appropriates a typical Victorian ending when dealing with Gwennan, Fanny and Jenny, punishing the sexually transgressive woman (albeit for conforming rather than transgressing), the violently transgressive woman and the upwardly mobile woman, she does the opposite when dealing with the minor character of Jessica. Unlike Gwennan and Jenny, Jessica is not punished for her transgressions. Rather, she is rewarded. At the end of the novel it is revealed that she is pregnant, though unmarried, and she eventually marries Harry.

The variable punishments and rewards meted out to the transgressive characters in *Menfreya* show that both the Victorian society it depicts and the twentieth-century society it inhabits are in a state of flux. There are no clear rights and wrongs. Jenny is punished for her upwards social mobility and yet Jessica is rewarded for the same upward motion. Ambitious, transgressive and manipulative, Jessica is the only female character who seems to have a realistic chance of a happy future. She seems poised to take advantage of the coming freedoms for women as she aspires to be a doctor and refuses to be contained by Victorian social or sexual mores. If there is a glimmer of hope for Harriet, it is not in her marriage but in her tentative friendship with Jessica. Having distrusted and feared the beautiful Jessica throughout the novel, wrongly believing that Jessica and Bevil were having an affair, Harriet finally makes her peace with her.

In *Menfreya*, then, Holt does not simply create a Gothic text. She combines Gothicism with sensationalism and uses them in a neo-Victorian way. Putting the Victorian past into conversation with the contemporary present, she revives the past to give warning of the future. In the novel, she does so through one of the legends surrounding Menfreya, which Fanny brings to life in order to warn Harriet of her impending death. At a broader level, by reviving the popular Victorian form of sensation fiction, Holt creates a neo-Victorian novel which co-articulates the powerlessness of women in the 'moral chaos' of a patriarchal society. *Menfreya* therefore acts as a reminder of the dangers of patriarchy and a warning to women if they do not take action against the patriarchal institutions which have historically oppressed them. There is, however, a note of optimism in Jessica's happy ending, and in the feminising of the house name, Menfreya. Together they suggest that although the future is uncertain and that there will certainly be difficulties along the way, there is hope for women in their struggle for equality.

Holt's most Gothic novels are those published in the 1960s, culminating in *The Shivering Sands*. From then on, the novels become less claustrophobic and the women have more agency. Rather than being confined to the domestic sphere, they travel abroad, finding adventure overseas. They are often heiresses; or, where they have to earn a living, they participate in a greater range of work and sometimes own their own businesses. Sensational events remain prominent throughout Holt's work, but there are fewer Gothic tropes after 1970. Other elements of the novels assume a greater importance, as discussed in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Repetitions and Thresholds

The spectacular success of Holt's novels and the modern Gothic genre can be seen as an uncanny repetition of the sensation fiction phenomenon a century earlier. It resembles a

haunting of the 1960s by the 1860s, making it an uncannily neo-Victorian event. The similarities between Holt's phenomenal rise and the similar rise of sensation fiction a hundred years earlier are remarkable. In both instances the sales were 'sensational' but in both instances the novels were condemned by contemporary critics. George Eliot bemoaned the success of sensation fiction in a letter to her publisher, saying "the most carefully written books lie, both outside and inside people's minds, deep undermost in a heap of trash" (Eliot *Neo-Victorianism* qtd. in Cox 7). Eliot's attitude is reflected in the aforementioned *Kirkus* review of *Menfreya*. *Kirkus* reviews were anonymous but were written by authors, and echoes of Eliot's professional rivalry can be heard in the review.

The birth of the modern Gothic genre has been attributed mainly to one author, Holt, with two further authors being closely connected with it, just as sensation fiction's birth was attributed to one author, Wilkie Collins, with the work of two further authors being closely connected. In the modern Gothic, Punter associates Mary Stewart and Phyllis A. Whitney, as well as Holt, with the genre's early and enormous success, whereas in sensation fiction, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood are commonly cited as being almost as important as Collins. Holt's enormous sales echo those of sensation fiction. Wallace talks of the modern Gothics' "sudden and phenomenal success" (Wallace *Historical* 133) and draws attention to the particularly high sales "between 1969 and 1974" (Wallace *Female Gothic* 146), whilst Pykett talks of the sensation novels' "spectacular success" which "dominate[d] the literary scene for a time in the 1860s", although she notes that "[t]he term 'sensation novel' proved remarkably resilient in both the reviewing and marketing of fiction well into the 1890s and it was regularly used in advertisements for both new and reissued fiction" (*Nineteenth* 6, 1, "Legacy" 211).[35] Similarly, Holt's popularity did not decline after 1974, as Wallace suggests

[35] An exploration of the differences between the literary marketplaces in the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the mirroring of the two phenomena is remarkable.

when she includes Holt in her study of the modern Gothic. Instead, Holt's novels regularly appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller lists until after her death in 1993, with her posthumous novel *The Black Opal* (1993) and paperback releases of earlier hardbacks also making the list. The novels were similarly popular with library borrowers. Holt was consistently in the Top 10 most borrowed authors in the library system (Bennett 2).

There are, more specifically, uncanny similarities between Holt and Collins. Both were published serially in magazines. *Mistress of Mellyn* was serialised in *Woman* (UK) and *Ladies' Home Journal* (USA) in 1960; *The Woman in White* was published in serial form in *All the Year Round* (UK) and *Harper's Weekly* (USA) from 1859-1860. Both authors wrote fictionalised accounts of real-life criminal cases. Collins's story "The Poisoned Meal", which was published in *Household Words* (18 September – 2 October 1858), is based on the true story of Marie-Francoise Salmon, who was falsely accused of murder in 1781. Similarly, Holt wrote four fictionalised cases of Victorian crimes under the name of Elbur Ford, which are discussed further in Chapter Four. Both authors extended Gothic fiction by including crimes in their novels. Whereas the crimes in Gothic fiction take place in the past (Spooner 245), in Collins's and Holt's novels they take place in the contemporary present.

These remarkable similarities indicate that Holt is the Wilkie Collins of her generation. However, whilst Collins is established as a part of neo-Victorianism, Holt's place is not yet secure. There is an inherent contradiction in the fact that whilst Victorian sensation fiction, itself a popular form, is one of the main progenitors of neo-Victorianism, contemporary popular fiction has not been accorded a similarly important place in the genre. Kohlke argues persuasively that some of the reasons for silencing disparate voices include "discrimination on the basis of genre, subject matter, writing style, and/or target audience" ("Mining" 29). Discrimination on the basis of genre and subject matter is addressed in the

next two chapters but discrimination on the basis of writing style is addressed in this section, which seeks to further problematise the thresholds between popular and literary fiction with regard to authorial voice.

There are a number of different issues to be considered. Cox gives as a general guideline the definition that popular fiction is concerned with story and literary fiction is concerned with how the story (if there is one) is told. A contemporary review of *The King of the Castle*, whilst being largely positive, complains that the language is "conventional . . . (mouths are mobile, volumes slim)" (Harvey "New" 8). Whilst much of Holt's language is admittedly conventional, her novels cannot be accurately judged *en masse*. Individual novels show varying degrees of concern with how the story is told and there are many examples of more careful choices than those highlighted in Harvey's review. In *The Shivering Sands*, for example, Caroline Verlaine is newly widowed and thinks of her husband, Pietro:

> Then I suffered the familiar grief, the longing, the frustration, and Pietro's face rose up from the past as though to say: A new life? You mean a life without me. Do you think you will ever escape from me?
>
> No, was the answer to that. Never. You will always be there, Pietro. There is no escape . . . not even the grave.
>
> Tomb, I told myself flippantly, would sound so much better. Much more Grand Opera. That was what Pietro would have said (2, capitals in original).

Caroline's self-conscious replacing of the word 'grave' with 'tomb', and her reflection that it is much more Grand Opera, show thoughtfulness on the part of the author. So, too, does Caroline's choice of death-related vocabulary which suits a Gothic novel. Similarly, Holt's self-conscious use of metaphor in the same novel shows care and deliberation:

> I know that one day people will stand here looking on the town and they will no longer see that row of houses because the sea will have taken them. But a sea wall would have saved them. Mrs. Verlaine, you and I have to build that sea wall . . . metaphorically, I mean. We have to protect ourselves against the encroaching sea of the past (167, ellipses in original).

As well as a compelling plot, *The Shivering Sands* implicitly raises questions of authorship when one of the characters, Alice Lincroft, is writing a book called *The Shivering Sands*. This fact provokes questions about the nature of novels and authorship, which is an example of philosophical enquiry that is not usually associated with popular fiction. The reader may be prompted to consider whether *The Shivering Sands* is a book by Eleanor Hibbert, or Victoria Holt, or Caroline Verlaine (the first-person narrator who is telling the story) or Alice Lincroft. They might also be prompted to wonder about the relationship between the two texts, both the one they hold in their hands and the one being written by Alice. They might further find themselves considering thoughts about the texts' relationships with *The Moonstone*, whose atmospheric location the novels appropriate for their title.

Conversely, not every novel in the canon is free from conventional language and Kohlke rightly warns against making standards for inclusion higher now than they were previously. She questions "whether some of our most acclaimed neo-Victorian classics are *pure gold* or more adulterated metal" ("Mining" 30). It is not only neo-Victorian classics which need to be queried but also Victorian sensation fiction itself. If sensation fiction cannot be excluded from neo-Victorianism (and of course it cannot) then it is contradictory to exclude fictions which are based upon it and written in a similarly popular style.

One of the chief differences between Holt's writing style and that of the sensation novelists is that Holt does not concentrate on the physical sensations of her characters. Many critics including Leighton and Surridge draw attention to the "nervous excitement" (37) which is a feature of sensation fiction. Holt's writing style is comparatively flat. Even at moments of high drama her heroines show very little physical reaction. When trapped in the flooding cellar, Harriet narrates: "I had begun to shiver – not so much with the cold dampness of this place but by the strangeness of Fanny" (239). That, however, is as close as she comes to nervous excitement. She then carries on prosaically: "Fanny," I said, "let's get out of this place" (239). Even when she realises that Fanny means to kill her she simply narrates: "I was frightened" (243), without any reference to the sensations this fear induces.

Holt does not, then, attempt to imitate the voice of Victorian sensation fiction. In this she is unlike Fowles and Byatt, who both seek to replicate Victorian writing styles, the former in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the latter in *Possession*. Byatt includes 'Victorian' poetry in her novel which purports to be written by her fictional Victorian poets, but it is instead written by Byatt herself in a Victorian style. Whilst Holt does not set out to copy a Victorian writing style in this manner, her authorial voice can be seen as imitative. It presents a modern equivalent of the Victorian sensation novelists' voice in that it is easy to read and has a compulsive hold on the reader.

Neo-Victorian criticism is still undecided about the weight to be given to authorial voice in deciding on a neo-Victorian hierarchy. Whilst Heilmann and Llewellyn argue for a literary voice, Cox effectively challenges this view. Holt's work is an important part of this conversation. Although she does not have a style that would generally be regarded as literary, this does not preclude her from having something important to say about the Victorian era, its ideologies and literature, and their continuing influence on her own contemporary present.

Chapter Four: Crime, Detection and Punishment

> "Good God, Judith," says archaeologist Sir Tybalt Travers to his wife. "We're in a maze of intrigue." You can't accuse Tybalt of being premature. Lady Judith has just been immolated in an Egyptian tomb as a warmup for murder. Her half-sister Theodosia has been killed in a suspicious bridge accident. A local girl named Yasmin has been mysteriously done away with. And what about Tybalt's father, the late Sir Edward, who died in these same digs? (Lepis 428).

Although Holt's novels are not currently regarded as crime fiction, contemporary reviews often highlight the criminal elements in her work. The *New York Times*'s review of *Curse of the Kings*, quoted above, foregrounds the importance of murder, but this has been largely overlooked by criticism. Certainly, Holt is not mentioned in general critical companions to crime fiction. One of the probable reasons for her neglect is the labels of Gothic romance or historical romance, which have obscured other (and arguably more important) elements of her work. It is also likely that the general attitude towards crime fiction in the mid-twentieth-century has played a part. Crime fiction was not considered a suitable subject for critical study for most of the twentieth century and attitudes towards it were hierarchical. W. H. Auden, although a lover of the genre, opined that Raymond Chandler's novels are "serious studies of a criminal milieu" and should therefore be judged as "art", but detective stories "have nothing to do with works of art" (n.p.). The hierarchy Auden espouses not only reinforces ideas of high and low culture, but it is also implicitly gendered. The 'hardboiled' masculine crime fiction of Chandler is ranked above the more feminised detective fiction, which often had a

woman as the detective, for example Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, or had a more feminised male detective. In Christie's "The Man from the Sea", for example, the detective Mr Sattherthwaite is described as having "a very feminine side to his nature" (126) whilst Christie's more famous detective, Hercule Poirot, is introduced in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, as a "quaint dandified little man" (23). Both men are interested in fine dining, a trait shared by Dorothy L. Sayers's detective Lord Peter Wimsey, who also shares Poirot's interest in clothes. Unlike 'hardboiled' private eyes, the more feminised detectives do not engage in violence; any physical action such as restraining a criminal is done by others.

When Holt's first novel was published in 1960, hierarchical attitudes still held sway. As Martin Priestman explains, although crime fiction was regularly discussed between fans, by contrast, "[w]here the authors claimed some academic credentials, their love for the genre was owned up to as a guilty pleasure – or juxtaposed to the world of 'proper' culture" ("Introduction" 1). Holt's novels, then, fell foul of critical attitudes, which considered all crime fiction 'low' culture. Her novels also fell foul of hierarchical attitudes which ranked 'masculine' characters above feminine or feminised characters, since her novels were female centric.

A further possible reason for Holt's neglect is that her novels were likened to drugs. Likening fiction to drugs is a longstanding form of derogatory comment. Thackeray, for example, describes Newgate novels as "absolute drugs on the literary market" (qtd. in Hollingsworth 149) and Auden says: "the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol" (n.p.), which he gives as one of the reasons they cannot be considered as works of art. Holt's novels, too, are judged to be addictive. Alex Stuart, writing in *John O'London*'s magazine, remarks of *Mistress of Mellyn*: "Once you begin to read it, it is like a drug for which, without in the least meaning to, you form an addiction". Holt herself, in a 1974 interview with the *Sidney Morning Herald*, makes a similar comparison about the

writing (rather than the reading) of her novels, saying: "I love my work so much that nothing would stop me writing . . . If I take even a week's break I just feel miserable. It's like a drug."

However, in the latter half of the twentieth century more progressive attitudes began to be adopted. The change, according to Priestman, came in the 1960s, since when "the presumed barriers between 'high' and 'low' culture have been progressively dismantled" (1). As crime fiction became more accepted, critics began to comment on the similarities between detection and literary criticism. Priestman comments that "[l]iterary and crime-solving obsessions", are "mirror-reversals of each other" ("Post-war" 174). A. S. Byatt makes a similar connection in *Possession* when Maud Bailey says "Literary critics make natural detectives" (237). Holt, too, draws attention to the overlap between the two in *The Time of the Hunter's Moon*. The narrator, Cordelia Grant, is an English teacher working in a private school. She narrates:

> I found lessons stimulating. I had a subject very dear to my heart – English literature – and it was very interesting for me to read my favourite Jane Austen and the Shakespeare plays with closer attention than I had given them before, to read them with the girls, to dissect them, and search for hidden meanings (97).

The search for hidden meanings in literature reflects the search for hidden meanings in detective fiction. When she looks back over a series of events which led to serial murder, Cordelia must search for hidden meanings in the speech and behaviour of those around her. Only by uncovering them can she understand what actually took place.

There are a number of reasons, then, for the lack of criticism relating to crime in Holt's work. However, the fact remains that it has been under-represented, leaving a gap in criticism which this chapter seeks to redress. 'Crime fiction' as it is used here refers to all branches of the genre including detective fiction, sensation fiction, domestic noir and

thrillers. The first section of this chapter argues that Holt's novels talk back to Victorian real-life crime as well as Gothic and sensation fiction. Unlike the other sections, it refers to the author herself as Eleanor Hibbert (rather than Holt) because it explores her novels written under the pseudonym of Elbur Ford, as well as her novels written under the pseudonym of Victoria Holt. The Elbur Ford novels are fictionalised versions of true Victorian crimes and the section argues that they show a hitherto unrecognised self-reflexivity in Holt's creation of criminal characters and crimes. Holt's employment of Newgate fiction, as well as sensation fiction, is used to make a case for extending the 'Victorian' period beyond the confines of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) to include the whole nineteenth century.

The second section focuses on detection, whether by the more usual amateur detective or, occasionally, by the authorities. It situates Holt's novels in the development of twentieth-century crime fiction, arguing that they provide a link in the chain leading from sensation fiction, through Golden Age detective fiction and domestic noir, to today's thrillers such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). In seeking to determine whether Holt's novels can legitimately be considered detective novels it compares them to the work of Agatha Christie, who is the "crucial figure" in Golden Age detective fiction (Knight "Golden" 81). It also gestures to other Golden Age authors including Dorothy L. Sayers, who was "a major force in asserting the identity and the credibility of crime fiction" (Knight *Crime* 97). It then investigates common themes between Holt and domestic noir, using *The Road to Paradise Island* (1985) as an example of the home being "a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence" (Joyce vii). Additionally, it draws attention to Holt's place as an innovator in the development of historical crime fiction, a subgenre in which the amateur detectives are arguably more credible than they are in contemporary crime fiction because the methods available to them do not differ so widely from those of the police force.

The third section focuses on punishment, arguing that Holt's novels co-articulate anxieties over capital punishment at a time of unprecedented change. Execution had traditionally been the mandatory punishment for murder. However, increasing unease about its morality and efficacy led to its suspension and, finally, its abolition in the late twentieth century. Holt's novels were published across this volatile time. Analysing key scenes from *The Shivering Sands* and *The Curse of the Kings*, it reveals how Holt blurs the lines between murder and socially sanctioned forms of killing, thereby questioning the morality of capital punishment and reflecting the political and social anxieties of her era. In the process of all these investigations, Cox's claims that crimes set in the past are made safe by their historical setting are interrogated. The chapter finally draws conclusions as to the validity of considering Holt's novels as crime novels and their position in both neo-Victorianism and in twentieth-century crime fiction.

Mystery and Murder: Talking Back to Victorian Crime

In all of Victoria Holt's novels there is a crime. It often starts as a mystery which leads to the uncovering of a murder and then places the narrator in danger of her life. In a 1980 interview, Holt said that her books consisted of "mainly surprise and mystery" (Smith). Contemporary reviewers agreed. The review for *Curse of the Kings*, quoted at the start of this chapter, highlights the mystery. So too does Marlene A. Eilers's review of *The Captive*, which opens: "Victoria Holt is at her very best in *The Captive*, where murder, mayhem and a hint of the Orient are expertly combined". Similarly, Elizabeth Harvey's review of *The Shivering Sands* emphasises the crime: "One of them [the narrator's pupils], married to the villain suspected of killing his brother who was a paragon of goodness and beauty, disappears next and Caroline herself is in great danger." Carol Anderson, reviewing *Spring of the Tiger*, refers even more directly to the crime: "There are many people who have obvious reasons to want

Sarah dead – Clinton and his mistresses, Clytie and her husband. The real reason, and a murderer, come as a surprise".

Holt's first novels, published in the early 1960s, typically open with a focus on the narrator's circumstances, but from 1970 onwards many of the novels open with a narrative 'hook' which references the murder or mystery. For example, the first sentence of *The Secret Woman* reads:

> When my Aunt Charlotte died suddenly many people believed that I had killed her and that if it had not been for Nurse Loman's evidence at the inquest, the verdict would have been one of murder by some person or persons unknown; there would have been a probing into the dark secrets of the Queen's House, and the truth would have come out (3).

Similarly, *The Judas Kiss* opens with: "I was seventeen years old before I discovered that my sister had been murdered" (7). Other novels refer to mystery and intrigue without specifying an actual crime. For example, *The House of a Thousand Lanterns* includes in its first paragraph: "Little did I realise then that I, Jane Lindsay, would one day be caught up in the mystery, danger and intrigue which was centred in that house with the haunting name" (7). Likewise, in the first sentence of *Spring of the Tiger* the narrator looks back "over the sequence of events which brought me to that house of brooding mystery, of sinister undercurrents and disturbing echoes and an awareness of encroaching peril" (9). The crime often then disappears into the background until the latter half of the novel but its initial prominence suggests that its use as a narrative hook is one of the reasons for Holt's extraordinary sales.

The emphasis on mystery shows Holt's debt to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic, in which mystery plays an important role. Indeed, the word 'mystery' is used in the

title of seventy novels from 1794 to 1854 (Landrum qtd. in Knight *Crime* 19) and a search of *At the Circulating Library*'s database lists 154 titles which include the word 'mystery' between 1837 and 1901. Holt's narrator-detectives often begin by investigating a mystery rather than a murder. For example, in *Mistress of Mellyn,* Martha is driven to uncover the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Connan TreMellyn's first wife; in *The Shivering Sands,* Caroline Verlaine is driven to find out what happened to her missing sister. It is only at the end of the novels that the mysterious disappearances are finally confirmed to be murders. Both Martha and Caroline face what seems like certain death by immuration, a trope which is common in Victorian Gothic fiction. Knight notes that stories of live burials are prevalent in stories published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in the early nineteenth century (*Crime* 17). Edgar Allen Poe's work also features the theme. Poe is canonical in both Gothic and crime fiction, and is considered by T. S. Eliot to be one of the fathers of the crime genre. His use of immuration can be found in "The Black Cat" (1843), "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), for example. In Blackwood's stories "the viewpoint is normally that of a detached observer" (Knight Crime 17). In Poe's stories the viewpoint is that of the murderer. Holt talks back by telling her stories from the point of view of the victim, always the female narrator. This not only adds a further layer of Gothic horror, but it also emphasises the theme of female entrapment which is a feature of Holt's novels.

Holt is also indebted to sensation fiction, particularly for the trope of the transgressive woman. Sensation fiction is itself an important connection in the development of crime fiction, as many critics and authors point out. T. S. Eliot declares that Collins's Victorian sensation novel, *The Moonstone*, is "the first, the longest and the best of modern English detective novels", a view shared by Dorothy L. Sayers, who remarks that it is "probably the finest detective story ever written" (qtd. in Knight *Crime* 44). Julian Symons remarks that all

forms of crime fiction are "part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature" (Symons 4). Similarly, Hadley remarks: "Sensation and detective fiction adopt a similar plot structure: both genres hinge on the discovery of a secret from the past that threatens the social order in the present" (63). Cox comments that "the specific tenets of the sensation novel (including the domestic setting, the emphasis on family secrets, and the figure of the amateur detective) are redeployed in the detective genre" (75). Additionally, Maurizio Ascari presents sensation fiction as part of a counter-history of crime fiction, which places further emphasis on the sensational roots of the discourse, noting that in sensation fiction the "plots centred on criminal deeds, or social transgressions or illicit passions" (110). The murders in Holt's novels are often committed by women, recalling Lady Audley. However, Holt does not simply copy the trope. Instead, she develops it by using it for neo-Victorian purpose, to co-articulate matters of socio-political concern. In particular she uses it to draw attention to the continuing disadvantaged position of women, as discussed throughout this thesis.

Holt also talks back to Newgate fiction, published predominantly in the 1830s and 1840s, which had a historical setting and drew on true crimes for its inspiration. Whereas the Newgate novelists look back from the nineteenth century to the eighteenth century for their criminal sources, Holt looks back from the twentieth century to the nineteenth century. The first Newgate novel, Edward Bulwer's *Paul Clifford*, was published in 1830 and was followed by his *Eugene Aram* (1832).[36] Both novels, like Holt's, have a historical setting and, in the case of *Eugene Aram*, its eponymous character is based on a real-life murderer who was hanged in 1759. The bones of Aram's victim, Daniel Clarke, were discovered in a cave fourteen years after the crime was committed, leading to Aram's trial and execution. The discovery of bones in an isolated and enclosed space, years after the murder, is echoed in Holt's *Mistress of Mellyn*.

[36] Edward Bulwer was known as Edward Bulwer Lytton after 1843.

The historical setting and elements of real crime found in Newgate fiction, then, are important antecedents for Holt's novels. Moreover, they intervene in the debate surrounding periodisation in neo-Victorian criticism. Holt's work has recently garnered a little more critical attention with the publication of Jessica Cox's *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction* (2019), in which there is a section devoted to *The Shivering Sands*. Holt's growing recognition as a neo-Victorian author, combined with her roots in Newgate fiction, emphasise the need for a wider periodisation of the discourse. If the term 'neo-Victorian' is defined as literature published after the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, but engaging with the period of her reign, then Newgate fiction is excluded as a legitimate area of study since it precedes Victoria's reign. However, Newgate fiction is likely to be important in any study of neo-Victorian crime. Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* has echoes of *Paul Clifford*, for example. Both novels include sensational revelations about parentage and both have a criminal who disguises himself as a 'gentleman' (and who, in Waters's novel, is actually known as Gentleman). To rule out an important antecedent on the arbitrary date of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne is unnecessarily limiting and indeed detrimental to scholarship. The use of the long nineteenth century is therefore indicated as a necessary extension.

One of the factors standing between Holt and recognition as a neo-Victorian author is a view that she does not self-consciously engage with the Victorian era. The novels she wrote under the name of Elbur Ford can be used to show that she was knowingly engaging with Victorian real-life crime in her Victoria Holt novels, and that she was using those crimes intertextually. The four Elbur Ford novels are fictionalised accounts of real-life Victorian crimes. They not only demonstrate Holt's familiarity with Victorian crime, but they also show an important link between Holt and Golden Age crime, again helping to situate her in the history of crime fiction. By fictionalising real crimes, Holt was following in the tradition of members of the Detection Club, who published *The Anatomy of Murder* in 1936. In that

book, seven prominent Golden Age authors give accounts of seven murders, some of which are also explored by Hibbert in her Elbur Ford novels. The overlapping cases are those of Constance Kent and Adelaide Bartlett, both of which are Victorian crime cases. They feature respectively in Ford's novels *Such Bitter Business* (1953)[37] and *Poison in Pimlico* (1950). In fictionalising the Kent case, Ford was not only following in the footsteps of the Detection Club, but she was also anticipating Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2008). Summerscale's novel is based on the Constance Kent case, and Summerscale acknowledges Ford's earlier novel.

Ford's remaining novels are *Flesh and the Devil* (1950), based on the criminal case of Dr Edward Pritchard (1825-1865), and *The Bed Disturbed* (1952), based on the case of Euphrasie Mercier. Richard Dalby, writing in the April 1993 edition of *Book and Magazine Collector* #109, remarks: "This gripping series of novels, each one closely based on official records, skilfully reveals the various events and emotions which lay behind some of the most sensational and ghastly murders of the last century" (18). These four novels have not yet been investigated as neo-Victorian texts, and they are in need of further study. They are discussed here to establish that Holt had an in-depth knowledge of the crimes, echoes of which can be discerned in her novels. By referencing the Ford novels it is possible to show that Holt knew of the actual cases and that the similarities are therefore self-conscious rather than coincidental.

Echoes of the Kent case, which was fictionalised by Ford as *Such Bitter Business*, can be heard in Holt's *The Shivering Sands*. Constance Kent was sixteen when her three-year-old brother was found murdered and Constance was suspected of the crime. Although she was arrested she was released without trial, partly because there was no direct evidence against her but also because the idea of a sixteen-year-old girl committing murder was incompatible

[37] *Such Bitter Business* was published in the United States as *Evil in the House* (1954).

with Victorian ideas surrounding age and gender. *The Shivering Sands* involves a murderous child. It also references Wilkie Collins, whose sensation novel *The Moonstone* makes use of the Kent case. [38]

There are multiple echoes of the Bartlett case in Holt's work. Adelaide Bartlett was accused of murdering her husband in 1886. Adelaide's illegitimacy provides one echo, since illegitimacy often inspires Holt's characters to murder. The sympathy shown to Adelaide provides another echo, which can be found in the sympathy shown to many of Holt's murderous women, including Celestine in *Mistress of Mellyn*, Ethel in *Secret for a Nightingale* and Fanny in *Menfreya*. Similarly, there are echoes of Dr Edward Pritchard, who is the subject of Ford's *Flesh and the Devil*, in the amoral Dr Damien Adair from Holt's *Secret for a Nightingale* and in the murderous Dr Deveril Smith in Holt's *Kirkland Revels*, as well as many of Holt's criminals who murder by poisoning: Pritchard murdered his wife and her mother by poisoning their food with antimony and aconite, then falsified their death certificates so that it looked as if they had died from natural causes.

In her echoes of Pritchard, Holt was continuing a literary tradition which embraced Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. John R. Reed argues that Mary Elizabeth Braddon could have based the character of Philip Sheldon on Pritchard in her 1867 novel *Birds of Prey* ("Laws" 168); Conan Doyle mentions Pritchard in "The Speckled Band", saying: "When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge. Palmer and Pritchard were among the heads of their profession" (256). Pritchard is also mentioned by Agatha Christie in *Crooked House* (1949): when it is said that poisoning is a woman's crime, the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard remarks that plenty of men have been poisoners and names Pritchard (101). In Holt's *Shadow of the Lynx*

[38] Jones, Amanda. (2019). "Madness, Monks and Mutiny: Neo-Victorianism in the Work of Victoria Holt." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 12(1), 1–27. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3470919

(1971), the companion Lucy Maryan murders her mistress, echoing the murderous servant in the Mercier case.

However, Holt did not simply rely on the crimes that she had earlier fictionalised as Elbur Ford. She also used elements of other real Victorian crimes in her novels. The case of Madeleine Smith is explicitly referenced in *The Snare of Serpents*. In 1855, Madeleine Smith had an affair with Emile L'Angelier but when a more suitable match was found for her she attempted to break off the relationship. L'Angelier threatened to expose her by revealing the letters she had written to him. She was seen buying arsenic and L'Angelier was subsequently murdered, poisoned with arsenic. At her 1857 trial, Smith's case was found 'not proven'. The 'not proven' verdict, which was possible under Scottish law as an alternative to 'guilty' or 'not guilty', indicated that the jury thought she was guilty but they did not feel there was enough evidence to convict her.

Both Madeleine Smith and Davina Glentyre, the narrator of *Snare of Serpents*, are suspected of murder by using arsenical poisoning. Both stand trial for their lives and both receive the Scottish verdict of 'not proven'. A 'not proven' verdict results in acquittal for both Madeleine and Davina, but nevertheless leaves them under a cloud of suspicion. The effect this has on Davina provides much of the tension and conflict in Holt's novel. Wilkie Collins used the Smith case as a basis for his 1875 novel, *The Law and the Lady*, in which Eustace Woodville suffers a 'not proven' verdict. *The Snare of Serpents* therefore has a double engagement with the Victorian period reflecting on both Victorian crime and Victorian literature.

As in her Elbur Ford novels, Holt delves into the emotions which lay behind the murders in her novels, rather than focusing solely on crime, detection, court cases and punishment. She explores the reasons for criminal behaviour and "[s]he is particularly adept at . . . imagining interesting motives for her villains" (Mussell 368). In this, her work shows

the interests that were typical of post-war crime fiction. Julian Symons, writing in the 1960s, notes that post-war writers, "while often retaining a puzzle element, are primarily concerned with crime in relation to character and motive" (*Detective* 35). He further notes that post-war crime fiction "has retained many elements of the detective story, [but] its interests are far more like those of a novel" (*Detective* 35). Holt's work is also closer to novels with a variety of concerns, whilst still having a detective thread which varies in prominence from book to book.

Holt's work shows a particular interest in crimes committed by those who were disadvantaged by their society, as discussed in the previous chapters. In so doing, it anticipates one of the major concerns of neo-Victorian fiction, which foregrounds marginalised characters. An article in *The Christian Remembrancer* in 1864 draws attention to the fact that "[c]rime is inseparable from the sensation novel, and so is sympathy with crime" (qtd in Cox 71). Holt's novels echo this view, regarding disadvantaged criminals in a sympathetic light. The criminal acts are positioned as the responsibility of society, rather than solely the responsibility of the individual, and the inference is that criminality cannot be excised until the inequalities in society are themselves rooted out.

Holt's work does not just look back, however. It also anticipates trends which were to become increasingly important in the latter half of the twentieth century. In combining elements of crime and sensation fiction in a Victorian setting, Holt's novels anticipate later, acknowledged, neo-Victorian fiction such as Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*. In addition, Holt's novels anticipate Victorian-set historical crime fiction. Historical and neo-Victorian crime novels are related but not the same. In particular, a use of intertextuality in neo-Victorian crime fiction separates the two. However, whilst not all historical crime fiction set in the Victorian era can be considered neo-Victorian, all neo-Victorian crime fiction can be seen as historical as well as neo-Victorian. Peter Lovesey's novel, *Wobble to Death* (1970), is

mentioned in general criticism such as *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, where it is the first Victorian-set crime novel mentioned. However, several of Holt's novels predate it and, indeed, *Mistress of Mellyn* predates it by a decade. However, Holt is not mentioned in the *Companion*, suggesting that her importance as a pioneer in this branch of crime fiction has not yet been recognised.

Other historical crime novels followed as the subgenre became increasingly popular. Not all of them were set in the Victorian period. Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael novels, for example, are set in the twelfth century and Lindsay Davies's Marcus Didius Falco novels take place in the first century A.D. However, the subgenre began with Victorian-set crime fiction and the popularity of Peters, Davies and others shows a continuing interest in historical crime as the century wore on: the first Cadfael novel, *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, was published in 1977, and the first Falco novel, *The Silver Pigs*, was published in 1989. Given that historical crime begins to flourish at a time when detective fiction was being pushed aside by police procedurals, it seems likely that part of the appeal was in its greater credibility. In a contemporary novel, a reason had to be found for excluding the police and the private detective's efforts seem increasingly amateurish when compared to the sophisticated methods of detection, such as DNA testing, open to the police. However, in historical crime an amateur detective is more believable since the police are not so firmly established and their methods of detection are not so dissimilar to the amateur's. Whether later authors of historical crime were influenced by Holt is uncertain. However, the huge sales enjoyed by Holt demonstrated that there was a market for Victorian-set crime fiction and this arguably influenced publishers in its favour, making them more willing to accept later historical crime novels and give them the necessary promotional support to become bestsellers.

Detection: The Golden Age and Domestic Noir, with Particular reference to *The Shivering Sands* and *The Road to Paradise Island*

Holt's crime writing is not solely defined by neo-Victorian or historical crime. Her novels also have elements of Golden Age detective novels and *domestic noir*, giving them increased relevance in the history of crime fiction. They provide a missing link, most particularly in the counter-history of crime fiction as detailed by Maurizio Ascari. Ascari analyses the "hybrid zones" (xii) where the conventions of detective fiction mingle with those of other genres, including sensation fiction. This section will explore Holt's use of Golden Age and *domestic noir* conventions both independently of, and linked to, her neo- Victorianism. In particular, it will analyse Holt's *The Shivering Sands* as an example of a novel utilising elements of Golden Age detective fiction, and *The Road to Paradise Island* as an example of *domestic noir*.

The first half of the twentieth century was dominated by so-called 'cosy' crime novels, representing a Golden Age for crime writing. This 'golden age' is generally regarded as being the period between the first and second world wars. Both terms have been called into question: 'cosy' crime often features dark elements, and golden age fiction did not stop being published at the end of the inter-war period. Stephen Knight points out that the terms are of limited use anyway since there is an overlap between them. Knight instead uses the term "clue-puzzle" novels (*Crime* xiv), which highlights the importance of looking for, and finding, clues rather than relying on intuition or police procedures. The most important figure, according to Knight, is Agatha Christie, who develops a "pattern of extraordinary resilience" (Priestman qtd. Knight "Golden" 81).

Cox rightly points out that Agatha Christie's novels themselves owe a debt to sensation fiction. Indeed, both Christie and Miss Marple were Victorians (although discrepancies within Christie's work as a whole sometimes contradict this). Christie was born

in 1890, and Miss Marple first appeared in 1927 when she was already an old lady. Christie stated that Miss Marple was "the sort of old lady who would have been rather like some of my step grandmother's Ealing cronies – old ladies whom I have met in so many villages where I have gone to stay as a girl" (*Autobiography* 449). Christie often mentions the Victorian era in the course of her work. For example, in *4.50 from Paddington*, one of the characters, Cedric Crackenthorpe, refers to the body that has been discovered in the barn as being like a "Victorian melodrama" (79). It is likely that Christie is here referring to the 1826 Red Barn Murders, which formed the basis of popular Victorian melodramas, and this reference suggests that it was the inspiration for her own novel.

As Cox demonstrates, Christie mentions sensation novels by name. *Lady Audley's Secret* appears in Christie's short story, "Greenshaw's Folly" where it is presented as one of the books in a library that "showed little signs of having being read" (154). Cox argues persuasively that this reflects "the lack of interest in the sensation novel by the time 'Greenshaw's Folly' was published" (74). Significantly, Cox dates the story to 1960, which is the year that Holt's first novel was published. The correlation of dates suggests that Holt's rise is linked to the death of the Victorian sensation novel: when the latter fell out of favour, the time was ripe for a new kind of sensation novel to take its place. The correlation between the dates is not quite as tidy as this makes it appear. Although "Greenshaw's Folly" was included in a collection named *The Adventures of the Christmas Pudding* which was first published in 1960, the story itself was originally published in the *Daily Mail* in 1956. However, the closeness of the dates suggests that the demand for sensational stories had not died. It was simply dormant until such time as sensational stories which were accessible for the modern reader appeared.

Holt was well placed to reinvent the sensation novel for a twentieth-century readership and to bring about its revival. Her thorough knowledge of Victorian sensation

fiction allowed her to use tropes with proven popularity, and her ability to select crimes pertinent to both eras enabled her to create novels which articulated matters of contemporary concern. Whilst drawing on the past, therefore, her novels were relevant for her contemporary readership. Her adoption of some of the Golden Age traits suggests further reasons why her books were market leaders and why they continued to be popular after the main modern Gothic wave had subsided. Knight usefully defines the key markers of the Golden Age as: the crime being murder, the setting being enclosed (often a country house), the social range being essentially middle class and the detective being an amateur who uses rational means of deduction, as opposed to intuition or police procedures. In addition, according to Knight, Golden Age crimes have a limited range of suspects, a political context of the era is absent, there is a lack of mourning for the victim and the absence of "the real pain and degradation of violent death" ("Golden" 78). Furthermore, romance is rare, though it can occur and "minor suspects can pair off finally" ("Crime" 87). The story ends with the identification of the criminal. Executions are usually not included, although the killers often commit suicide or meet an accidental death, thus providing a moral justice.

Analysing Holt's novels alongside Agatha Christie's work in the light of Knight's markers demonstrates the line of descent from Christie to Holt as well as showing their shared line of descent from sensation fiction. Both Holt and Christie use murder as their major crime. Other crimes feature, but it is the uncovering of the murderer which is the main narrative drive and which marks the end of the novel. Both authors use enclosed settings, often country houses. Christie's first novel is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Like the nineteenth-century novels before it, it emphasises the mystery element. It is not until later that 'murder' or 'death' become the key words in the titles. The novel uses Styles house as its major setting and many other country houses followed. Holt's early novels published in the 1960s, including *Mistress of Mellyn* and *The Shivering Sands*, also feature country houses as

an enclosed setting. As with Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Holt's early novels are often also named after the house. In her later work, when Holt's enclosed settings became more varied, part of *The Secret Woman* is set on board a ship, echoing the setting in Christie's *Death on the Nile* (1937). There is a possibility that influence worked both ways. In Christie's *Endless Night* (1967) the murderer commits his crimes in order to gain the house of his dreams, recalling Holt's *Mistress of Mellyn*.

The social range in Christie's novels is essentially middle class. The lower classes also appear, often as servants, but they are usually confined to minor roles. Holt is less restrictive than Christie in this matter, with the narrator sometimes forming a bond with a working-class character who adopts a major role. Fanny in *Menfreya*, for example, is a major character who turns out to be a (failed) murderess, and the working-class Eliza features strongly in *Secret for a Nightingale*, again being a failed murderess. There is also some diversity in the social class of the narrators and their love interests. Many of Holt's narrators are impoverished, although they are still essentially middle class. However, Kerensa Carlee, the narrator of *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* is a poor cottage girl who hopes to be given a job as a servant. Similarly, some of the heroes are from the professional classes, for example Dr Adair in *Secret for a Nightingale*.

The similarities between Holt's novels and those of Agatha Christie emphasise the importance of the detective element in Holt's work. They further demonstrate that Holt does not just imitate Victorian sensation fiction, but that she creates a hybrid which emerges from twentieth-century detective fiction as well as Victorian fiction, and in so doing she moves the genre forwards. Her work, then, is a strand in the development of crime fiction throughout the twentieth century. Both Holt and Christie use an amateur detective and have a limited range of suspects, who are often members of the victims' families. In Holt's case the amateur detective is the narrator. Although Christie's novels are usually written in the third person,

some of them use a first-person narrative and the narrator functions as an amateur detective, for example Charles Hayward in *Crooked House* (1949). Both authors use rational methods of deduction, although Holt's narrators sometimes also use intuition, and sometimes the mystery unfolds without their help. Both Holt and Christie use a female detective who owes a debt to Marion Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. However, whereas most of Christie's famous novels use the recurring detectives Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, Holt's novels lack a unifying detective. Yet although the detective is not the same named person, Holt's detectives can be seen as functionally the same: a female narrator who acts as an amateur detective as she uncovers a crime, usually murder, and identifies the criminal.

Holt also differs from Christie in that Christie's detectives work out the identity of the murderer and then apprehend them, but Holt's narrators only discover the identity of the murderer when they themselves become the murderer's next intended victim. Holt's method of revealing the villain's identity is similar to Christie's method in some of the Marple stories. In Christie's *A Murder is Announced* (1950), for example, Miss Marple persuades the housekeeper Mitzi to imply that she has seen Miss Blacklock committing a murder. When Miss Blacklock attempts to kill Mitzi in order to silence her, Miss Marple and the police are hiding close by and witness the deed. Similarly, in *The Moving Finger* (1943), Miss Marple persuades Megan to tell Mr Simmonds that she knows he committed murder and to demand money from him. In order to silence her, he drugs her and attempts to gas her by putting her head in the oven. Again, Miss Marple and the police are watching and he is caught. Like Christie, Holt uses a failed attempt at murder as the climax of her novels.

In Holt's novels, the narrator's main love interest is always, at some point, a suspect. Existing criticism reads this from a feminist perspective and uses it as an example of Holt's conservatism. Joanna Russ quotes Terry Carr as saying: "The basic appeal . . . is to women who marry guys and then begin to discover that their husbands are strangers [. . . there is a]

handsome, magnetic suitor or husband who may or may not be a lunatic and / or murderer" concluding that the readers " were frightened of their husbands" (Russ 667). Carr was an ex-editor at Ace books, a publishing house that published some reprints of Holt's work. His views have been influential in the way that Holt's work is seen: following Russ, Wallace also cites them. However, Carr's opinions need to be treated with caution as he does not appear to have any special expertise in Victorian, crime or Gothic fiction. Rather, he was an editor of Ace's science fiction, and was himself a science fiction author.

Rather than being seen as expressions of conservatism, Holt's dangerous love interests have a long literary history. They derive in part from the figure of the demon lover in Gothic and sensation fiction, but they also derive from the archetype of the dangerous husband in detective fiction. In Christie's novels, (as in real life), if a woman is murdered then the immediate suspect is her husband. In this, they are a mirror image of Gothic and sensation fiction which takes the opposite approach, diverting suspicion from the husband until eventually revealing his guilt as a major plot twist, for example in *Paul Ferroll* and *Rebecca*. The logical suspicion of husbands is made explicit by Christie in *The Moving Finger*. When explaining why Mr Symmington sent a lot of poison pen letters before murdering his wife, Miss Marple explains that it was a smoke screen because "the very first person one thinks of in such a case, is, I am afraid, the *husband*" (225, italics in original). Similarly, in *4.50 from Paddington* (1957), Miss Marple says: "So many men seem to murder their wives" (278).

Christie, like Holt, often teases the reader with the fear that the love interest (rather than the husband) is the murderer but then swerves from that conclusion. For example, in *The Moving Finger*, Jerry Burton suspects Megan Hunter of writing the poison pen letters which led to Mrs Symmington supposedly committing suicide, before it is revealed that Mrs Symmington was actually murdered by her husband. Holt, then, like Christie, manipulates the

reader into believing that the husband or other love interest is the murderer before revealing the true perpetrator. She is therefore working in the tradition of Gothic, sensation and Golden Age crime when she makes her leading male characters suspects, and her readers are no more likely to be afraid of their husbands than the readers of these other forms of fiction. By playing with the possible guilt of the love interest, Holt's work forms a link in the development of crime fiction in the twentieth century, which leads on to novels such as S. J. Watson's *Before I Go To Sleep* (2011), which gives the theme a further twist. In Watson's novel, amnesiac Christine Lucas fears that her husband, Ben, is the person who was responsible for the vicious attack on her which left her with amnesia. Watson plays with the idea of Ben's guilt, presenting him alternately as a loving husband who is trying to cope with his wife's condition and as a man who might be her assailant. Watson's twist is that Ben is not Christine's husband, as he pretends to be, but is instead Mike, her lover, and he is indeed the man who attacked her. The threatening romantic partner therefore is really to be feared, but the twist is that he is not the husband.

Gillian Flynn subverts the theme even further in her domestic noir thriller, *Gone Girl*, where she plays with gender stereotypes as well as playing with the idea of the husband as murderer. The husband, Nick Dunne, is ultimately revealed to be innocent after his wife, Amy Elliott, (a descendant of Lady Audley and other transgressive sensation fiction 'heroines'), deliberately creates the illusion that he has murdered her. Like Holt's novels, and *Before I Go to Sleep*, it has a first-person female narrator. The narration provides a sense of immediacy and intensifies the sense of connection for the reader whilst also making the plot twists more surprising. The use of a first-person *transgressive* female narration is used by Holt in *The Secret Woman*, discussed in Chapter Five. Holt makes Chantel Loman one of two narrators, showing the novel's descent from *The Moonstone*, with its multiple narrators, but also anticipating *Gone Girl*'s dual narration, in which Amy's first-person narration alternates

with sections using Nick's first-person narration. Chantel, like the later Amy, is an unreliable narrator. Chantel, like her Victorian predecessors, is ultimately punished for her crimes. However, Flynn develops the idea of an ambiguous attitude towards the criminal and Amy is not punished for her transgressions.

Given that Holt's narrators are themselves victims of the murderer and they only just manage to escape with their lives, it is perhaps not surprising that her novels express more fear and horror than is customary in Golden Age fiction. References to violence are not altogether excluded from Golden Age novels, for example, in Christie's *The Moving Finger*: "[s]omewhere . . . was a person who had cracked a defenceless girl's skull and driven a sharp skewer home to her brain" (173). However, the victim's fear is not expressed from their point of view. Holt's novels, by contrast, emphasise the fear of the victim when the narrator faces what seems like certain death. Her novels therefore provide an example of the hybridity Ascari outlines, as the novels merge with horror fiction, an element which follows in the tradition of Poe as discussed earlier.

Whilst many of Knight's defining factors of Golden Age fiction are justified, as discussed above, his argument that romance is "[n]otably absent in most cases" (Knight 87) is unconvincing. Many crime novels have a romantic element. Knight's denial of romance seems to be a part of the hierarchical syndrome mentioned at the start of this chapter. Despite critics overcoming ideas of worthiness where crime is concerned, romance retains its aura of being critically unacceptable. Many of Christie's novels feature romances. *Crooked House*, for example, has a romance between the narrator, Charles Hayward, and Sophia Leonides. These two characters marry at the end of the novel. *The Moving Finger* has two romances: the narrator and amateur detective, Jerry Burton, falls in love with Megan Hunter and his sister falls in love with Owen Griffith. The novel ends with Jerry and Megan looking at their wedding presents. *Death on the Nile* has its events set in motion by love. Jacqueline de

Bellefort is in love with Simon Doyle but recognises that he covets the wealth of her friend, Linnet Ridgeway. She devises a complicated plan in which Simon marries Linnet and then she and Simon murder Linnet for her money. Again, the murder in *Endless Night* is motivated by love. Michael Rogers is in love with Greta Anderson but desires wealth. He therefore marries heiress Fenella (Ellie) Rogers, after which he and Greta murder Ellie. Christie is not the only author of detective fiction to feature romance as a part of her novels. In some of Dorothy L. Sayers's novels, for example, Lord Peter Wimsey falls in love with Harriet Vane and the two eventually marry in *Busman's Honeymoon*.

Holt's novels always feature a romance. One of the major differences between Holt and Christie is that Holt's novels generally have a heavier emphasis on the romance, whereas Christie's novels generally have a heavier emphasis on the crime. This can partly be explained by the fact that Holt's novels are descended from Gothic and sensation fiction. However, in some cases, the crime and romance are finely balanced, for example in Christie's *The Moving Finger* and Holt's *The Shivering Sands*. With both Christie and Holt, the unmasking of the murderer provides the climactic ending (although brief epilogues might appear, to tie up any loose ends, including outstanding romantic issues). The punishment of the criminals does not appear and most avoid the gallows by committing suicide or accidental death.

Holt, like Christie, teases her readers from one novel to another. In *The Moving Finger* (1943), Megan Symmington is described as a "changeling" child. Her hatred of her family seems to make her a suspect as the sender of poison pen letters, but the novel resolves in a different way when her stepfather is revealed to be the author of the letters and the murderer. In *Crooked House* (1949), Josephine Leonides is described as a "changeling" child, but this time the changeling child is revealed to be the murderer. Holt sets up similar resonances in her work. In *Bride of Pendorric*, the child Hyson seems to be odd and becomes

a suspect for the mysterious happenings in the house but it is finally revealed that the guilty party is Barbarina. In *The Shivering Sands*, Holt plays with her readers' expectation of childhood innocence by introducing another child, Alice, who seems as if she might have something to do with the strange goings on in the house, and this time she is revealed to be the murderess.

Both *The Shivering Sands* and *Crooked House* draw on the case of Constance Kent. Holt's appropriation of the case is implicit, but is strongly indicated not only by the theme of a murderous child but also by the novel's explicit reference to Wilkie Collins. Christie's reference to the case is, by contrast, explicit. She uses it as misdirection, in a conversation between the narrator and his father, who is the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard. The Assistant Commissioner says that some murderers "have been thoroughly nice chaps . . . They've been in a tight place or they've wanted something very badly, money or a woman — and they've killed to get it. The brake that operates with most of us doesn't operate with them. A child, you know, translates desire into action without compunction . . . Constance Kent, everybody said, was very fond of the baby brother she killed" (114, 115). By talking about children, Christie gives a major clue that the murderer in this case is a child. However, by making it seem as though the comment is an illustration of the murderer's emotional immaturity she directs attention away from the child in the case and towards the adult male suspects.

Sensation fiction, Golden Age crime and Holt's usual *modus operandi* all overlap prominently in Holt's *Bride of Pendorric*. The novel has echoes of both *The Woman in White* and *A Murder is Announced*, and it has similarities with the later *Fingersmith*. It is unique in Holt's work in that its setting is contemporary rather than historical.[39] The reasons for the

[39] Interestingly, Holt provides a link with *Mistress of Mellyn* by mentioning its two fictional houses, Mount Mellyn and Mount Widden, as part of the surrounding district, along with the real house of Cotehele.

contemporary setting are unclear, but what is certain is that the contemporary setting was never repeated. Cox's insightful work linking Christie to sensation fiction, however, provides a way of including *Bride of Pendorric* in a consideration of Holt's neo-Victorianism. The unifying feature of these four disparate novels is their central plot point of women taking on each other's identities. In *The Woman in White*, the unscrupulous Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco swap Laura Fairlie for her half-sister Anne Catherick. The healthy Laura is drugged and committed to an asylum in place of the sickly Anne. Anne is taken to a place where she is not known and, when she dies, she is buried under the name of Laura Fairlie.

Christie gives the 'sister swap' plot a twist with one of the sisters bringing about the swap. The wealthy Letitia Blacklock takes care of her delicate sister, Charlotte, in Switzerland. Against all expectations, Letitia dies of natural causes and Charlotte survives. Charlotte then deliberately takes on Letitia's identity, burying her sister as Charlotte. She goes to live in an area where she is not known and enjoys her sister's affluence. She takes an old schoolfriend, the loyal but stupid Dora Bunner, to live with her. When Dora's slips, for example calling her 'Lotty' rather than 'Letty', threaten Charlotte's safety, she murders her.

In *Bride of Pendorric*, Holt gives the same theme a further twist by creating her sisters as twins and having one of them murder the other. Barbarina Pendorric's twin sister, Deborah Hyson, is having an affair with Barbarina's husband. As a result, Barbarina murders her. Wanting to be free of her husband, Barbarina then impersonates Deborah so that she can escape the marital home and live out her life in Deborah's house. As in *The Woman in White*, clothes play a crucial role in the swap. Barbarina plans the murder only a few minutes before executing it and has no intention of taking on her sister's identity. But when the dead Deborah is identified as Barbarina because she had borrowed Barbarina's clothes, and when Barbarina is discovered in Deborah's room (where she had fled after the murder because it

was the nearest room), everyone assumes that Barbarina has died. Her death is taken to be an accident and Barbarina escapes detection.

Like Christie, Holt gives her swapped character a faithful companion. Barbarina's faithful nurse, Carrie, is not fooled but keeps silent out of love for Barbarina. Like Dora Bunner in *A Murder Is Announced,* Carrie makes occasional slips but Holt departs from Christie by having these slips put down to old age. Barbarina is eventually driven mad by the constant pretence and comes to believe the legend which has attached to the brides of Pendorric. She thinks that she can find peace of mind if the next bride, Favel Pendorric, dies. She therefore attempts to murder her by drugging her and then setting fire to her bedroom. The fiery conclusion has echoes of both *Jane Eyre*, in which the mad Bertha sets Mr Rochester's bed on fire, and also *Rebecca*, in which Mrs Danvers sets the country house of Manderley aflame. Favel, the novel's narrator, is luckily not completely drugged and she survives.

The essential plot of swapping two women's identities is used again by Sarah Waters in her neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith,* where the maid Sue Trinder and her mistress Maud Lilly swap places. Waters provides a new twist on the theme. Sue Trinder is part of a plan to lock Maud Lily away in an asylum, but finds that she has been tricked and that she is the one who is incarcerated. The novel employs multiple identity swaps between the two women, some of which are engineered by the women themselves and some of which are engineered by others, in order to take advantage of them. The interweaving of these four novels, which all revolve around the central theme of women swapping identities, provides an important strand in the history of crime fiction, which can be seen to stretch back from Waters, through Holt and Christie, to Collins.

The cosy crime, like sensation fiction before it, began to gradually lose popularity. Julian Symons, writing in *Bloody Murder* (1972), suggests that the market for traditional

detective fiction was dwindling by that time, although Knight remarks that it continued to be popular into the 1970s. Agatha Christie's death in 1976 arguably hastened its decline. The timing is again significant. The enormous success of Holt's novels, with their cosy crime elements, coincided with this decline. Holt's popularity suggests that cosy crime did not so much decline as mutate and merge with post-war twentieth-century neo-Victorian fiction.

Holt's novels do not just use elements of cosy crime, however, they also use elements of another sensation fiction offshoot, domestic noir. The term was coined by Julia Crouch in 2013 but it is applicable to earlier fiction and recent criticism has traced its presence in crime novels throughout the twentieth century. Crouch defines it by saying: "At the centre of these stories is a subversion of the idea of home as sanctuary. Home can also be a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence" (vii), adding: "crucially, the stories are seen subjectively, through the eyes of the female protagonists" (viii). Crouch further remarks that:

> for me, writing about the domestic is as much a feminist act as writing about women who are captains of industry . . . domestic noir is an important subgenre. It puts the female experience at the centre of the narrative, rather than just allowing it to support or decorate or provide the springboard for the main, male story. It is a new kind of thriller, for a new kind of world (viii).

These definitions and explanations bind Holt closely to domestic noir. Her novels not only have a female protagonist but they also have a tight focus on the female experience, with women often taking all the major roles of murderess, victim and detective.

Diane Waters and Heather Worthington point out that domestic noir intensifies the claustrophobia of the cosy crime setting, remarking: "The key difference [between cosy and noir] is that while female characters may spend much time in the house, they are not at home

there" (210). Anna Snoekstra remarks that in domestic noir, which follows the Bluebeard tradition, "ordinary wives and homemakers becom[e] pre-emptive detectives, investigating their own potential victimhood" (qtd, in Waters and Worthington 202). Laura Joyce further defines domestic noir as:

> fiction that deals with domestic, intimate, and sexual violence, that deals with a lack of recourse for victims, and that asks questions about . . . safety, rights, and freedoms . . . It "re-enacts existing tropes and mythologies, whilst offering a particular, specific index of the current cultural anxieties which produce these narratives" (1,2).

Whilst Crouch situates domestic noir as a new kind of thriller, critics point out that it has its roots in sensation fiction. A. B. Emrys shows Collins's influence on Vera Caspary, with the villainous Waldo Lydecker in her 1943 novel *Laura*, based on Count Fosco from Collins's *The Woman in White*. Caspary's use of *The Woman in White* links *Laura* to Holt's work as well as Golden Age and sensation fiction. A four-way intertwining of Holt's work, domestic noir, sensation and Golden Age fiction can be seen in specific instances of overlap. For example, the borrowing of an item of clothing leads to a case of mistaken identity in *Laura*, as it does in Holt's *The Silk Vendetta*, Ellen Wood's *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* and Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House* (1932). Holt actually references *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* in *The Silk Vendetta* (22), showing her deliberate intertextual use of the hypotext.

In *Laura*, Laura's friend is shot whilst staying in Laura's flat and wearing her silk robe. In the following two cases the item of clothing is a cloak, and in the latter it is a shawl. This example demonstrates both an overlap and a continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century crime and sensation fiction, as well as neo-Victorian sensation fiction. Instances of overlap have been remarked upon by Cox, who argues persuasively that

Christie's story "Greenshaw's Folly", with its mention of *Lady Audley's Secret*, "functions as a tribute to the sensation novel, an early example of neo-Victorian (sensation) fiction, and an acknowledgement of the genre's influence on detective fiction" (74). *Peril at End House* can be viewed in the same way, with its link to *The Silk Vendetta* and *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* showing the interconnectedness of the genres.

The same interconnectedness can be extended to include domestic noir. Fiona Peters makes a link with another sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, arguing that: "The new interest in domestic noir is an exciting and timely move towards incorporating the new with earlier manifestations of the transgressive female, such as . . . Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley" (22). Holt makes an important contribution to this category of transgressive females, notably with Chantel Loman from *The Secret Woman*, and therefore has an important, but as yet unrecognised, place in the discourse of domestic noir. Peters also cites Daphne du Maurier as a precursor of modern domestic noir novels such as Gillian Flynn's 2012 thriller *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins's 2015 *Girl on a Train* (12). Since du Maurier was an acknowledged influence on Holt, this provides another link between Holt and domestic noir, situating her as an important stepping stone on the way from du Maurier to today's domestic noir.

The focus on the home as a site of danger rather than sanctuary can be seen throughout Holt's work. In some cases it leads indirectly to murder or attempted murder and in others, it is at least implied, it leads directly to murder. Joyce comments that in domestic noir, the home is, "a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence" (vii) and this is certainly the case in Holt's *The Road to Paradise Island*. The novel is episodic and, in brief, it details the experiences of Annalice Mallory, who goes in search of the legendary Paradise Island which is reputed to exist somewhere in the South Seas. She travels out to Australia with Felicity Derring, a young woman who is going there to be married to William Granville.

Felicity has accepted William's proposal in order to escape from an unhappy home life but, on the ship going over, she begins to be afraid as she realises the enormity of her decision. Annalice agrees to go and stay with the newly married couple, to help Felicity settle in. Annalice is then mainly an observer, rather than a participant, in a chapter entitled "Interlude in a Dark House" (244). The characters, like the house, are dark. It quickly becomes apparent that William enjoys humiliating women (246) and that there is "a sadistic streak" in him (270). The housekeeper, Mrs Maken is unwelcoming and has "malevolence in her gaze" (247), echoing *Rebecca*'s frightening housekeeper, Mrs Danvers.

Annalice is afraid for Felicity, who "seemed to have lost all her spirit. Perhaps the only way she could endure the ordeal of being married to William Granville was to numb her sensibilities. I could well imagine that was necessary" (251). Felicity confides in her, saying:

> I can't endure it here. I can't endure . . . him. I didn't know married life was like this. The things that are done . . . I had no idea . . . I can't bring myself to speak of it. . . . When he comes into that bedroom I pray that something awful will happen. Fire perhaps . . . anything to save me from him (263, 264).

Annalice fears that Felicity will either kill herself, having spoken of it, or will "fall into the role of acceptance . . . to become drab, worn out, without spirit, just accepting, taking for granted the cruel life which had been thrust upon her" (268).

One night, Annalice sees Mrs Maken entering William and Felicity's bedroom. "Then I understood. She was in there . . . with him and Felicity. This was monstrous. It could not be endured. What sort of orgies was he planning? The man was lascivious, sexually perverted and insatiable" (272). She tries to persuade Felicity to leave but Felicity is too frightened to go, saying "I'm caught. I'm trapped" (273). As Waters and Worthington explain: "The

concept of domestic space as trap is explored in domestic noir" (201). The trap is not simply physical for Felicity, it is also psychological and emotional. She tells Annalice: "I can't bear to face anyone . . . I can't bear to talk about it, even to you" (274). Her inability to talk about her experiences traps her not only in the confined space of the house but also in the even more confined and claustrophobic space of her own mind.

One night, Annalice hears a shot. She goes into Felicity's bedroom and sees that the balcony has given way. William is sprawled on the ground below, a gun lying close by. Annalice believes that Felicity "had come to the end of her endurance" and had shot William. Annalice does not condemn her for it; rather, she understands, thinking: "There is a limit beyond which even the meekest person cannot be goaded" (279). A cursory investigation takes place. However, it is not the familiar detection of Golden Age crime, with an amateur detective, but it is instead a police investigation. There is little suspense for the reader as it is heavily implied that Felicity shot William out of fear, in an act of self-defence. The episode is that of a thriller rather than a Golden Age crime, with the perpetrator being known from the outset. However, the novel works the incident through to a conclusion, with the local officials being notified. They decide that he heard bushrangers, went out onto the balcony and shot himself accidentally when the balcony gave way. Later, Felicity confides in Annalice, saying: "I shan't rest until I have told you. I want you to tell me that I am not wicked" (285). Felicity frames it as an accident, saying: "I think I may have fired the shot that killed him" (286). However, the implication is that she deliberately shot him. Annalice reassures her that it was not her fault, thinking: "I could only be thankful that it was at an end – *by whatever means we had reached that end*" (290, my italics). The incident therefore remains open-ended. The reader might conclude that Felicity shot him by accident, or that Felicity deliberately shot him, but there is never textual confirmation. The reader here is the detective and they must make their own decision based on the information offered to them.

This incident is not the main focus of the novel, which follows the life of its narrator, for whom Felicity's story is only one element. Nor is it the main crime, which follows Holt's usual pattern when the narrator's life is threatened at the end of the novel before she escapes. Instead, Felicity's marriage is a subplot which is contained within one chapter. It builds on the theme of domestic violence, and in particular marital rape, which was present in *Menfreya* almost two decades earlier. In so doing, it voices one of the major ongoing concerns of the late twentieth century. By showing the pain, fear and distress caused by Felicity's experiences, as well as the long-lasting emotional effects of her abuse, the novel contributes to changing attitudes in the late twentieth century, and pioneers a major feature of neo-Victorian fiction, which is the uncovering of abuse which is not presented in Victorian fiction. In addition, *The Road to Paradise Island* adds an element of the thriller and domestic noir to Holt's more usual conventions, and shows that her novels continue to develop in the ways they explore the darkness that can lie within the home. Laura Joyce points out: "Domestic noir is a capacious, flexible category" (3). With its roots in sensation fiction, its parallels with Golden Age fiction and its focus on women and the home, domestic noir offers a new way of viewing Holt's novels. Situating them, at least partially, in domestic noir not only contributes to her reclamation but it also reveals Holt's place as a 'missing link' between sensation fiction, Golden Age detective fiction and the modern domestic noir.

Punishment: The Horror of the Past, with Particular Reference to *The Shivering Sands* and *The Curse of the Kings*

Newgate fiction, sensation fiction, Golden Age fiction, Holt's novels and domestic noir all approach crime and detection from different angles. Similarly, they include a variety of approaches to punishment. Holt was writing across a time of immense social and political change. In the early part of the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth century, murder was

punishable by death. However, there were several periods of abeyance in the twentieth century. There was a willingness to suspend executions in the 1930s, as evidenced by Mr Vyvyan Adams, who saw the prolonged suffering of the condemned man (or woman) as an evil: "When once he [the murderer] is condemned, I believe that the punishment he then has to sustain—that of waiting during the final period of three weeks for the terrible moment that he knows is coming—often greatly exceeds the sufferings of his unwarned victim" (qtd. in UK Parliament 1938: Column 957 n.p.). but the Second World War delayed matters. When the subject was again broached in 1956, the moral considerations were once more to the fore. Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs, Major Gwilym Lloyd-George, remarked:

> In executing the capital sentence, the State pronounces the moral judgment of society on murder. In what circumstance, if any, society is justified in exacting the extreme and irrevocable penalty is a problem which rightly exercises the minds and consciences of civilised and responsible people everywhere (qtd. in UK Parliament 1956: Column 2536 n.p.).

However, legislation was slow to follow the general opinion and it was not until 1965 that the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act was passed. The Act suspended capital punishment for the crime of murder. The suspension was to last for a period of five years but there was a provision for it to be made permanent, as long as action was taken before the end of those five years. During those five years there was a period of uncertainty but in December 1969 the Act was made permanent, effectively abolishing capital punishment. However, the possibility of its return still lingered. The last House of Commons vote on the reintroduction of the death penalty did not take place until 1994, when it was defeated by 403 votes to 159.

The Shivering Sands and *The Curse of the Kings*, published in 1969 and 1973 respectively, were written and published when punishment was in a state of flux. *The Shivering Sands* was published before the suspension of capital punishment was made permanent, and *The Curse of the Kings* at a time when there was still a possibility of its return. This section therefore analyses Holt's place in the history of crime fiction with regards to punishment, situating the attitudes expressed in her novels in the development of social, legal and literary attitudes from the Victorian era to the late twentieth century.

Despite the fact that they are set in the Victorian era and involve murder, Holt's novels do not follow the murders to their logical conclusions by including lengthy scenes in the condemned cell or at the foot of the gallows. Such scenes were contentious even when the Newgate novelists used them and they were condemned by contemporary critics for being 'low', that is, taking place amongst the lowest classes of people, both socially and morally. However, authors provided a robust defence, arguing that their work acted as a moral warning. Bulwer-Lytton's essay "A Word to the Public" (1847) justifies his work, and that of his contemporaries, by listing a history of literary works which exposed "the meaner and more vicious propensities of men" (25). He said: "The destructive or pernicious power of intellect corrupted into guilt, affords him [the author] of the natural means of creating terror for the evil, and compassion for its victims . . . we confirm social enthusiasm for virtue, and unite the reason with the passions in detestation of crime" (26). He pointed out that there was "terror in the condemned cell" and "tragedy at the foot of the gallows" (26), and that these scenes were the legitimate province of authors in providing a moral lesson.

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1839) exemplifies the type of scene to which Bulwer-Lytton refers. Regarded as a Newgate novel by contemporary critics because of its use of characters from the criminal classes and its gallows scene, *Oliver Twist* follows the criminal Fagin to the condemned cell, where he reflects on his life as he awaits his death:

> It was not until the night of this last awful day, that a withering sense of his helpless, desperate state came in its full intensity upon his blighted soul . . . he started up, every minute, and with gasping mouth and burning skin, hurried to and fro, in such a paroxysm of fear and wrath that even they [the prison guards]—used to such sights—recoiled from him with horror (352).

Dickens here exploits the full horror of the situation but he uses the scene as a moral warning rather than to evoke sympathy for Fagin, or to abominate the punishment. However, although he uses gallows scenes in his novels, he protested against public hangings in real life. In a letter to *The Times* in 1849 he called it a "moral evil", saying that it was time "to root it out". He wrote of witnessing a hanging and commented on the carnival atmosphere of the "general entertainment", pointing out the "wickedness and levity" of the crowd, who showed "no more thought that two immortal souls had gone to judgement [. . . than if] there were no belief among men but that they perished like the beasts". Dickens was not alone in his condemnation, and the last public execution took place in 1868. Executions themselves, however, and their cruelty to the condemned which Mr Adams later abominates, continued.

By avoiding gallows scenes, Holt's treatment of her criminals is closer to sensation fiction than to Newgate fiction. Sensation fiction usually punished its criminals by other means, rather than by legal execution. Lady Audley is confined to an asylum; Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco, in *The Woman in White*, are respectively killed in an accidental fire and killed by a secret society; Sir Francis Levison, in *East Lynne*, commits murder but his sentence is commuted to transportation. The sensation novelists were, in part, echoing the more liberal ideas of the late nineteenth century. During the course of the century, legislation reduced the number of crimes carrying the death penalty and, by 1868, capital punishment was only applicable to murder (and, until 1861, attempted murder). Holt's novels, published

in a time of even greater liberalisation but set in the Victorian era, show Celestine Nansellock in *Mistress of Mellyn* avoiding the gallows because she is insane, for example.[40] Similarly, Dr Deveril Smith in *Kirkland Revels* commits suicide and Barbarina Pendorric in *Bride of Pendorric*, like Sir Percival Glyde, is accidentally killed in a fire.

Golden Age fiction continues the sensation tradition and does not dwell on the punishment of its criminals. As in sensation fiction, (and as in Holt's novels) other forms of punishment, such as suicide or accidental death, often overtake the murderer so that they avoid the gallows. However, the subject of capital punishment is not avoided altogether. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple is in favour of it. In *The Body in the Library* she says of Mark Gaskell: "Really, I feel quite pleased to think of him being hanged" (211); in "A Christmas Tragedy", a short story contained in the collection *The Thirteen Problems* (1932) she says: "I've no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment" (185). Neither does Miss Marple have any patience with notions of attributing murder to madness, unlike the sensation novelists. In *4.50 from Paddington,* she says: "there is great wickedness here". When Lucy Eyelesbarrow responds: "Or madness," Miss Marple replies: "Of course I know that is the modern way of looking at things. I don't agree myself" (234). She does, however, express sympathy for a girl who was fooled into committing murder in "The Tuesday Night Club", a short story which is also contained in *The Thirteen Problems*. In that story she says: "I hope that wicked Jones is hanged, I am sure, making that poor girl a murderess. I suppose they will hang her too, poor thing" (16). Hercule Poirot voices a related concern in the short story, "The Underdog" (1926), asking Lady Astwell if she will agree to being put under hypnosis in order to prevent an innocent man from being hanged (179). Christie's major detectives then condone capital punishment (which was still in force) but

[40] There is a clear parallel here with the fate of Lady Audley.

express an underlying unease concerning the possibility of an innocent person, or a person who is not morally culpable, being hanged.

There is, however, variety in the views expressed by Golden Age detectives. Dorothy L. Sayers's detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, agonises over the part he plays. Knight points out that in *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), Wimsey "recognise[s] with some pain that in identifying a murderer he too has sent someone to death" (87). No matter how much Wimsey may agonise over his role in events, however, he still reveals the murderer and expresses no dissatisfaction with the law which mandates execution for murder. The authorial focus is no longer on the pain of the criminal as he awaits execution, as it is in *Oliver Twist*. Instead, in *Busman's Honeymoon*, it is on the pain of the detective.

Holt's novels, unlike those of Christie and Sayers, express more morally ambiguous views. In doing so, they extrapolate the movement from righteousness to regret shown in the trajectory leading from Dickens to Sayers, and take it still further. Sympathy is shown to the criminals, not simply because they are facing execution, but because there is an understanding of their thoughts and feelings and convoluted motives, so that the moral waters are murky rather than clear. This is taken to extremes in *Secret for a Nightingale*, when Eliza attempts to murder Dr Damien Adair: "I'm a murderess, ain't I? Or as good as makes no difference. I tried and I failed but I might have done it" (369). At the time the novel is set (predominantly the 1850s), the punishment for attempted murder was death. Yet in *Secret for a Nightingale*, Dr Adair decides that Eliza can "expiate her sin" (370) by running the hospital of Rosenwald. This moral ambiguity also has its roots in sensation fiction: in *Paul Ferroll*, Paul kills his wife but does not face the consequences. Similarly, in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Maxim de Winter murders his first wife yet never faces trial or punishment, even though the reader knows from his own lips that he is guilty. There is some slight punishment

meted out to them, in that they spend their lives in exile, but they do not pay for their crimes with their lives.

It is notable that *Rebecca* was published in 1938, when Golden Age fiction was at the height of its popularity and when Mr Vyvyan Adams was moving that "the death penalty should be abolished in time of peace for an experimental period of five years" because, if a mistake were made, "[i]t cannot be remedied; it cannot be repaired; and it cannot be revoked" (Adams qtd. in UK Parliament 1938: Column 956 n.p.). Mr Adams made mention of specific cases, including the Edith Thompson case: "The late Lord Birkenhead was in doubt about the guilt of Edith Thompson—and so, if I may say so with respect, have I always been" (Adams qtd. in UK Parliament 1938: Column 961 n.p.).

There are echoes of the Thompson case in *Rebecca*. The case had a high profile and led to a public outcry. In 1923, Edith Thompson was hanged although she herself did not commit a crime. However, her young lover, Freddy Bywaters, stabbed her husband to death. The prosecution argued that her many love letters to Freddy amounted to incitement to murder, even though she never asked him to commit murder on her behalf. Vague references to her unhappiness, such as writing of a woman who had lost three husbands, saying, "I can't even lose one", were used as evidence that she was covertly asking Freddy to kill her husband. However, Freddy made it clear that he had been acting alone and that she knew nothing of his plans. Nevertheless, Thompson was hanged. After Thompson's conviction, a petition for mercy attracted nearly a million signatures, but to no avail.

In *Rebecca*, when the second Mrs de Winter is afraid that her husband will be charged with murder and sentenced to death, du Maurier exploits the horror of the situation by exploring the thoughts of the second Mrs de Winter. Mrs de Winter returns early from the coroner's inquest, where she nearly faints, and lies down. Her mind races as she realises that

she does not know anything about the procedures involved for committal and this adds to her sense of unreality and panic:

> Other women had been through this. Women I had read about in papers. They sent letters to the Home Secretary and it was not any good. The Home Secretary always said that justice must take its course. Friends sent petitions too, everybody signed them, but the Home Secretary could never do anything (354).

The talk of petitions reflects the unsuccessful petitions that were drawn up in the Thompson case, which continued to create controversy throughout the century. René Weis, in *Criminal Justice: The True Story of Edith Thompson* (1988) argues that Edith's trial and execution were sexist in nature. He further argues that she was essentially being tried for having a younger lover (Freddy was nine years her junior), and of writing him passionate letters which mentioned their sex life. Noting the judge's use of such phrases as "unwholesome" in regard to Edith's affair, he concludes that misogyny played a role in her execution.

The Thompson case also had some influence on Christie's work. Although Christie's major detectives are in favour of capital punishment, they recognise its pitfalls. It is possible that, in "The Tuesday Night Club", Christie is obliquely referring to the case of Edith Thompson when she expresses sympathy for the poor girl who will be hanged even though she is not responsible for the murder. Whilst Christie *might* have been thinking of Thompson in "The Tuesday Night Club", she explicitly mentions the case in *Crooked House*. Sophie Leonides's mother, Magda, wants to perform the role in a play. When she talks of how to perform Edith, Magda comments on the "terror" (41) Edith must feel when she realises what is going to befall her. Magda argues that a play about Edith Thompson "is definitely a psychological drama – or psychological thriller" (132).

The murderous child, Josephine Leonides, explains the case. In doing so, she draws attention to the similarities between the Thompson case and the novel. In *Crooked House*, the young wife of the murder victim, Brenda Leonides, is having an innocent affair with the children's tutor, which is conducted mainly through letters. She is arrested, along with the tutor, on suspicion of murder. There is talk of the forthcoming trial and a potential judge who is "always very righteous about illicit love" (212). This echoes the judge in the Thompson case who talked of the "unwholesome" relationship between Thomson and Bywaters. The police are not sure that Brenda committed the crime and neither are the family, which creates unease about the possibility of an innocent woman being sent to the gallows. In the end this is deflected when Josephine is revealed to be the killer and the young couple are freed. Josephine's terminally ill aunt takes her for a drive and sends the car into a quarry, killing them both. It is notable that Josephine's aunt is named Edith: an innocent woman who dies as a result of another's criminal actions.

By the time of Holt's 1969 novel, *The Shivering Sands*, capital punishment had been suspended but the novel is haunted by one of the major tropes of neo-Victorian fiction: a fear of the past returning. The five-year period given for the Act to be converted into a permanent ban on executions was drawing to a close and at the time it was uncertain whether or not the death penalty would be abolished permanently. The novel contains two murders and an attempted murder, and all three are presented as a revival of execution. In a chilling scene at the end of the novel the narrator, Caroline Verlaine, realises that the murderous child Alice has tricked her into walking onto a patch of 'shivering sand'; that is, quicksand. Alice has been inspired by Roman drawings on a cave wall which replicate images on a Roman mosaic excavated nearby, showing a scene of execution in which a man sinks into quicksand. The scene in which Caroline realises that Alice is reviving the Roman mode of executions is one of horror. However, although Alice is copying the Romans' method of execution, she is not

executing prisoners. Instead, she is executing innocent women. Alice, then, is reviving executions in order to commit murder. By blurring the boundaries between execution and murder, Holt is revealing the deep-seated anxieties of her age. Further, by presenting the revival of defunct executions as horrifying, the novel portrays the contemporary horror felt over the reinstatement of the death penalty.

Even when capital punishment had been permanently suspended, there was an unease about it returning and this unease finds literary expression in Holt's *The Curse of the Kings*. The novel follows the life of its narrator, Judith Osmond, from her childhood to her early married life. She marries archaeologist Tybalt Travers and goes with him to Egypt, where he is working on an archaeological dig. Whilst in Egypt she and her party attend a local celebration, the Feast of the Nile. Tybalt explains that the origins of the feast date back thousands of years to a time when the Egyptians worshipped the river. Believing that it needed placating so that it did not overflow its banks, they threw a virgin into the waters as a human sacrifice. Judith replies: "Poor virgins! They did have a bad time. They were always being thrown to dragons or chained to rocks or something" (226). Her speech at this point exemplifies the humorous tone of the novel. Nevertheless, it draws attention to the link between women's sexuality and their sacrificial role, with their virgin status providing the spurious justification for their sacrifice.

Tybalt goes on to explain: "Now they throw a doll into the river – often an enormous life-sized beautifully dressed doll. This represents the virgin who used to be thrown in the river in the old days" (226). Tybalt's speech here emphasises that the custom is safely in the past and the party settle down to enjoy the spectacle. However, shortly afterwards the mood begins to subtly alter: "The waters of the river looked red . . . The people shuddered as they pointed out the redness of the water. The blood color! [sic]" (228). As Judith and her party watch the procession, the horror gradually grows:

> As the procession passed close to us for a few seconds I saw the doll clearly. I could not believe that it was not a real girl; and there was something familiar about her too.
>
> She was lying back in her carriage seat, her eyes closed.
>
> The procession passed on.
>
> "What a life-like doll," said Hadrian.
>
> "Why did they make the doll with eyes shut?" asked Evan.
>
> "I suppose," I put in, "because she knows of her coming ordeal. It's possible that if one were going to be thrown into the river one wouldn't want to see the crowd . . . all come to witness the spectacle."
>
> "But it's a doll," protested Hadrian.
>
> "It has to be as realistic as possible, I suppose," I said. "It reminds me of someone. I know. Little Yasmin, the girl who made my slippers" (229).

It transpires that the doll is indeed Yasmin, who has been murdered.

The scene talks back to Dickens, echoing the carnival atmosphere he condemned at public executions but, instead of vilifying the revellers, there is sympathy for the object of attention, particularly in the closed eyes that cannot bear to see the crowd that has gathered to witness the spectacle. There are echoes of Dickens's horror at public executions, with the suggestion that the 'doll' had its eyes closed so that it did not see the crowd. The 'spectacle' echoes Dickens's contempt at the carnival atmosphere surrounding such events. Instead of acting as a warning to criminals, the 'gallows scenes' in Holt's novels act as a moral warning to authority about the evils of capital punishment. The scene not only acts as a moral warning against the reintroduction of the death penalty, but it also points out the particular dangers to

women, whose sexuality is a contributory factor to their treatment. Further, by linking murder with legally sanctioned killings it suggests that legally sanctioned killings are murder. The novel articulates the shift in moral focus from the Victorian era when capital punishment was seen as a moral lesson to criminals, to Holt's contemporary era when it was seen as a warning against a societal moral evil.

This warning is intensified by echoes of the Edith Thompson case which reverberate through the scene in that the sequence highlights the misogynistic links between women's sexuality and their killing by murder, execution or sacrifice. Like Edith, Yasmin's murder is ultimately a result of an affair: Yasmin was in the habit of meeting her lover in one of the tombs, at a place where there was a secret passage leading to an important and undiscovered tomb. The local Pasha, who instigated her murder, believed that the tomb had not been robbed and contained riches. He therefore had Yasmin killed so that she did not discover it by accident. Unusually for Holt, the Pasha escapes any form of retribution, suggesting an anxiety that men could escape retribution for murdering women, as long as they disguised the murder as a sanctioned form of killing.

By blurring the boundaries between execution, sacrifice and murder the novel again, like *The Shivering Sands*, reveals the societal unease about the morality of sanctioned killings and the fear of the death penalty returning. Both novels can be used to contest Cox's claim that Victorian-set crimes are rendered safe because they are in the past (99). They can also be used to contest Wallace's argument that "[t]he historical setting reassures readers that such victimisation is safely in the past and can be 'put behind' them" (*Female Gothic* 152). Indeed, *The Shivering Sands* explicitly states that the past can never be laid to rest and that, even if evil has been held at bay, there is always a threat of its revival. As Napier, the novel's hero, says to Caroline: "You like everything to be neatly rounded off with Finis written at the end", but goes on to remind her that "[n]othing is ever finished" (168). By foregrounding the

horrifying return of outmoded executions and human sacrifice, the novels show that the past is not irrevocably in the past and that the horrors could reappear. Holt's novels therefore act as a warning against complacency.

Chapter Five: Romance, Marriage, Divorce and Legitimacy

"I put it down first of all to the effect of gold lamé, but, on consideration, I think it was probably due to 'lerve'."

—Dorothy L. Sayers's *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937)

When fictional Miss Letitia Martin, Dean of Shrewsbury College, Oxford, writes to a friend about the wedding of Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, she cannot bring herself to write the word 'love'. Instead, she extends it into a parody of itself by skewing it into 'lerve'. Sayers's humorous depiction of the difficulties faced by an academic when confronted with 'lerve' highlights one of the bars to Holt's inclusion in the neo-Victorian discourse: romance is not taken seriously by the academy. The point is made by Kohlke when she refers to neo-Victorian criticism's "discrimination on the basis of genre" ("Mining" 29) and specifically mentions romance. Her use of the word 'discrimination' emphasises the unjust nature of this exclusion, which is particularly inappropriate when considered alongside neo-Victorianism's valorisation of diversity. The negative perception of romance is longstanding, as can be seen from Sayers's humorous depiction of it in her 1937 novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*. It was particularly remarked upon in relation to Holt's novels when Eleanor Hibbert appeared in a BBC radio programme in 1972. The interviewer, Roy Plomley, remarked that, because the Holt novels are "classified under the heading romantic fiction", her work is "ignored largely by the critics" ("Jean"). The classifications of 'Gothic romance', 'historical romance' and 'romantic suspense', which were in use at the time, are still used by a number of critics. Authors, however, were unhappy with the term and Phyllis Whitney, who is associated with Holt as a leader of the 'romantic suspense' genre, expressed their feelings: "'Romantic suspense' sounds terribly sappy. Though we may have to accept that term for want of a better" (qtd. in Reed n.p.). Whether or not Whitney was including Holt in her use of the word

"we" is uncertain. However, the 'sappiness' of the romantic labels has had a negative impact on the reception of Holt's work, as Plomley's comments emphasise.

Whilst love is an important element of Holt's novels, it is not always limited to romantic relationships. The love of a woman for a house is foregrounded in *Mistress of Mellyn*, the love of a woman for her nurseling is highlighted in *Menfreya* and the love of a woman for her parents has prominence in *Spring of the Tiger*. However, all of the novels also contain love in the more traditional sense of a developing romantic relationship between a man and a woman. The relationships are not limited by courtship and marriage but extend to issues of divorce, widowhood, children and the related concerns of legitimacy and illegitimacy. The romantic element itself varies considerably from book to book and is not always the same, as some critics claim. In some of the novels the romance is strongly focused and at other times it is just one strand in the narrator's eventful life. Sometimes the romance ends in a long and happy marriage but at others it ends in an abusive marriage, widowhood or simply an indication that the narrator may, or may not, marry. Uniquely, in *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* it ends with the narrator having no future romantic relationship in sight. Marriages do not always take place at the end of the novel, but can occur at the beginning or in the middle. There is, then, a wide variety within the series of novels.

The Secret Woman exemplifies Holt's use of love and romance, with their attendant issues of marriage, divorce, children and legitimacy. Unusually for Holt, the novel has a primary first-person narrator in Anna Brett and a secondary first-person narrator in Chantel Loman. This chapter begins by investigating Anna's romantic relationship as a response to the relationship between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel. Further, it argues that Anna's relationship co-articulates changing attitudes to marriage and divorce against the background of the Victorian divorce laws and the Divorce Reform Act of 1969. The second section interrogates Chantel's relationship as a response to William

Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*. Examining Chantel's attempts to commit murder in an effort to hide the secret of her husband's illegitimacy, the section argues that the novel co-articulates attitudes towards illegitimacy at a time when the 1969 Family Law Reform Act was coming into force. The third section of this chapter uses Holt's work to talk back to neo-Victorian criticism's 'discriminatory' attitude towards romance. Drawing on Kohlke's argument that *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Fingersmith* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are all romances ("Mining" 29), it investigates the similarities and differences between these novels and *The Secret Woman* in order to contribute to the ongoing process of defining the parameters of neo-Victorianism.

Marriage and Divorce: *Jane Eyre* and the Other Woman

Holt's novels show a sustained and varied use of their avowed hypotext, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Secret Woman* continues this tradition by creating a quasi-sequel to *Jane Eyre*. The main characters in *The Secret Woman* are the narrator, Anna Brett, her love interest Redvers Stretton and his wife, Monique Stretton. The characters are recognisable appropriations of Jane Eyre, Mr Rochester and his wife, Bertha Rochester, respectively. Anna, like Jane, is an orphan although, unlike Jane, she is not orphaned until she is about eight years old. Like Jane, she is then raised by an aunt. Both aunts are unloving, and cruel in their own different ways. Anna's childless aunt is cold and undemonstrative and regards Anna as a burden, whereas Jane's aunt, who has three children of her own, actively dislikes Jane and sends her away to school. Anna, remaining at home, manages to win her aunt's favour by showing an interest in the antique furniture which her aunt privately buys and sells. However, her aunt is controlling and, like Jane, Anna eventually rebels. Her thought that "I did not have to be Aunt Charlotte's slave forever" (48) echoes Jane's reference to herself as a "rebel slave" (15).

The antiques business brings Anna into contact with Redvers Stretton, with whom she falls in love. She first meets him when she is twelve years old and he is nineteen. Anna views him as a romantic figure, partly because he is handsome and partly because he is a sailor who travels to exotic places. Their meeting is brief and they do not meet again until Anna is twenty-one. At that time she narrates: "he was like the hero of some romantic tale . . . a bold adventurer who roamed the seas" (36). Their mutual attraction is evident, but their meeting is again brief and Redvers sets sail soon afterwards. Both of these encounters with Redvers are uncomplicated by any notion of moral ambiguity: they seem to be two young people who are free to fall in love if they wish to do so. Before he returns, however, Anna learns that Redvers has a wife. The romantic triangle which then develops between Anna, Redvers and his wife, Monique, is appropriated from the romantic triangle in *Jane Eyre* between Jane, Mr Rochester and his wife, Bertha. The link between the two texts is intensified by notable similarities in the characters involved in the triangle. Anna and Jane are both governesses, although Anna takes on that role temporarily after her aunt dies and Jane is a governess, and later a teacher, by profession. Monique and Bertha, the wives in both novels, are of mixed race: in *The Secret* Woman, Monique is described as possibly half Creole (79), whilst in *Jane Eyre* Bertha is half Creole (335). There is a subtle similarity in the names: although Rochester's wife is usually referred to as Bertha Mason, her full name is Bertha Antoinetta Mason. The French names and heritage of both Monique and Bertha provide an understated connection between the two. The husbands, Edward Rochester and Redvers Stretton, are both unhappily married, sexually profligate and compared to pirates (*Eyre* 214, *Secret* 232).

One of Brontë's most notable achievements in *Jane Eyre* is the way she manipulates readers into investing emotionally in Rochester's extra-marital relationship. She achieves this in a number of distinct ways, which Holt then critiques in *The Secret Woman*'s parallel relationship. In *Jane Eyre*, the romance that develops between Jane and Rochester is

apparently free of moral encumbrances since Mr Rochester is presented as a bachelor. The two characters meet when Jane takes a post as a governess at his home of Thornfield Hall, teaching Mr Rochester's young ward, Adèle Varens. Their conversation initially includes a discussion about Adèle and her progress, but it quickly veers into less conventional channels. Their relationship develops slowly, over a matter of months, as they come to know something of each other's backgrounds and discover a strong rapport. During all this time there is no indication that he is married. Jane is heartened when Rochester forgets her status as a paid dependent and they converse on an increasingly equal footing, which is determined by character rather than status. Their conversations are lengthy, providing depth to their increasingly philosophical topics, so that when Rochester confesses that if the "cord of communion" that exists between them should be snapped, he would "take to bleeding inwardly" (291), the reader is invested in the romance. Despite the difference in their social class, Rochester proposes and Jane, not knowing of the moral and legal obstacles in the way of their union, accepts. It is not until Jane stands at the altar that she learns Rochester is married already. In this way, Brontë is able to firmly establish a strong romantic relationship between Jane and Rochester before she introduces the moral, ethical and legal problems of Rochester's wife. Readers are therefore invested in the romance, and their investment can withstand the subsequent complications.

By contrast, in *The Secret Woman* Holt makes it plain that Anna knows about Monique. The novel therefore creates an alternate future for Jane and Rochester by proxy, using the appropriated characters of Anna and Redvers to play out the new narrative. Anna is presented as the 'other woman' in the relationship. She knows almost from the beginning, and certainly before she and the reader are emotionally invested in the romance, that the object of her affections is married. Anna hears the news from a servant; moreover, she learns that he was married at the time of their last meeting, although he did not reveal the fact. This

retrospectively casts a shadow of moral ambiguity over that meeting. By the time they meet again, seven years later, Anna has learned more about his marriage. She knows that he is married to a woman from the Friendly Isles and that he has a son. From then on, Anna (and the reader) is involved in a morally ambiguous romance as Anna and Redvers continue to be mutually attracted, despite the presence of his wife. In this way, Holt not only re-creates the central triangular relationship of man, wife and 'other woman' which is present in *Jane Eyre,* but she also develops it. By moving the empathy from the 'other woman', Anna, to the wife, Monique, and back again, Holt creates a questionable situation in which the reader's moral compass is constantly tested.

Brontë, on the other hand, continues to present Jane and Mr Rochester as a desirable romantic couple by removing sympathy from his wife. She presents Bertha as an inhuman Gothic monster, a horrifying woman with whom no man could be expected to live. Jane hears "a demoniac laugh . . . goblin-laughter" (173) one night. Subsequently, she hears a cry in the night, and thinks "the *thing* delivering such utterance must rest ere it could repeat the effort" (238, my italics). The voice is "now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey" (243). It is not only Jane's impressions of Bertha which refer to her as inhuman. Bertha's brother, who goes to the attic alone to see her, is attacked and refers to her in vampiric terms: "She sucked the blood: she said she'd drain my heart" (246). When Jane discovers that Rochester has a wife, he says he had a right to propose to Jane, despite his prior marriage. He says he wanted to "seek sympathy with something at least human" (337), thereby implying that Bertha is not human. When Jane finally sees Bertha, she says Bertha "snatched and growled like some strange wild animal . . . the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet" (338). By creating Bertha as animal-like and demonic, Brontë denies her sympathy. She constructs a situation where the wife appears as the 'other' – or,

indeed, ‘othered’ - woman, instead of Jane, who appears as the rightful romantic match for Rochester.

Instead of imitating this inhuman construction in her creation of Redvers’s wife, Monique, Holt creates a woman with whom readers can empathise. Like Bertha, Monique, is mentioned in the text before she appears. Lady Crediton reveals that Monique suffers from a lung condition and has severe asthma attacks. By giving Monique an understandable physical ailment, Holt creates sympathy for her. Lady Crediton also reveals that Monique is “a foreigner; her ways may not always be like ours” (77). This information encourages a predisposition to view Monique’s idiosyncrasies in an understanding manner, as the natural differences of someone removed from their own home. Monique’s nurse later emphasises this, saying: “Monique is not like a conventional English woman. I doubt whether Island morals are like those of a Victorian drawing-room” (227). The comment not only prepares the reader for differences in Monique’s attitudes and behaviour, but it also talks back to *Jane Eyre* with its mention of island morals: since Bertha is also from an island, Jamaica, *The Secret Woman* implies she should not be judged according to the rules of an English drawing-room. Instead, she should be understood on her own terms. Monique is created as other, like Bertha, but this otherness is described in appealing terms. She is of mixed race (79), which is presented as attractive. Like Bertha, she is described as being like an animal, but instead of being a snatching hyena she is a gorgeous “tropical bird” (79). Her beauty is often referred to throughout the novel, by Anna as well as others.

Brontë further dehumanises Bertha by the way Bertha is treated. Rochester says that “she is cared for as her condition demands. . . in safety and comfort” (356). Bertha’s treatment is presented as humane by comparing it to the treatment of lunatics in asylums. It is also presented as caring by comparing it to Rochester’s alternative, which would be to send her to his second home, where the unhealthy atmosphere would kill her. However, she is kept

in a windowless room for ten years, with no company except that of her attendant, who drinks porter. There is a suggestion that sexual frustration may play a part in her madness, but it is suggested with a condemnation of female sexuality rather than an understanding of it. With the sexual double standard of the age, Rochester takes mistresses but condemns Bertha for being "intemperate and unchaste" (353).

By contrast, Holt creates respect for Monique by the way she is treated. She is cared for by the secondary first-person narrator, Chantel Loman, who is a pretty, lively nurse, and who humours and cheers her. Monique has a set of attractive apartments in the east wing of Castle Crediton. All of the inhabitants of the castle know of her existence and she has plenty of company. There is an understanding shown for her passionate behaviour, despite its deviation from English restraint. When it is suggested that "there is a streak of madness in her", Chantel replies "I would call it hysteria. Mrs Stretton is a passionate woman deprived of a husband" (83). There is an acknowledgement here of women's sexual needs, and a condemnation of a woman being denied sexual gratification. The link between hysteria, illness and sexual frustration is later emphasised when Dr Elgin says that her asthma attacks are a result of "inner tensions" (107). The novel implicitly critiques Redvers, and society, for depriving her of the sexual gratification she needs.

Knowing of the existence of wives forces both Jane and Anna to examine their consciences. Jane, however, is only called upon to do this once she has already fallen in love with Rochester. She considers what she owes to her own standards, as well as what she owes to Rochester and to God. However, there is a notable omission in that she does not consider what she owes to Bertha. Like Rochester, she dismisses Bertha's rights and prior claim. After seeing Bertha, she thinks "I would not say he had betrayed *me*" (341, my italics), but she does not consider that in fact he had betrayed Bertha. When Rochester says: "you won't kiss the husband of Bertha Mason? You consider my arms filled and my embraces appropriated?"

Jane replies: "At any rate, there is neither room nor claim for *me*" (345, my italics). The repetitive use of the word "me" shows that Jane's focus is on herself, rather than Bertha.

By contrast, Anna is forced to examine her conscience at a much earlier stage in her relationship and she is therefore not able to make a solid bond with Redvers. The reader, too, is involved in moral and ethical considerations from an early stage, meaning that neither Anna nor the reader can invest fully in the relationship. The novel therefore presents a more complex representation of the potential beginnings of an extra-marital affair. It also affects the readers' view of Anna in a negative fashion.

The scene then changes in both novels. Jane leaves Thornfield, removing herself from the romantic triangle. For Anna, the romantic triangle intensifies. When Monique returns to her island home, Coralle,[41] for the good of her health, Anna is hired to look after Monique and Redvers's son, Edward, on the journey. Anna feels she should not accept the position but her aunt has died, leaving her with debts, and so she accepts. Going on the journey means she can rent out the house her aunt left her and the money she earns in this way will help to pay off the debts, as will her salary for looking after Edward.

On the journey, Holt shifts the sympathy backwards and forwards between Anna and Monique in a series of confrontations. When Monique finds Anna and Redvers together on the bridge of the ship she says "I have caught you" (221). She protests to Redvers, saying: "Ever since she came into the castle she has been trying to take you from me . . . I am watching her. I will have her know that you are married . . . married to me" (221). Anna's friend, Chantel Loman, who is also travelling to Coralle as a nurse to Monique, voices her dissatisfaction with Redvers. It is a dissatisfaction which could apply equally to Rochester.

[41] By calling it Coralle, Holt is answering back to another Victorian text, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), extending her interaction with Victorian texts beyond *Jane Eyre*. Whilst *The Coral Island* is about boys having an adventure on a remote island, *The Secret Woman* repurposes the Victorian 'boys' own' adventure story, answering back to Victorian literature by providing an adventure for its female characters. Just as *The Coral Island* mixes exoticism with danger, so, too, does *The Secret Woman* alternate the beauty of the island with its strangeness and threat.

Subverting Anna's romantic, idealistic view of Redvers, the anti-romantic Chantel suggests that Anna's feelings for Redvers are not real. She says: "You were lonely. Aunt Charlotte was maddening and he seemed romantic. You endowed him with qualities he doesn't possess. You're living in a dream. He's not the Captain of Romance you imagine him to be . . . He's weak and selfish and wants a good time. He is tired of his wife and fancies a romance with you . . . even if he were free and you married him he would soon be tired of you" (330, capitals in original). Anna, however, will not listen.

As Monique approaches her own home, her power increases and she challenges Anna's desire for Redvers. Whilst Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha as an externalisation of Jane's repressed rage, Holt's novel implicitly presents it as Bertha's own rage against a rival and an erring husband. Monique vociferously asserts her rights to Redvers, saying that they are married: "She may not like it . . . you may not like it . . . but it is true, and nothing will alter that . . . Nothing will change it while I live" (221). Monique's words highlight the central problem in both *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Woman*: there is no escape from an unhappy marriage in the Victorian era. In the nineteenth century divorce was possible, but it was difficult and expensive, and therefore not open to everyone in practical terms. It also required grounds. There needed to be some sort of 'fault' with one of the partners, usually adultery on the part of the wife, or adultery coupled with something such as cruelty on the part of the husband. Society did not recognise that the institution of marriage was an artificial social construct and as such was fatally flawed. Instead, it placed the blame for its failure on the people involved.

Neither Mr Rochester nor Redvers Stretton can therefore easily rid himself of an unwanted wife. Mr Rochester addresses this outright in *Jane Eyre*. He says he will pass a new law that will make his aims right. Neither Jane nor the reader understands the full import of what he is saying at the time because they are unaware of what his aims are. In fact, one of

his aims is to 'marry' Jane whilst he has a living wife. Jane can only understand his comments in a vague and general light. Nevertheless, she argues with him about the legitimacy of passing this new law. She says his aims cannot be right "if they require a new statute to legalise them" (161). Jane's argument represents a view that legislation exists to control its citizens, rather than to serve them. Rochester argues back, saying that an "unheard-of combination of circumstances demand unheard-of rules" (161). Jane counters with religious concerns, saying "[t]he human and fallible should not arrogate a power with which the divine and perfect alone can be safely intrusted" (161). Jane is here voicing her view, as a religious woman, that laws are made by God and that, as such, they are infallible and not to be changed. This comment is rooted in the practicalities of the English legal system as well as Jane's own opinions. The ecclesiastical courts were involved in the legislative life of the country and therefore played an important practical role in the legal process.

Once Bertha's existence has been revealed, the meaning of his conversation finally becomes clear. At this point he says: "I could not rid myself of it by any legal proceedings . . . I knew that while she lived I could never be the husband of another and better wife" (353, 354). Rochester's open protest against the nineteenth-century divorce laws prompted contemporary debate about the peculiar situation in which he found himself, and the law's inability to redress the situation. George Eliot, for example, in a letter to Charles Bray, wrote about the "diabolical law which chains a man soul and body to a putrefying carcass" (qtd. in Henry 95). Whilst Redvers, the husband in *The Secret Woman*, does not speak at such length about his hatred of the law, he nevertheless refers to himself as "a man in irons" (202). Both novels therefore engage with the Victorian divorce laws, but whereas *Jane Eyre* is engaging with the laws of its own day, *The Secret Woman* is engaging with both Victorian and contemporary divorce laws in neo-Victorian fashion. There had been a few minor changes to the Victorian divorce laws in the early part of the twentieth-century. The Matrimonial Causes

Act of 1923 ("Changes") enabled either spouse to petition for divorce on grounds of adultery. The 1937 Act ("Wedlock") also allowed cruelty, desertion and incurable insanity as grounds for divorce. Redvers's problem, however – that of being chained to an unloved wife – was still an issue in the years leading up to the publication of *The Secret Woman*. It was, nevertheless, a matter of vigorous political debate throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with a view to a major overhaul of the divorce laws.

The contemporary relevance of marriage and divorce gives added meaning to *The Secret Woman*. Although it is set in the Victorian era, Holt's readers in 1970 would have recognised the central problem as being one of contemporary urgency. The period saw a rising number of divorces ("Divorce"). However, there were no legal grounds for release from a marriage simply because it was unloving. Unhappy couples were therefore forced to pretend that one or other of them had committed adultery, so that they could obtain a divorce. Typically, the husband would hire a woman and a photographer. The three of them would go to a hotel and rent a room. The husband and woman would partially undress, the photographer would take photographic 'evidence of adultery', which would be given to the wife, and a divorce would ensue. This farcical situation was satirised by A. P. Herbert in his novel *Holy Deadlock* (1934): "We are not here, Mr. Adam, to secure your happiness, but to preserve the institution of marriage and the purity of the home. And therefore one of you must commit adultery" (qtd. in Kiernan 77). Kiernan comments: "Herbert's novel publicized the hypocrisy of carefully staged hotel-scenes designed to provide the evidence needed for a divorce on the grounds of adultery", rightly arguing that "Herbert attacked a morality that privileges the public institution of marriage over the quality of the relationship" (Kiernan 177).

By presenting the unhappiness that accompanies an unhappy marriage, as well as the moral and emotional complications, *The Secret Woman* comments on the changing attitudes

to marriage and divorce, as well as the new statutes which were being enacted in Holt's contemporary society. By presenting the situation in two distinct locations, one being England, where Anna is in the more powerful position, and one being Coralle, where Monique is in the more powerful position, Holt shows the need for a neutral space in which the matter can be resolved. Whilst matters are resolved in *The Secret Woman* and *Jane Eyre* by the convenient death of the wife, in society unhappy couples turned to the neutral space of the courts. The new laws being debated introduced the radical idea that a divorce could be obtained if the marriage had broken down irretrievably, without either party being at fault. This idea was radical because it placed the idea of 'fault' on the institution of marriage, rather than on the individual. It acknowledged that an institution which demanded a lifelong commitment, typically made when people were young, was inherently flawed. The social construct, not the individual, was to blame.

As in *Mistress of Mellyn*, Holt subverts Victorian attitudes by placing them in part of a continuum. In *Mistress of Mellyn*, she subverts Victorian attitudes to madness, as discussed in Chapter One. In *The Secret Woman*, she subverts Victorian attitudes towards marriage and divorce, particularly to the connection between marriage and religion. By setting her novel in the Victorian era and implicitly placing it against a background of twentieth-century legislation, she draws attention to the transience of marriage laws. The new Act was passed in 1969 and enacted in 1970. It allowed couples to divorce after two years' separation, if both partners wished for the divorce, or after five years if only one partner wished it. By removing the concept of 'matrimonial offences', it removed the idea of divorce "as a remedy for the innocent against the guilty" ("Divorce"). In doing so, it makes real the 'new statute' Rochester threatened to make in *Jane Eyre*, showing that Victorian laws were not immutable and that, despite Jane's views, they could be changed.

The unshakeable link between the Christian religion and marriage which Jane voices is more explicitly undermined in a threatening and atmospheric scene in *The Secret Woman*. When the characters arrive on Coralle, civilisation is left behind. The island is pagan and the natives worship a fire god. Suka, Monique's old nurse, is a prominent and malevolent figure on the island. She takes a dislike to Anna because Monique dislikes Anna, and Suka supports Monique in every way. When Anna explores the island she sees a large, strange stone in the sea. Suka appears and tells her the meaning of the stone: women who covet other women's husbands are hanged and then their spirits are trapped in the stone (325).

The scene is ominous. It acts as a threat and a warning to Anna, but it also serves as a reminder that marriage precedes Christianity. The islanders have husbands and wives, even though they are not Christian. By introducing this scene, Holt implicitly contests the link between marriage and Christianity which shaped Victorian attitudes and which was emphasised in British marriage laws. Elizabeth Rigby, writing in the *Quarterly Review*, remarked: "Mr Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws of both God and man" (n.p.). When the divorce laws were being revisited in the twentieth-century, the discussions were wide ranging and covered several decades. They involved not only a Royal Commission and the Law Commission, but also a group appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Levin notes: "The Church of England considered the matter and reported in 1966" (632). The presence of the Church of England group reflected that fact that marriage was not just seen as a secular law, but also as God's law.

The complexities in *The Secret Woman*, then, co-articulate the elements of romance, love, marriage and divorce that were being debated during the period leading up to the 1969 Divorce Reform Act. The situation portrayed in the novel is relevant to the Victorian period, and recognisable as a reworking of *Jane Eyre*. However, it is also relevant to its own moment in time. Like other Holt novels, the socio-political climate of the year of publication needs to

be taken into account if the massive popularity of the novels is to be fully understood. By 1970, attitudes towards marriage were changing. In the Victorian era it was regarded as sacrosanct, but in the late twentieth century it began to lose its power as the new divorce laws came into effect.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Woman*, the wife dies, leaving the husband free to remarry. Jane returns to Rochester and settles down to a life as a wife and mother. Whilst *Jane Eyre* provides an unequivocally happy ending for Jane and Mr Rochester, however, the ending for Anna and Redvers is much less secure. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, *The Secret Woman* does not end with a marriage, and there is no glimpse into the future which shows that the new relationship is happy. When Redvers returns to England following the death of Monique, he visits Anna. He walks into the garden and takes her hand. There are no kisses, as there are with Jane and Rochester. Their meeting is described in the final half page, in contrast to the ten pages or so (depending on edition) which describe Jane's meeting with Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre*. The final sentence of *The Secret Woman* is ambiguous. Anna thinks: "I knew – and he knew - the future was for us to make" (370). Its hesitancy is particularly apparent when compared to Anna's positive assertion when she decides to continue running her aunt's antiques business: "I could do it. I knew I could" (369).

This ending has an uncertain promise of happiness when compared to the long-lasting, fruitful marriage of *Jane Eyre*. Redvers has been portrayed as a philanderer, and a man who has already tired of one wife: "He's weak and selfish and wants a good time. He is tired of his wife and fancies a romance with you" (330), as Chantel points out. Anna's chances of happiness with him do not seem sure. The ending therefore lacks the closure of *Jane Eyre*, and Anna's future is left for the reader to imagine. In providing Anna with an uncertain ending, Holt moves *The Secret Woman* away from a conventional romance, and a simple imitation of *Jane Eyre*, to present a more complex, neo-Victorian investigation of

romance, love, marriage and divorce which reflects her changing society and makes her novel more realistic and relevant to her readers.

Anna is not the only first-person narrator in *The Secret Woman*. Her friend, Chantel Loman, is also a first-person narrator. Although Anna does not meet Chantel until she is an adult, her retrospective narration allows her to mention Chantel on the novel's first page. She does so in flattering terms and Chantel is, to begin with, a sympathetic character. Her beauty, charm and friendship with Anna all initially suggest that she is a heroine rather than an anti-heroine. Her first-person narration also intensifies the readers' identification with her. Chantel arrives in Anna's life when she nurse's Anna's aunt. When Anna's aunt dies, Chantel moves to Castle Crediton to nurse Monique Stretton. She suggests to Anna that they both keep diaries and swap their diaries at regular intervals, so that they can learn about each other's lives. The second section of the novel, "The Castle", is then narrated through Chantel's diary entries. Both Anna and Chantel are unreliable narrators, however. Whilst Anna believes that her narration is honest, Chantel deliberately sets out to deceive. Lying by omission, she hides her transgressive nature and presents herself as an angel in the house when, in reality, she is a murderess. Whilst explicitly drawing attention to "the lack of literary merit connected to romance fiction" Henry Sutton goes on to say that "when romance meets crime or violence it arguably stretches into new and conceivably more favourable literary terrain" (59), a remark which has obvious implications for Holt's novels as they always contain a crime.

There are striking similarities between Chantel and the character of Becky Sharp, who is the protagonist of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847). Becky is a proto-sensation heroine, whose transgressive nature marks her out as a forerunner of the typical sensation heroine exemplified by Lady Audley. Chantel and Becky are both orphans with their way to make in the world. Chantel tells Anna she grew up in a vicarage, saying: "I know

now why people say poor as church mice. That's how we were. All that economy. It was soul-destroying" (60). She adds later: "I knew from my earliest days that I should have to battle for my bread in a cruel world, so I prepared myself" (82). Both Becky and Chantel are ambitious women, at a time when society afforded few opportunities to ambitious women, and both are driven to escape the poverty into which they are born. However, they are condemned to low-paid work and a poor standard of living since few opportunities were available to women at the time. The jobs open to them, such as that of a governess, were poorly paid and insecure.

The cruel realities of life for impoverished women are revealed in the fate of Miss Beddoes. Miss Beddoes is the governess to Edward Crediton, Redvers's son. When Edward temporarily goes missing one day, Miss Beddoes is dismissed for incompetence. Seeing Miss Beddoes's distress, Chantel writes in her diary: "Oh God . . . help lonely women. Surely those brought up in genteel poverty suffer most. . . . I was picturing her in some lonely lodging, writing for posts that sounded good on paper. I thought of arrogant and demanding mistresses – peevish old ladies who needed a companion; mischievous thoughtless schoolboys like Edward. I felt the tears coming to my eyes" (146, 147). She gives Miss Beddoes some of her own money, to help Miss Beddoes over the early days of her unemployment. This action makes Chantel seem even more likeable. Unbeknownst to Anna, and the reader, until the end of the book is the fact that Chantel engineered Miss Beddoes's dismissal, as she wanted Anna to be appointed as Edward's new governess.

Chantel, like Becky, sees marriage as a career which will satisfy her economic needs and desires, rather than her romantic needs and desires. Her love is for money and position, rather than a person. Helena Michie argues persuasively that Becky, "in the absence of a mother to plot for her, must mold the marriage plot to her own ends" (62). By extension, Chantel must do the same. She herself recognises that she is an orphan and she must help

herself. When she sees wealthy people going to a ball from which she is excluded, she tells herself: "it's no use your looking round for a fairy godmother. You ought to have learned by now that *you* have to be your own fairy godmother" (119).

As a result, both Chantel and Becky deliberately set out to charm and marry men who have financial expectations. They do so in order to provide themselves with financial security and to raise themselves out of poverty. Given women's limited opportunities for economic advancement, Chantel's 'marriage career' is a practical, rather than a romantic, choice. Money is very important to Chantel. She makes no secret of the fact, when her marriage is discovered, that she married Rex for his money. She reveals: "as soon as I entered the Castle I wanted to be mistress of it . . . I am insatiably ambitious" (358). Rex's name, meaning King, is significant: in marrying Rex, Chantel effectively crowns herself the future Queen of Castle Crediton. However, Holt generates sympathy for her by emphasising the economic disadvantages facing women. Although she marries early on in the novel, the secretive nature of the marriage means that no one else, including the reader, knows it has taken place.

Chantel and Becky both marry weak men whom they can control. Chantel marries Rex Crediton, the heir to the Crediton fortune. He is also the heir to the Crediton shipping line and the great house of Castle Crediton. Becky marries Rawdon Crawley, who has the expectation of wealth from his elderly aunt. However, both women recognise that their marriages will jeopardise their husbands' inheritance and so they persuade their husbands to keep their marriages secret. Mussell refers specifically to *The Secret Woman* when she argues that, in pairing plain and domestic heroines with beautiful, passionate foils, the modern Gothics are conservative because "the plainer girl (with whom the readers identify) attains a stable marriage relationship not through overt sexual attractiveness but through domestic qualities [. . .whilst] [t]he passionate woman in all the novels fails to win the hero's love because she is too dependent upon her sexual nature, which at the least limits her and at worst

may lead her into villainy" (85, parenthetical material in original, 86). However, in *The Secret Woman*, it is the beautiful and passionate Chantel who attains a stable marriage rather than the 'plainer girl', Anna. Chantel easily wins the love of her hero, Rex Crediton, who is besotted with her and marries her despite her much lower status and her poverty. He is entranced by her beauty and her strong character. Even when she plots to murder his nephew, who is a boy he adores, he does not stop loving her. By contrast Anna, the more conservative of the two women, does not attain a marriage at all.

Chantel is, like Becky, obliquely associated with the devil. Rigby makes the connection between the devil and Becky in her review of *Vanity Fair*: "No author could have openly introduced a near connexion of Satan's into the best London society . . . considering Becky in her human character, we know of none which so thoroughly satisfies our highest beau idéal of feminine wickedness" (n.p.). Rigby later calls her a "poor little devil" and says: "the stamp of the Evil One was upon Becky" (n.p.). In *Vanity Fair* itself, Lord Steyne thinks, of Becky: "What an accomplished little devil it is!" (611). Major Dobbin says: "[t]hat little devil brings mischief wherever she goes" (778).

Chantel's connection with the devil is more subtle. Her mother gave her the name Chantel after seeing it on a gravestone and thinking it was a pretty name. The gravestone was inscribed with ""Chantel Spring 6 6."" (367, spacing in the original). No indication is given of what this means; whether the woman buried in the grave was named Chantel Spring, or whether she was named Chantel and was buried in the Spring. However, the spacing of the numbers "6 6" is suggestive. If it is a year, with some of the numbers worn away, as seems likely on a tombstone, the only possible number before the first 6 is a 1, meaning the grave is from the sixteen hundreds. The missing number between the two sixes could be any number between one and nine. This raises the possibility of the worn date on the grave being, originally, 1666. In the Book of Revelations, "the number of the beast . . . is Six hundred

threescore and six" (King James Bible, Rev. 13: 18). The number is often written as 666. The beast referred to is the Antichrist; that is, the devil. The gap between the two numbers takes on an added significance when it is considered that there is some debate over the "number of the beast"; whether in fact it is 666 or 616 (Michael 79). The details of the debate hinge on the contents of an ancient papyrus and are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Holt's use of the numbers 6 and 6 on the tombstone, with a space between them, is suggestive: the gap allows for the addition of either a six or a one to make the "number of the beast", linking Chantel with the devil.

There is a further suggestive link. At the end of her long, confessional letter, Chantel quotes from Cardinal Wolsey's speech in Shakespeare's *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*. She writes at the end of the letter: "A long farewell to all my greatness" (3. 2. 351). Later in the speech, Wolsey compares himself to Lucifer (371). Chantel, like Wolsey and Lucifer, is ambitious; like Wolsey and Lucifer, she falls. Despite her self-confessed murders, there is still sympathy shown for her. At the end of the novel, Anna goes to visit Chantel's sister, Selina. She does not tell Selina about Chantel's murderous streak but she takes comfort in talking to someone who knew Chantel. She narrates: "I often thought of Chantel. My life seemed empty without her" (367). There is a suggestion that Chantel was Anna's transgressive self. Bold where Anna was retiring; pragmatic where Anna was romantic and a risk-taker where Anna was cautious, Chantel remains an attractive character. Whilst she was somewhat redeemed towards the end of the novel when she saved the life of a child who had been badly burnt, she never repented her murders and was prepared to sacrifice anyone on the altar of her ambition. Yet Anna still missed her and there was a sense of something being lost from the novel when she was gone.

The likeness of Anna to Jane, and Chantel to Becky, raises the intriguing possibility that Holt was talking back to Rigby's reviews of both novels. Rigby ridicules *Jane Eyre* and,

by contrast, extols the virtues of *Vanity Fair*. She says: "there is no similarity either in the minds, manners, or fortunes of the two heroines. They think and act upon diametrically opposed principles—at least so the author of 'Jane Eyre' intends us to believe—and *each, were they to meet, which we should of all things enjoy to see them do, would cordially despise and abominate the other. Which of the two, however, would most successfully dupe the other is a different question, and one not so easy to decide; though we have our own ideas upon the subject*" (n.p., my emphasis). In *The Secret Woman*, it is Chantel / Becky who manages to dupe Anna / Jane. However, Holt shows the two women have a beneficial effect on each other which Rigby did not foresee. Chantel's more cynical nature makes Anna more cautious and is arguably responsible for Anna's failure to complete a marriage with the philandering Redvers. Chantel is also influenced by Anna. Although she commits several murders and intended to commit more, she saves the life of one of the children on the island when he becomes badly burned. In her confessional letter, written when she was dying, Chantel writes: "*But I am fond of you, Anna. It is something I never thought possible, so perhaps there are yet more secret recesses of my mind which I don't understand myself*" (363, italics in original).

Illegitimacy: Talking Back to Sensation Fiction

Whilst the character of Anna is derived from Jane Eyre and the character of Chantel is derived from Becky Sharp, the plot of *The Secret Woman* derives from sensation fiction. Like sensation fiction, the plot is complicated and involves a number of subplots. It revolves around illegitimacy, which is a major theme in Victorian fiction. Many of Dickens's novels involve illegitimate characters, for example Oliver in *Oliver Twist* (1839), Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* (1853) and Estella in *Great Expectations* (1861). Anthony Trollope's *Ralph the Heir* (1871) sees a man attempting to buy a reversion so that his illegitimate son can

inherit his estate, instead of his legitimate nephew. In George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), Hetty gives birth to an illegitimate child. Similarly, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Tess gives birth to an illegitimate child. In Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Gilbert Osmond's daughter is not the child of his wife but is the child of his mistress. There are many more examples.

In using the theme of illegitimacy, Holt is not simply copying the Victorian novelists. She is instead co-articulating a matter of social and legal concern. The stigma of illegitimacy had long been seen as unjust because it inflicted an inferior status on a child who had no control over their birth. The child was therefore 'punished' for a 'crime' which they did not themselves commit. The laws surrounding illegitimacy went through a number of significant changes in the period of Holt's activity as they rooted out the lingering Victorian presence in contemporary life. The changes were partly driven by changes in society. ONS figures show that the illegitimacy rate, which had been relatively constant at about 5% in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, began to rise in the latter half of the century, reaching more than ten per cent in the late 1970s and over thirty percent by the 1990s ("Happy Families" 54). A decline in the marriage rate and a more liberated attitude to sex outside of marriage fuelled the rise. In 1959, just before the publication of Holt's first novel, the Legitimacy Act "extended legitimacy to the children of parents who had not been free to marry at the time of their birth, but who had married subsequently. The Act effectively ended the discrimination against children who had been born as a result of adulterous relationships" ("Parliament"). The 1969 Family Law Reform Act "allowed people born outside marriage to inherit on the intestacy of either parent" and the 1987 Family Law Reform Act "removed all remaining legal distinctions between children born to married and unmarried parents" ("Parliament").

Illegitimacy is a particularly prominent theme in Victorian sensation fiction and the main plot of *The Secret Woman* is appropriated from *The Woman in White*. In both novels, a man will lose his inheritance if the secret of his illegitimacy becomes generally known. In both novels, a desire to prevent the secret from being discovered leads to criminal acts. In *The Woman in White*, Sir Percival Glyde knows that he will lose his inheritance if anyone discovers that he is illegitimate. He therefore seeks to hide the fact by forging an entry of his parents' marriage in the church register. When Walter Hartright discovers the forgery, he realises that Sir Percival "was not Sir Percival Glyde at all, that he had no more claim to the baronetcy and to Blackwater Park than the poorest labourer who worked on the estate" (529). Sir Percival is therefore prepared to go to great lengths to disguise the true state of affairs and this leads him into criminal actions which ultimately result in his own death.

In a similar manner, when Chantel discovers that Rex is illegitimate she is prepared to go to any lengths to prevent the secret from coming out. Rex has grown up as the acknowledged, legitimate son of Lord Crediton. However, he is in fact illegitimate. The fact of his illegitimacy is unknown to almost anyone because of a complicated generational subplot. The deceased Lord Crediton had two sons. Rex Crediton was apparently legitimate and Redvers Stretton was apparently illegitimate. However, Lord Crediton recognised both sons and brought them up almost equally. Rex was to inherit the Crediton fortune, shipping line and castle. Redvers was provided for in less luxurious style by being employed as a ship's Captain in the family shipping line. When Chantel marries Rex, she expects to become a very wealthy woman when his mother dies. However, when she discovers that Rex and Redvers were swapped in their cradles and that Rex is in fact the illegitimate son, everything she has worked for is in jeopardy. If this secret becomes generally known, then Rex will not inherit the house, title and fortune. She learns that Rex's mother is being blackmailed by the family of the nurse who knew of the swap and so she decides to act: "[t]he only way to

ensure Rex's position was to kill Redvers because if the legitimate heir and his descendants died it all went to the illegitimate one under the terms of the will" (361).

Like Sir Percival Glyde, Chantel is driven to ever more desperate measures to secure her position and she persuades Rex to go along with her schemes. She encourages Monique's wish to return to Coralle because she knows that it will be easier to murder Edward, and dispose of the body, on an ocean voyage. Halfway through the voyage she drugs Edward and instructs Rex to drop him overboard. Their plan takes place on the night of a fancy dress party, when no one will be up on deck and so Rex's actions are unlikely to be noticed. The fancy dress party also allows Rex to wear a burnoose; that is, a concealing item of clothing. Since many of the passengers are wearing the same costume, even if he is spotted he will not be recognised. Rex attempts to carry out the plan but he is disturbed by another passenger when he is carrying Edward across the deck, and he uses that as an excuse not to murder the child. Rex is glad to have escaped the act, but Chantel comments: "Rex is weak" (362).

Chantel's attempt to murder Redvers is more intricate. Knowing that Monique likes to make coffee for Redvers to drink, Chantel decides to poison the coffee so that Monique will be blamed for his death. She plans to suggest that Monique found some love letters between Anna and Redvers and that therefore Monique decided to murder him. However, in a complicated set of plot twists, Chantel accidentally drinks the coffee herself. Realising what has happened, she writes a long, confessional letter to Anna, revealing the extent of her crimes. Not only has she attempted to murder Redvers and Edward, but she has also murdered several elderly women whom she nursed. One of those women was Anna's aunt.

Ironically, the two people who are most concerned with Rex's illegitimacy are not disturbed by it. When Rex and Redvers both know the truth of their births they have no desire to swap roles. Redvers enjoys his life at sea; Rex enjoys his life on shore. They are both happy with their lives and carry on as they have always done. In this, Holt departs from *The*

Woman in White. Whilst Collins's novel shows the injustice of Sir Percival's position, and can arguably be read as a protest against this societal discrimination, Sir Percival is ultimately a criminal, which removes sympathy from him.[42] The illegitimate Rex, by contrast, is not a criminal. It is Chantel who engineers the attempted murders, and Chantel who pays the price for her crimes. Rex bears some blame for going along with her schemes, but he does not actually murder Edward and indeed there is a strong suggestion that he would not have completed the plan, even if he had not been disturbed. It is possible that he would have found some other excuse for not throwing Edward overboard. By breaking the link between illegitimacy and criminality, *The Secret Woman* talks back to Victorian attitudes towards illegitimacy which saw it as a 'crime'.

The Secret Woman is not the only Holt novel to focus on illegitimacy. Throughout the course of her career, illegitimacy was a matter of contemporary socio-political concern, and her use of this theme articulates the changes taking place in society. *Kirkland Revels* and *The Shivering Sands*, both published in the 1960s, continue the tradition of *The Woman in White* by making illegitimate characters criminals, reflecting the less liberated attitudes towards illegitimacy that was still prevalent in the 1960s. *Kirkland Revels* sees the illegitimate Deveril Smith driven to murder in an attempt to claim (by proxy) what he sees as his rightful inheritance, from which he is barred because of his illegitimate status. In *The Shivering Sands*, Alice Lincroft believes herself (wrongly) to be the illegitimate child of Sir William Stacy and commits murder in an attempt to secure her father's favour by removing the other contenders to his affections and his worldly possessions.

In *Mistress of Mellyn* and *Lord of the Far Island*, the illegitimacy is not a result of a child being born to unmarried parents, but it is instead one of doubtful paternity. In *Mistress*

[42] Collins was, however, more sympathetic to illegitimacy in other novels such as *No Name* (1862).

of Mellyn, Alvean TreMellyn is born to married parents but she is the child of another man. Similarly, in *Lord of the Far Island,* Silva Kellaway is born to married parents, but her father rejects her because he believes she is the child of another man. In both cases the children are legally legitimate, because they are born in wedlock, and reflecting their legal status they are not criminals. Holt's focus in these novels is on another kind of illegitimacy, what might be called a moral, rather than a legal, illegitimacy. Alvean is illegitimate in the sense that her mother had an affair and so her mother's husband, the man who is generally believed to be her father, is not her biological parent. Silva is, potentially, morally illegitimate for the same reason: her mother's husband believes she is the biological child of another man. In the Victorian era there was no way of resolving an issue. However, in the late twentieth century, paternity tests were developed and, under the 1969 Act: "[f]or the first time the law courts could order blood tests in cases of disputed paternity" ("Parliament"). These had been available since the 1930s but had not been sufficiently reliable to be used in a court of law. Holt's varied themes of illegitimacy were therefore highlighting issues that were particularly topical at the time she was writing and reflect the changes taking place in her society as lingering Victorian laws and attitudes were gradually replaced.

Whilst the words 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' are used literally in Holt's novels, they are often used metaphorically in literary criticism to denote levels of acceptability. Mary P. Freier notes that: "[b]etween 1970 and 1989, ninety-seven books (or book collections) about detective fiction were published . . . at a range of presses, including the university presses . . . detective fiction as a *legitimate* study for scholarly research had arrived!" (195, my italics). Whitney used the term in an interview when discussing the position of the 'modern Gothic' genre: "We're read by millions . . . yet we've never become quite *legitimate*" (Reed "Phyllis" n.p. my italics). Cox uses the term in neo-Victorian criticism when talking of Elizabeth Peters's *Crocodile on the Sandbank* and Holt's *The Shivering Sands*: "their focus

on (transgressive) women, inheritance plots, and family secrets marks them out as *legitimate* descendants of the nineteenth-century sensation novel" (Cox 191, my italics). The words 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' are used here to talk back to neo-Victorian criticism's embedded hierarchical viewpoint. The viewpoint regards literary fiction as a legitimate form and therefore suitable for including in the developing neo-Victorian canon, but regards popular fiction as an illegitimate form which ought to be excluded.

Many critics have drawn attention to the fact that this hierarchical viewpoint, including a dismissive attitude towards popular romance, is itself an example of the lingering presence of Victorian attitudes in modern life. In 1848, for example, Rigby mocked *Jane Eyre*'s more romantic passages, remarking that the novel is from "the lowest school [of literature] of our own day" and commenting on its "literary deficiencies", likening Jane's sufferings to "plunder from Minerva-lane" (n.p.). She was referring to the Minerva Press, the nineteenth-century equivalent of Harlequin Mills and Boon. The latter publisher is currently "indelibly linked in the scholarly imagination with the popular (in a largely pejorative sense), the fashionable (or even cynically opportunistic), the feminine, the non-professional and the ephemeral" (Batchelor, n.p.). In 1856, George Eliot's essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", was published anonymously in the *Westminster Review*. Eliot describes the "silly novels" as "a composite order of feminine fatuity" and remarks that "the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form" (n.p.). Eliot's remarks paved the way for her own novels, which were in a different style, and her attitude anticipates that of the anonymous *Kirkus* reviewer who condemned Holt's novels whilst also admitting to envy over her immense sales.

However, professional rivalry was not always the reason for the condemnation. As Modleski and Kohlke both rightly point out, there are double standards at play. Modleski

argues persuasively that the double standard shows the lingering presence of outmoded patriarchal attitudes:

> women's criticism of popular feminine narratives has generally adopted one of three attitudes: dismissiveness; hostility — tending unfortunately to be aimed at the consumers of the narratives; or, most frequently, a flippant kind of mockery . . . .It is, significantly, indistinguishable from the tone men often use when they mention feminine popular art . . . it often seems to betray a kind of self-mockery, a fear that someone will think badly of the writer for even touching on the subject, however gingerly. In assuming this attitude, we demonstrate not so much our freedom from romantic fantasy as our acceptance of the critical double standard and of the masculine contempt for sentimental (feminine) 'drivel'. Perhaps we have internalised the ubiquitous male spy, who watches as we read romances (4).

Kohlke also turns her attention to the double standard. She argues that popular fiction, and in particular romantic fiction, should not be disbarred from neo-Victorian study. She makes a strong case for a hierarchical approach to be dismantled, asking pertinently:

> Why *should* romances by Fowles, Byatt, and Waters be admissible as neo-Victorian 'literature', whereas mass market historical fictions about the same period are dismissed *a priori* as not making the grade as 'so-called paraliterature' (Jameson 1991, 2) or pariah-literature? Such a move seems counterintuitive to the neo-Victorian's implicit alignment . . .

> with a dismantling of established aesthetic and discursive hierarchies" (Kohlke "Mining" 29-30, italics in original).

Cox approaches the issue from a different angle. Instead of attacking the double standard she foregrounds the inherent problems in a hierarchical approach by arguing that it is impossible to make an absolute demarcation between literary and popular fiction since the boundaries are difficult to define. Whilst she tentatively describes the former as being concerned "with narrative art – with how the story is told" and the latter as being "typically plot-driven", she acknowledges that even with these broad definitions the boundaries are not impermeable. The novels of Sarah Waters and Michael Cox, as she rightly points out, blur the boundaries by drawing on popular fiction as their hypotexts. Conversely, "narrative participation in the genre of popular fiction does not preclude an engagement in metatextual games" (*Neo-Victorianism* 8). She uses Holt's *The Shivering Sands* as part of her argument but *The Secret Woman* can also be used to intervene in the debate. Investigating the similarities and differences between Holt's 'illegitimate' novel, *The Secret Woman*, and three 'legitimate' neo-Victorian novels, namely *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Fingersmith* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, problematises the boundaries between them and, by extension, between popular and literary fiction.

Although it was not published until 1966, Jean Rhys began writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the 1950s, making it highly unlikely that the novel was influenced, even unconsciously, by Holt's work. It is, however, possible that there was influence working the other way, from *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *The Secret Woman*. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Holt had read Rhys's novel it is certainly plausible as *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published four years before *The Secret Woman*. This fact raises the intriguing possibility that *The Secret Woman* is an appropriation of *Jane Eyre*, and an appropriation of an appropriation of *Jane Eyre*, demonstrating one of the more complex ways in which Holt uses Brontë's text,

and indeed demonstrating one of the complicated ways that *Jane Eyre* continued to make its influence felt in the twentieth century.

Like Holt, Rhys acknowledged her debt to *Jane Eyre*. She made it clear that she wanted to write about Mr Rochester's wife, saying "[i]t is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any of the other mad Creoles" (Smith viii). Whilst *The Secret Woman* is a quasi-sequel to *Jane Eyre*, however, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel. Both novels make subtle references to *Jane Eyre*. For example, Antoinette asks if a dress makes her look "intemperate and unchaste", a reuse of Rochester's description of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Similarly, Chantel teases Anna, saying: "A wild, hysterical and passionate woman, a straying husband and the woman he loves. What a situation and who would have believed it of you, my dear calm practical Anna!" (348-349). Readers familiar with *Jane Eyre* will recognise Chantel's teasing as a summary of *Jane Eyre*'s plot. However, both novels also make a claim to being considered in their own right by changing the names of the protagonists. Whilst Holt chooses Redvers and Monique, Rhys does not name the male protagonist and calls her female protagonist Antoinette, a name derived from the full name of Brontë's madwoman, Bertha Antoinetta Mason. Both novels give their versions of Bertha a voice. Whilst Holt allows Monique to express herself through speech and action, Rhys allows Antoinette to speak as one of the narrators.

Both novels introduce a postcolonial theme by including an island setting into their appropriations. *Jane Eyre* is set entirely in England, where English attitudes are accepted as the norm. *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins on an island in the West Indies before moving to England. *The Secret Woman* reverses the movement of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, beginning in England before moving to the island and then returning to England. Both Holt and Rhys use their island settings to complicate notions of otherness. In England, it is Antoinette and Monique who are othered. On the island, it is the English characters who are othered. Rhys's

unnamed male protagonist and Redvers are both conscious of this othering. They both dislike the island, describing it respectively as "a wild place. Not only wild but menacing" (*Wide* 42) or "evil" (*Secret* 298).

Holt goes further than Rhys in that she also places her female protagonist, appropriated from Jane Eyre, on the island. The experiences of Anna / Jane therefore mirror those of Monique / Bertha / Antoinette when she experiences the fear and pain of being othered in what is, to her, a frightening and incomprehensible culture. Anna expresses her anxiety to Chantel:

> "It's this place. It's so strange."
>
> ". . .. You can't expect the place to be run like an English town, can you?"
>
> "Everything seems so strange here. There's a hidden barbarity."
>
> "Without the conventions imposed by our dear Queen." She spoke ironically (327).

Chantel's irony mocks the idea of the colonial conventions and the supremacy of the Queen. Her attitude emphasises that, contrary to colonial ideas, a South Sea island cannot be run like an English town. Anna realises that colonial ideas of supremacy are nothing but a facade: "[t]he island had been but lightly touched by our Western ways. Beneath the veneer there was something deeply savage. These people believed in strange gods; a stone rock to them was a living thing. Curses and spells were commonplace. And I believed that Suka had marked me down as her enemy" (350).

Both novels appropriate the supernatural from *Jane Eyre*, which emerges when Jane hears Rochester calling her although she is much too far away to hear, and give it a much more menacing twist. In *The Secret Woman* the supernatural overtones begin lightly but

gradually intensify into menace. Anna and Chantel joke about Suka making effigies of them and sticking pins in them when they first arrive on the island, but Suka's presence becomes malignant and Anna feels Suka is measuring her for her coffin. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's old nurse, Christophine, practices obeah magic. Both Suka and Christophine dislike their nurseling's husband and are a threatening presence. Again both Holt and Rhys contest the idea that the islands have been changed by colonial ideas of civilisation and instead represent them as unchanged in any meaningful way. They retain their otherness, but on the island it is the English characters who are othered.

Wide Sargasso Sea and *The Secret Woman* both appropriate the themes of gender and economics from *Jane Eyre*. Jane must earn her keep in a low-paid job whilst Antoinette and Monique come from impoverished families. Antoinette's father drank himself to death following The Emancipation Act of 1833 because freeing the slaves brought financial ruin to the family. Antoinette's mother remarried and her new wealth came from her husband, Mr Mason, who restored the family house. In *The Secret Woman*, Monique's family owned a sugar plantation but when Monique's father died the family's prosperity dwindled. However, Monique's family fortunes are revived by Anna rather than by a man. Anna's professional knowledge and contacts, acquired from assisting her aunt in running an antiques business, lead to the lucrative sale of some unregarded antiques in Monique's island home and consequently restore the family fortunes.

Fire features in both novels but whereas it rages uncontrolled in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as it does in *Jane Eyre*, it is ultimately tamed in *The Secret Woman*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, following *Jane Eyre*, it is intimated that Antoinette will perish in the flames when she sets Thornfield Hall alight. Rhys foreshadows this in an incident where the freed slaves set Antoinette's island house on fire and her brother is injured whilst her parrot burns in the flames. Towards the end of the novel, when Antoinette is in England, she dreams of setting

Thornfield Hall on fire and the novel ends with her picking up a candle and going downstairs. Readers familiar with *Jane Eyre* know that she then sets the house on fire. Fire is therefore a destructive force in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In *The Secret Woman*, however, fire plays a greater part and is ultimately a cleansing force. The island is inhabited by a group known as the Flame Men. They claim to have the protection of the fire goddess and they frequently perform a flame torch dance to show that fire cannot harm them. When one of the Flame Men, a young boy, is burned in the ritual, Chantel heals him, thus earning the respect of the islanders. They venerate her and care for her grave after her unrelated death. Her selfless act in saving the boy goes some way to expiating her sins. Monique is unharmed by the fire, providing an unexpected twist which breaks from the hypotext and provides her with a more hopeful future. Although she later dies, it is from natural causes and her death does not occur for some time, during which she rediscovers her identity on the island.

The notable similarities between the two novels contest the boundaries between popular and literary fiction since both use the same avowed hypotext and both share themes of postcolonialism, the supernatural, economics, gender, madness and fire. Notions of otherness are shown to be subjective and in both novels the supernatural elements which are unthreatening in *Jane Eyre* become transformed into sources of fear in the island settings. However, the two novels differ in their treatment of gender, particularly with regard to economics and madness, and in their treatment of fire. In Rhys's novel it requires a man to restore Antoinette's family fortunes whereas in Holt's novel prosperity is restored by a woman. Antoinette's madness leads her to burn the house down in Rhys's novel whereas in Holt's novel, Monique's 'madness' is presented as sexual frustration and Monique is not driven to arson. Fire, in Holt's novel, is ultimately cleansing. Whereas Rhys's Antoinette repeats Bertha's fate, Monique breaks away from it as Holt symbolically breaks Brontë's

hold over her own appropriation. Rhys's novel is the more imitative of the two, whereas Holt creates a greater degree of transformation.

Whilst *The Secret Woman* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* share a hypotext of *Jane Eyre*, *The Secret Woman* and *Fingersmith* share themes derived from sensation fiction.[43] The main similarities between *The Secret Woman* and *Fingersmith* lie in their sensational plots and in their creation of two first-person female narrators. In both novels the plot revolves around two babies who are swapped. In *Fingersmith*, the swapped babies, Sue Trinder and Maud Lilly, lead very different lives. Sue is brought up in a den of thieves with baby farmers and Maud Lilly is raised in a large house, where she is trained to assist in preparing a collection of pornography. The secret of the swap drives the complicated plots of both novels. In *The Secret Woman* it leads Chantel to attempted murder and accidental suicide whereas in *Fingersmith* it leads to a plot including abduction and seduction. In the latter novel, Sue and Maud do not know they have been swapped and do not meet until they are almost eighteen. Sue is persuaded to help a man she knows as Gentleman by going to work as a maid at Maud's house, where she will encourage Maud to elope with Gentleman. After the elopement, she will help him to have Maud committed to an asylum so that he can claim her fortune as his own. Sue, however, falls in love with Maud and although she goes along with the scheme she does so reluctantly. However, when they reach the madhouse, it is Sue who is incarcerated and she realises that Gentleman and Maud have duped her.

The second part of each novel is narrated from an alternate point of view. In *The Secret Woman* the narration is taken over by Chantel whilst in *Fingersmith* it is taken over by Maud. Maud's narration reveals that she and Gentleman, known to her as Richard Rivers, planned Sue's incarceration all along. Richard planned to bring Sue to the house as a maid

[43] *The Woman in White* is a shared intertext of both *The Secret Woman* and *Fingersmith*.

and then elope with Maud, taking Sue with them and eventually having her confined under Maud's name. In that way, Maud's uncle would not pursue her as he would believe her to be mad and locked away in an asylum. The plan is enacted, but there is another twist. Gentleman takes her to the den of thieves where Sue was raised and the secret of the baby swap is revealed. Maud is then imprisoned in the den. The ultimate motive is gain: Sue's mother was a wealthy woman and she made a will benefitting both her own daughter and the child for whom she swapped it, that is, Maud. She desired the baby swap because she wanted to protect her child from her father and brother. Sue and Maud come into their fortune on their eighteenth birthday. However, as a result of the complicated plot, Gentleman will take control of his 'mad wife's' share and Mrs Sucksby, the baby farmer who provided the swapped infant, will take control of the other share by virtue of imprisoning Maud in her thieves' den.

The third parts of both *The Secret Woman* and *Fingersmith* revert back to their primary narrators, Anna and Sue respectively. Sue escapes from the asylum and returns to Mrs Sucksby's den, where she learns the truth. In the ensuing scuffle, Gentleman is stabbed and Mrs Sucksby is eventually hanged for his murder. At the end of the novel. Sue and Maud give way to their feelings for each other. Both *The Secret Woman* and *Fingersmith*, then, end by subverting Victorian norms. *The Secret Woman* does so by implying that Anna might choose a career and her own home over a marriage to Redvers. When she returns to England she goes back to the house she has inherited from her aunt. Her adventures have made her see her choices and her future more clearly: "I knew at once what I was going to do. I was coming back here [to the house]. I was going to buy and sell antiques . . . I could do it. I knew I could" (369). When Redvers returns, she does not abandon her plans but thinks "the future was for us to make" (370). *Fingersmith* subverts Victorian norms by concluding with a lesbian relationship.

The similarities between Holt's novels and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* lie not in character or plot but in conception. Linda Hutcheon argues that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an example of "historiographic metafiction", a term she coined and which she explains as a work whose "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historio*graphic meta*fiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5, italics in original). As historiographic metafiction, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was one of the first novels to be judged as neo-Victorian. However, Fowles's own comments on his novel show that his initial inspiration did not come from a desire to write historiographic metafiction (which at the time was unnamed but was nevertheless conceptually available to him). It came from:

> a visual image. A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea . . . It was obviously mysterious. It was vaguely romantic. It also seemed, perhaps because of the latter quality, not to belong to today . . . She was Victorian; and since I always saw her in the same static long shot, with her back turned, she represented a reproach on the Victorian Age (*Notes* 148).

The key words for Fowles's inspiration, then, are: Victorian, mysterious and romantic. These same three words are key descriptors of Holt's novels. However, both Fowles and Holt place mystery, romance and Victorian women at the centre of the picture. Fowles goes on to say that he cannot consciously place the genesis of the image. His uncertainty raises the intriguing possibility that it could have come from the cover of one of Holt's novels. With their widespread publicity, it is certainly possible that he saw the covers, and the date of his comments, 1966, is commensurate with Holt's success. The hardback cover of her first novel, *Mistress of Mellyn* is particularly similar to Fowles's vision. It shows

a woman who is vaguely Victorian, mysterious and romantic in a long shot, with her back to the viewer. The idea that it could have been an influence on Fowles is speculative. Nevertheless, it should not be ruled out. As Kohlke rightly points out, there can be "unconscious influence" ("Mining" 22) at play, as well as conscious influence, in literary inspiration. Whether it sowed the seed for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or not, the basic similarities between Holt's novels and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, with their focus on the Victorian, the romantic and the mysterious, are undeniable and should be acknowledged.

The boundaries between *The Secret Woman* on the one hand and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Fingersmith* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* on the other are, then, not as impermeable as might be supposed. Holt's novels are perceived as illegitimate, popular fiction whilst the novels of Rhys, Waters and Fowles are perceived as literary fiction. This affects their perceived statuses but those statuses can be contested by the obvious similarities between them. Whilst they all differ in style and authorial voice, they are bound together by shared hypotexts and by similarities in character, plot and inspiration. Most importantly, they are united by a desire to respond to the literature and ideologies of the Victorian era.

Conclusion

"Nothing is ever finished"

— *The Shivering Sands*

"Nothing is ever finished" (168) as Napier Stacy points out in *The Shivering Sands* and his words resonate with my ongoing interest in Victoria Holt. I began my study of her novels in my MA dissertation and continued it in "Madness, Monks and Mutiny: Neo-Victorianism in the Work of Victoria Holt". It soon became apparent that there was a great deal more to be discovered. The aim of this thesis was therefore to continue my investigations, refining them by examining Holt as a pioneer of neo-Victorian sensation fiction. To do so, I focused on Holt's reply to the genres which form a part of Victorian sensation fiction, particularly Gothic, crime and romance fiction, as well as her overall response to the sensation genre itself.

The analysis reveals that Holt's work is a pioneering example of key defining tropes of neo-Victorian fiction, particularly the restoration of silenced voices, the mirroring of socio-political concerns and intertextuality. Moreover, Holt's most widely used tropes and intertexts are derived from mid-Victorian sensation fiction and their use is self-conscious, in the sense of knowing. Specifically, the novels utilise a middle-class domestic setting and their plots feature secrets, issues of identity (including class, gender, legal and existential identity), crime, mystery and melodrama as well as a complex focus on women. The latter trope is enhanced by the novels' first-person female narrators and the importance of female secondary characters. The focus is further emphasised by the prominent use of female madness and female criminality, including female murderers and the women who uncover their crimes.

Whilst all of the novels contain these elements to some degree, the proportions vary as they co-articulate the burning socio-political issues at the time of publication. In the 1960s

and early 1970s there is an emphasis on the domestic setting, indeed six of the twelve novels[44] published before 1974 refer to the house in the title. The anthropomorphising of the house and its close relationship to the family which shares its name derive from Gothic fiction, which is itself one of the progenitors of sensation fiction. Yet the house is not simply a building, nor can it be dismissed as a nostalgic yearning. It is repeatedly used as a symbol of gender inequalities, echoing the concerns of mid-Victorian sensation fiction and pioneering one of the major motifs of neo-Victorian sensation fiction. Whereas sensation fiction engaged with the issues of first-wave feminism, however, Holt's novels engage with second-wave feminism. The early concerns of second wave feminism focused on women's disadvantaged economic position, brought about by their lack of educational and employment opportunities which led them to lower paid work, as well as unequal pay when doing the same, or comparable, job as a man. Women's lack of economic power finds expression in Holt's novels through the issue of home ownership. In both eras, home ownership was predominantly a male privilege. Holt's first novel, *Mistress of Mellyn*, first published in 1960, presents an extreme case of a woman being driven mad by her desire for a house which she can only obtain through marriage. When she is thwarted in this desire she is driven to murder and ends her life in a lunatic asylum. The house as a symbol therefore speaks to women's economic disadvantages and links these disadvantages to criminality and madness. Crime and madness are therefore seen, at least in part, as the responsibility of society as well as the individual.

The house as a symbol of economic inequality begins to wane after the end of the 1960s, suggesting that the explicit attention given to the issue by the Women's Liberation Movement made its mediation through novelisation less urgent as the fears it occasioned receded. The movement's conference of 1970 specifically demanded equal opportunities of

[44] Excluding the anomalous *The Queen's Confession: The Story of Marie-Antoinette*

education and employment as well as equal pay. The demands led to legislation such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), which began to address economic inequalities. The female narrators of Holt's later novels, whilst inhabiting the same Victorian period as their counterparts in the earlier novels, reflect these changes as they have more economic independence. In *The Secret Woman* (1970), the narrator, Anna Brett, becomes a homeowner when her aunt bequeaths her a house and in *Lord of the Far Island* (1975) it is the female narrator who owns the island. There is a similar progression in the use of the house as the sole, or major, setting. As late twentieth-century society moved into a new configuration where women increasingly worked outside the home, encouraged by better employment opportunities and wages, Holt's narrators travel more widely and the novels are not as claustrophobic as the settings are not predominantly confined to one house. The prominent position of the house in the title also wanes and it is included in only one of the novels published after 1974, *The Landower Legacy*.

However, the house as a site of the secret abuse of women continues to co-articulate socio-political concerns throughout Holt's work. Mid-Victorian sensation fiction voiced this concern through novels such as *The Woman in White*, where there is a veiled reference to Count Fosco's rape of his wife and where Laura Glyde is held a virtual prisoner in the house and is traumatised by the menacing behaviour of Count Fosco and her husband. Domestic abuse was a major concern of second wave feminism and the first women's refuge for battered women was set up in Chiswick in 1971. Holt's novels co-articulate this abuse of patriarchal power. In *Menfreya* (1966), patriarchal control, and its devastating consequences for women, are foregrounded both through the power that Harriet's father, and then her husband, have over her life. With familial, political and religious power being in the hands of men, the novel takes place in a world which is nightmarish for women. When Harriet's husband rapes her, the novel explicitly links the rape to men's physical power and implicitly

links it to men's political power since, unusually for Holt, the narrator's husband is a politician. Disempowered by her unequal society, Harriet adopts a fatalistic view of marital rape and comes to accept it as a part of marriage. Her maid, Fanny, spirals into madness and suicide as she lacks the physical and legal power to protect Harriet. The addition of newspaper headlines utilises one of the tropes of sensation fiction whilst at the same time echoing the contemporary Profumo scandal, emphasising the lingering influence of the patriarchy in the political framework of 1960s England.

Twentieth-century legislation was slower to address domestic abuse than it was to address economic disparities and it seems likely that this is why domestic abuse continues to feature in Holt's work. There was some progress with the 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act but it was not until 2003 that marital rape was outlawed. Whilst domestic abuse continues to feature throughout Holt's work, it ceases to be accepted by the narrators and increasingly they resist it, reflecting changing opinions in society and frustration at the slow rate of change. In *Secret for a Nightingale* (1986), the narrator fights back against domestic abuse by leaving her husband. She is able to develop a new life, in part as a result of a small inheritance but also because of the training and employment opportunities available to her as a 'Nightingale' nurse. The novel therefore reveals the role of economics in domestic abuse and the importance of women's financial independence in escaping it. In Holt's *The Road to Paradise Island* (1985), the narrator's friend Felicity also fights back against her abusive husband, fatally shooting him. Whether the shooting is an accident or deliberate is never resolved but the narrator's attitude is that, if the shooting was deliberate, it was justifiable. In providing this attitude, Holt complicates issues of criminality, evoking sympathy for the female perpetrator which is in keeping with sensation fiction. The implicit argument that the crime is a product of socio-political conditions again echoes sensation fiction by suggesting that women are forced to take the law into their own hands

when failings in the legal system refuse them protection. The novel therefore participates in one of the pressing issues of its own time, refracted through mid-Victorian sensation fiction.

Holt's work in this area not only provides a neo-Victorian co-articulation of socio-political concerns, restoring silenced female voices and highlighting injustices in society, but it also provides an important 'missing link' in the development of crime fiction. Eleanor Hibbert's deep-seated interest in, and knowledge of, Victorian crime can be seen by the novels she wrote under the name of Elbur Ford as well as those she wrote under the name of Victoria Holt. Ford's fictionalisation of real Victorian crimes shows that the allusions to crimes such as the Constance Kent case, which appear in Holt's work, are deliberate. Whilst contemporary reviewers acknowledged the importance of crime in Holt's novels by foregrounding the mysteries and murders in their reviews, it has been largely overlooked by criticism. The neglect can partially be explained by the fact that crime fiction was dismissed as popular fiction when Holt began writing, and it was therefore not considered suitable for critical investigation. However, when this position began to change in the latter half of the twentieth century, Holt's work was still not recognised.

The prevailing opinion that she was an author of modern Gothic or romantic fiction appears to have inhibited investigations of her in this area. Yet her work occupies an important place in the chain of development from sensation fiction to contemporary crime fiction. Two motifs are of particular note: the development of the Gothic demon lover into the abusive husband, and the evolution of the transgressive woman. The abusive husband, who may or may not be a killer, progresses through such sensation novels as *The Woman in White*, through Golden Age detective fiction such as Christie's *The Moving Finger* (1943), to *domestic noir* and on through Holt's novels to bestselling twenty-first century crime fiction such as *Before I Go to Sleep*. The theme of the transgressive woman, derived from sensation fiction, becomes the unreliable, murderous narrator of *The Secret Woman* and leads on to

such transgressive narrators as Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* and Sue Trinder in Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian *Fingersmith*.

Punishment as well as crime is critiqued in Holt's work and again there is a focus on gender and the outdated patriarchal legal system which disadvantages women. The murders of women that take place in *The Shivering Sands* and *The Curse of the Kings* blur the lines between execution and murder, implicitly commenting on their own political moment, when the death penalty was increasingly seen as a moral evil and was ultimately abolished. Linking the executions to history by recalling the habits of Roman Britain and ancient Egypt respectively, the novels present the reappearance of the past as horrific. The female victims highlight the role of gender in punishment and recall the Edith Thompson case, which created a sensation in the twentieth-century. It aroused unease since Thompson herself did not commit murder and the evidence that she incited it was tenuous. There was a feeling amongst many people that the judge's misogyny had contributed to her plight and that her execution should not have taken place. By presenting executions as archaic and a moral evil, Holt's novels talk back to mid-Victorian fiction and society, which regarded execution as a righteous warning to criminals. Instead, they contain a warning to the authorities about the immorality, particularly the gender-biased immorality, of the procedure. This is highlighted in *The Curse of the Kings* when the murderer escapes retribution, implicitly showing that men can murder women without punishment if they disguise the murder as a legalised form of killing.

By setting her novels in the Victorian era, Holt co-articulates the socio-political disadvantages under which women had laboured for more than a century, giving a historical perspective which reflects the feminist notion of 'herstory', that is to say, history told from the female perspective. Historiographical concerns are an acknowledged feature of neo-Victorian fiction and they appear particularly in *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, *On the*

Night of the Seventh Moon and *Secret for a Nightingale*. In *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, Holt uses a fictitious legend to show that patriarchal historiographies have been used to oppress women for centuries, with standing stones limiting them to such an extent that they are both literally and symbolically immobilised by being turned to stone. The traditional word for standing stones, '*men*hirs', is used to emphasise the masculine nature of the petrifying force. *On the Night of the Seventh Moon* presents memory as an important form of historiography and emphasises the notion that female memory can be used to counteract the biased views of both received history and orthodox history. In Holt's own twentieth-century era, when women were marginalised characters in historical accounts, she validated their place by retelling history through their eyes. Moreover, she validated their personal recollections, and by extension those of their ancestors, as being of equal importance to other forms of historiography. Indeed, they are presented as necessary if a true picture of history is to emerge. In *Secret for a Nightingale* she continues to validate female experience by using female writing as a form of historiography. The influence of Florence Nightingale's letters and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be seen in the novel as Holt presents a view of the Crimean War as a site of female resistance to Victorian notions of the angel in the house. The War is presented as an important historical node for the professionalisation of women, rather than a male-centric conflict. Published at a time when orthodox history focused on the achievements of men rather than women, the novel sent a timely message.

Early neo-Victorian criticism regarded neo-Victorian novels as a form of historiographic metafiction. Although current critical concerns have developed a wider range of motifs and the emphasis on historiographic metafiction has rightly given way to more far-reaching concerns, some critics still regard historiographic metafiction as a defining element of neo-Victorian fiction. Most of Holt's novels do not include real historical personages or events, so that they are not historiographic metafiction as Hutcheon defines it. However, *On*

the Night of the Seventh Moon and *The India Fan* both have such inclusions and they can be regarded as laying claim to past events whilst at the same time reflecting on the past's unknowability. The self-consciousness of the concern with the unknowability of history is arguable in the former novel since it is implicit rather than explicit, and therefore the novel's status as historiographic metafiction is subjective. However, the novel can certainly be seen as neo-Victorian in that it is set in the Victorian period and restores the silenced female voice to the historical record, thereby restoring justice to history's marginalised. *The India Fan*, however, explicitly reflects on the unknowability of history, with the narrator drawing attention to different accounts of the English Civil War and similarly conflicting views of the Indian Mutiny, also known as the Sepoy Rebellion and India's First War of Independence. This provides the self-consciousness that Hutcheon includes as a part of her definition of historiographic metafiction and reveals that Holt, whilst being regarded as an author of popular fiction, used her novels to foreground serious concerns.

One of the major areas inhibiting a serious study of Holt is that her novels have been dismissed as romances. Whilst comparable, male-oriented popular genres such as crime fiction have long been considered suitable for study, romance is still viewed pejoratively and its inclusion is resisted by the academy. Yet, as Kohlke rightly points out, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Fingersmith* are all romances but they are accepted as neo-Victorian fiction. However, as she continues, they are also more than 'just' romances. They therefore exhibit areas of overlap between popular fiction and literary fiction. Holt's novels, like those of Rhys, Fowles and Waters, are also not 'just' romances. They do not simply focus on emotional courtship but instead they co-articulate all aspects of romantic relationships, including marriage, divorce, legitimacy and illegitimacy. Moreover, they do so at a time when the divorce laws and the legitimacy laws were pressing concerns and were consequently going through a period of rapid change. *The Secret Woman* responds to the

romantic triangle in *Jane Eyre* and co-articulates the problems of an unhappy marriage when divorce was not, for most people, a realistic option and so there was no way out. Whilst *Jane Eyre* sees the Creole Bertha Rochester locked in an attic, *The Secret Woman* gives a voice to the wronged wife. The novel also appropriates the theme of illegitimacy from sensation novels such as *The Woman in White* and co-articulates concerns over the subject at a time when the legitimacy laws were being rewritten. The residual presence of the Victorian era, which was apparent in lingering condemnatory attitudes towards divorce and illegitimacy, was slowly eroded as Holt's contemporary society moved out of its shadow. The novel speaks to the process of much-needed reform.

The novels of Rhys, Fowles, Waters and Holt all speak with different voices but this should be regarded a positive, rather than a negative, consideration because it creates the variety which is needed if the discourse is to be truly representative. Importantly, *The Secret Woman*, like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Fingersmith* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exhibits the primary thrust of neo-Victorian fiction, which is that it shows a desire to respond to the literature and ideologies of the Victorian era. Yet the resistance amongst some critics to include so-called popular fiction is inhibiting Holt's recognition as a pioneer of neo-Victorian fiction. Excluding popular fiction relies on the ability to successfully discriminate between the two, yet this study reinforces the fact that the two types of fiction do not have clear dividing lines and that in many novels the two overlap. As such, the thesis has used her work to talk back to criticism, challenging critical assumptions and highlight areas of discrimination. Holt uses a wide range of Victorian intertexts, giving evidence of narrative art pertaining to the "literariness of literature" as Sanders puts it. The high degree of intertextuality in Holt's work therefore challenges easy definitions of her work as purely popular. The range and differing uses of the Victorian intertexts is evidence of an implicit self-conscious desire to respond to the Victorians, not only their socio-political milieu but

also their literature. Mid-Victorian sensation fiction is particularly strongly represented, with Holt repeatedly using themes derived from sensation fiction as well as overt mentions of sensation novels and authors.

The thesis extended the sensation motifs of illegitimacy and identity to talk back to neo-Victorian criticism, showing that excluding Holt's novels as 'illegitimate' subjects for study rests on their 'identity' as popular fiction. This identity is problematised by their extensive intertextuality and metatextual gameplaying, which challenges their status as illegitimate subjects for study. Similarly, the conflicting identity of the readers as either general readers of popular fiction or professional readers further problematises the issue. If Holt was writing unashamedly popular fiction aimed at an exclusively general readership then it stands to reason that she would not have introduced intertexts which could only be recognised by professional readers. Similarly, if her novels can only be properly understood by knowledgeable readers, then they cannot be easily categorised as purely popular fiction.

Although many of Holt's neo-Victorian concerns were to some degree expected when I started this thesis, following my knowledge of Holt gained through my MA dissertation, the analysis revealed some unexpected results. Adding to the problematisation of Holt's perceived position as an author of *just* popular fiction is an unforeseen aspect of Holt's work that this thesis uncovered. It again showed that her work is more complex than it might at first appear. Her books are not only novels *of* appropriation, *of* history, *of* the Gothic, *of* crime and *of* romance but they are also *about* these subjects. *Mistress of Mellyn* not only appropriates *Jane Eyre*, but it is also *about* the stories we tell and the ways we tell them. Holt's novels are not only set in a historical period, usually the Victorian era, but they are also *about* the nature of history, about who is doing the telling and what are they choosing to tell, or what are they choosing to leave out. The Gothic nature of the novels is not only a collection of Gothic tropes, but it is also a presentation of life as a Gothic nightmare for

women living in a patriarchal society. The crimes are not only absorbing elements which increase the reader's enjoyment of the novels but they are also *about* crime and punishment, including the fluid boundaries between legal and moral concepts of murder. The romantic elements of the novels are *about* romance as a social construct, with its attendant social constructs of marriage, divorce, legitimacy and illegitimacy. These broader revelations again contest a view that Holt's novels are simply popular fiction and show that there is an overlap with serious literature which has not been recognised.

The strength and number of the feminist themes was also unexpected, as was the extensive use of symbolism to express those themes. In *Mistress of Mellyn*, Alice TreMellyn is symbolically suffocated by the patriarchal expectations which force her into an unhappy marriage, but also literally suffocated to death by being locked into a priest's hole. The site of her death is significant, being related to the male religious authority that symbolically suffocated her in life. In *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin*, Kerensa Carlee realises that she has symbolically encased herself in stone by internalising patriarchal values, which are represented by the legend attached to the local standing stones. The stones are said to be the remains of nuns who rebelled against patriarchal values by losing their virginity, and who were consequently petrified for their transgression. In *Menfreya*, Harriet Delvaney is trapped in an abusive marriage in which her husband, a politician, expresses his familial power over her by marital rape. The rape not only shows his physical power but it also symbolically represents his political power to control her life by controlling the law-making process. *The Curse of the Kings* and *The Shivering Sands* also critique discriminatory patriarchal legal power when Yasmin and Caroline Verlaine are murdered, or almost murdered, in conditions which blur the lines between murder, execution and sacrifice. The novels' publications dates coincide with laws suspending and abolishing the death penalty and they reflect the long-lasting societal unease over the execution of Edith Thompson. Many more examples of

women's vulnerability in a patriarchal society can be found in Holt's novels, giving them a political context that emphasises the fluidity of the boundaries between so-called popular and literary fiction.

The discoveries made through a close study of Holt show the dangers of excluding so-called popular fiction "*a priori*", as Kohlke puts it. Excluding popular fiction has led to the neglect of Holt, an author who, as the analysis reveals, pioneered the major neo-Victorian motifs of restoring silenced voices, co-articulating socio-political concerns and intertextuality. This in turn has led to a narrow view of neo-Victorian fiction as the preserve of so-called literary fiction, particularly when written by authors who are conversant with the academy's cultural values through a shared academic background. There is an inconsistency here, because much neo-Victorian fiction is founded on sensation fiction, which is itself a popular genre. To allow entry to popular fiction as a hypotext but not as a hypertext is contradictory. There is therefore an urgent need for other likely neo-Victorian candidates to be properly investigated, regardless of popular or literary status, so that their neo-Victorian concerns can be uncovered. Widening the text base will not only broaden our understanding of the neo-Victorian impulse but, vitally, it will also provide the inclusion that neo-Victorian sensation fiction itself valorises, by embracing diverse viewpoints.

This thesis has extended my previous work on Holt but a great deal remains to be done. Holt's novels need further investigation as neo-Victorian sensation texts. All of Holt's Victorian-set novels are considered to some degree in this thesis but not all of them are analysed in depth. This means that the other novels await close analysis as neo-Victorian sensation fiction. There are indications that some of the novels have more in common with other Victorian trends than with sensation fiction. For example, Holt makes intertextual use of New Woman fiction, which flourished particularly in the 1880s and 1890s, in some of her novels. Indeed, in *The Landower Legacy* (1984), the narrator refers to herself as a "New

Woman" (374, capitals in original) and so this would be a fruitful area of further study. There are also indications that some of Holt's later novels are in the realist mode, although they still contain occasional sensational happenings. Close study is likely to reveal these, and other, interactions with Victorian literature and ideologies. In addition, five of Holt's novels are not set in the Victorian period and they await analysis beyond neo-Victorianism.

The detailed analysis in this thesis shows that Holt's novels are not only important for neo-Victorian fiction but they are also important for a range of other discourses. Chief among them is appropriation studies. All of Holt's novels appropriate their avowed hypotext of *Jane Eyre* at some level. They also make intertextual use of a wide range of other novels, plays and poems from several centuries of literature as well as fairy tales and other folk literature. It seems possible that Holt is the most prolific author to consistently use appropriation as one of her chief modes of expression. Whilst many of her novels appropriate Victorian texts there are indications that some of them appropriate a wider range of precursors. *The Road to Paradise Island*, for example, appears to be an appropriation of Milton's "Paradise Lost" (1667) and "Paradise Regained" (1671), and this should be investigated.

Holt's novels also have global importance for Brontë studies. By appropriating the novels of the Brontës they add to the influence of the Brontës and the spread of the Brontës' renown. *Mistress of Mellyn*, a hypertext of *Jane Eyre*, was adapted for Taiwanese cinema where it is known as *The Bride Who Has Returned From Hell* (1965). Some critical attention has been turned towards the film in Asian Studies but it is in need of investigation as part of a study of Holt. It is also important when considering Holt's worldwide impact and the attendant dissemination of *Jane Eyre*.

Eleanor Hibbert's other pseudonymous novels also require exploration. The books she wrote under the names of Jean Plaidy, Philippa Carr and Elbur Ford all have potential relevance for the neo-Victorian discourse. Jean Plaidy wrote a series of four novels about

Queen Victoria, *The Captive of Kensington Palace* (1972), *The Queen and Lord M* (1973), *The Queen's Husband* (1973) and *The Widow of Windsor* (1974) and these should be interrogated to find out if they are politicised, as de Groot persuasively argues for Plaidy's novels about Anne Boleyn. They also open up further areas of research into the relationship between historical and neo-Victorian fiction. Similarly, some of the Philippa Carr novels, which are known collectively as the 'Daughters of England' series, have Victorian settings and need to be examined for neo-Victorian traits. Elbur Ford's novelisations of Victorian crimes require attention, not only in relation to the Victoria Holt novels where they provide confirmation of self-conscious usage of those crimes, but also for politicisation, particularly in their treatment of the marginalised, including the working classes and women.

The conclusions of this thesis show that Eleanor Hibbert has a claim to be regarded as a pioneer of neo-Victorian fiction, as well as an author who launched the modern Gothic genre, influenced the direction of crime fiction and reclaimed women's place in history through her historical fiction under a variety of pseudonyms. More work therefore needs to be done on Holt in order to fully uncover her wide contribution to the development of fiction in the twentieth-century. As a consequence, other authors currently dismissed as authors of popular fiction should also be investigated without pre-judgement. The work of female authors in particular has been unjustly neglected, and often derided, yet it potentially has much to tell us and it requires further investigation.

The conclusions of this thesis also make it clear that the hierarchical attitudes towards literary and popular fiction which are still apparent in many areas of criticism must continue to be challenged if a true picture of twentieth-century fiction is to emerge. If hierarchical attitudes are allowed to persist they will most probably lead to the neglect, and therefore the invisibility, of Holt, who is demonstrably one of the century's more widely influential authors. This neglect will be detrimental to the pursuit of knowledge and a full understanding

of literary trends. Conversely, acknowledging Holt's influential place will have positive consequences, not only for a study of Holt but also for neo-Victorian fiction. It expands the genre's base, improves diversity and restores justice to a neglected female author by acknowledging her place as a pioneer of neo-Victorian sensation fiction.

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