

Reading "The Writing on the Wall": Neo-Victorian Reimaginings and the Potential of Popular
Genres

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A Note on *Drood*(s)

To avoid any potential confusion as to which version of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* I am referring to throughout the course of this thesis, I will specify either “Holmes’s *Drood*” or “Dickens’s *Drood*,” using the shortened version of the title for efficiency and adding the author for context.

Additionally, due to the complicated history of Holmes’s *Drood*’s tracklist, I want to clarify the order of songs I hold canonical, as certain changes over the various productions have shifted meaning, pacing, and nuance in the show’s narrative. My version of Holmes’s *Drood* draws largely from the Roundabout Theatre Company’s 2012 revival, and thus consists of the following:

Act One

- “There You Are” (Chairman and Company)
- “A Man Could Go Quite Mad” (Jasper)
- “Two Kinsmen” (Jasper and Drood)
- “Moonfall” (Rosa)
- “Moonfall Quartet” (Rosa, Helena, Wendy, and Beatrice)
- “The Wages of Sin” (Puffer)
- “Opium Den Ballet”
- “Ceylon”* (Neville, Helena, and Company)
- “A British Subject”* (Neville, Helena, Drood, Rosa, Crisparkle, and Company)
- “Both Sides of the Coin” (Jasper and Sapsea/Chairman)
- “Perfect Strangers” (Drood and Rosa)
- “No Good Can Come From Bad” (Nevilla, Jasper, Rosa, Drood, Helena, Crisparkle, and Waiter/Bazzard)
- “Never the Luck” (Bax/Bazzard and Company)
- “Off to the Races” (Sapsea, Durdles, Deputy, and Company)

Act Two

- “An English Music Hall” (Chairman and Company)
- “Settling Up the Score” (Puffer, Datchery, and Company)
- “The Name of Love and Moonfall” (Jasper, Rosa, and Company)
- “Don’t Quit While You’re Ahead” (Puffer, Datchery, and Company)
- “Don’t Quit While You’re Ahead (Encore)” (Company)

- “Don’t Quit While You’re Ahead (Voting)” (Company)
- “The Garden Path to Hell” (Puffer)
- “Puffer’s Revelation” (Puffer)
- “Out on a Limerick”** (Datcherys)
- “Jasper’s Confession” (Jasper)
- “[Murderer’s] Confession”*** (Murderer)
- “Perfect Strangers - Lovers’ Reprise”**** (Lovers)
- “The Writing on the Wall” (Drood and Company)

* = while “Ceylon” and “A British Subject” have traditionally been two separate songs, the 2012 revival of *Drood* combines them into one track, separated by brief interstitial dialogue. Due to the fact that I will be discussing them in differing contexts and for differing purposes, I will refer to them separately in my text.

** = while the title “Out on a Limerick” remains consistent for whoever is voted Datchery, when referring to a specific character’s song (ie, Helena, Neville, Rosa, or Crisparkle) I will be sure to specify which version I am referring to. This is due to the fact that despite the title consistency, the contents of the song change depending on who is voted Datchery, and reveal different motives appropriate for each character’s development and narrative arc. The potential candidates for Datchery are Neville, Rosa, Helena, Bazzard, and Crisparkle.

*** = like my above note for “Out on a Limerick,” when discussing a particular character’s confession, I will alter the title to include the murderer’s name, for similar reasons of content change and singularity. The potential murderers are Neville, Rosa, Helena, Crisparkle, Bazzard, Puffer, and Durdles.

**** = The “Lovers’ Reprise” is sung by two characters who have not been voted Datchery or the murderer for the evening, and feature brief dialogue before the reprise of the song itself. The potential candidates are Neville, Jasper, Crisparkle, Bazzard, Durdles, and Deputy, and Rosa, Puffer, and Helena.

Introduction: Neo-Victorianism and Popular Culture

And please try to keep your actors away from Mr. Dickens' sombre and poetic novel at all costs, at least during rehearsals—for neither the Music Hall Royale nor the characters they portray are to be found there. (Holmes 1986, 143)

Rupert Holmes's sardonic statement of "Some Final Thoughts" that he offers to potential productions of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is as enigmatic as it is insightful. Initially staged in 1986, Holmes's musical adapts Charles Dickens's unfinished final novel of the same name. Holmes's *Drood* portrays a metatheatrical "Music Hall Royale" staging a production in 1892 of an adaptation of Dickens's 1870 novel, and these layers of mediation set the metaphorical stage for the dissonance Holmes perceives between his work and Dickens's. But these cryptic lines raise additional questions about the nature of Holmes's relation to adaptation, and indeed questions of literary adaptation and reinvention on a larger scale. If Holmes's adaptation is indeed tackling this "sombre and poetic novel," what does it mean for him to insist upon such separation between himself and Dickens? What relationship can exist between creators separated by over a century? What can the creation of Holmes's "Music Hall Royale" and its metafictional framework add to the original Dickensian narrative, if anything?

These questions and countless others form central concerns within the field of neo-Victorianism, a subset of Victorianist studies whose gaze extends beyond the reign of Victoria herself in order to interrogate the influence, legacy, and representations of the Victorian era after its conclusion. The debate surrounding the question of what place the Victorian era holds in a larger cultural sense has been a point of discussion well before neo-Victorianism was coined as a specific sub-field in modern and contemporary literary studies. It is impossible to discount modernism's subversion and critique of Victorian norms, seen in authors like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce's writing back against their Victorian parents and grandparents. John Kucich and

Diane Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (published in 2000) also raises questions on the definition of "post-Victorian" literature and media, speculating on why the Victorian era continues to draw scholarly attention across the world in the twenty-first century.

Formally, Neo-Victorianism was introduced as a field fairly recently with the inaugural publication of *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008, along with the titular work *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* compiled by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in 2010. Though a relatively new sub-field, neo-Victorian scholars have embraced works created before the twenty-first century and thus before the formal beginning of neo-Victorianism in their conceptions of a neo-Victorian canon. Heilmann and Llewellyn along with Louisa Hadley, author of *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (2010), locate the 1980s and 1990s as a particularly generative period of works later incorporated into the neo-Victorian canon. A.S. Byatt's 1990 work *Possession: A Romance* and the lesbian-centric novels of Sarah Waters, beginning with *Tipping the Velvet* in 1998, are exemplars of such works published before the formal beginning of neo-Victorianism as a field. Rupert Holmes's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, first staged in 1986, is another example of such a phenomenon.

With the formal creation of neo-Victorianism as a sub-field of note, the question of what defines a work as "neo-Victorian" becomes the next major undertaking of neo-Victorian scholars. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn offer the following definition:

What we argue throughout this book is that the 'neo-Victorian' is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book, texts (literary and filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians [...] Drawing on contemporary debates and recent research within Victorian studies and works on or of contemporary culture, the chapters each bring forward a

question relating to the aesthetic, ethical, metafictional, and metacritical parameters of their own acts of (readerly/writerly) appropriation. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4)

The capaciousness of Heilmann and Llewellyn's definition thus means that neo-Victorianism often dovetails with other academic disciplines in these "(re)inventions." The presence of postmodern narrative techniques that disrupt the conventions of the linear Victorian novel structure, postcolonial (re)inscriptions of ideas of colonial subjecthood and multiculturalism within the Victoria era, and revised notions of femininity and domesticity are just a few examples of techniques neo-Victorian creators have employed in their works as an interrogation of Victorian cultural norms.

Furthermore, Louisa Hadley points to a particular political/ethical concern that comes from such specific focus on the Victorian era. She draws a line between the aforementioned eruption of neo-Victorian works in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the re-establishment of global conservatism in Western governments. Hadley points to Thatcher's overt desire for an "adoption of Victorian values," which Hadley then decodes as "a wider appropriation, and manipulation, of the past for present political purposes" (Hadley 2010, 24). Aligning Thatcher's call for a return to "Victorian values" with the corresponding conservative politics of the Thatcherite government, Hadley's perception of such "appropriation" as a "manipulation" of the Victorian era implies a need for a level of interrogation when dealing with any potential connections between past historical moments and the contemporary present.

Heilmann and Llewellyn's emphasis on "(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision" seems to speak to Hadley's concern over any kind of unquestioned invocation of the past, re-emphasizing the importance of the contemporary perspective of neo-Victorian creators alongside the engagement with Victorian legacies. For Hadley, as with Heilmann and Llewellyn, the

application of critique to the Victorian past along with the active incorporation of contemporary sociocultural/political/ethical ideologies is what distinguishes neo-Victorianism from “historical fiction,” “historiographic metafiction,” “post-Victorian” fiction, or any of the previous terms offered as a name for the genre. In short, in neo-Victorianism “the present is negotiated through a range of (re)interpretations of the nineteenth century” as much as contemporary creators (re)interpret the Victorian past (Heilmann and Llewellyn 3).

But while the inventiveness and awareness of “contemporary debates” in neo-Victorianism seems ripe for works that push the proverbial Victorian envelope, much of neo-Victorian studies has remained centered around works that can be classified as “highbrow” or “literary fiction.” Even taking Heilmann and Llewellyn’s allowance of both “literary and filmic” and “audio/visual” works within the neo-Victorian canon, many canonical neo-Victorian works cater specifically to audiences with an academic understanding of the very themes their creators are trying to interrogate. For example, the reception of Byatt’s *Possession* and John Fowles’s 1969 work *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* speaks to this larger trend within neo-Victorianism. *Possession* won the Man Booker Prize the year it was published, and Fowles’s novel was adapted into a critically acclaimed film that garnered several Oscar nominations.

Genre categorizations and forms of media associated with commercial and popular acclaim are often overlooked in favor of works that garner literary and academic praise. Considering the development of popular culture in the Victorian era itself, this trend comes as a surprise, especially when considering how many of the most canonical forms of popular culture have their roots in Victorian prototypes. The “detective novel” as a genre and character archetype emerged from the popularity of Edgar Allan Poe’s Auguste Dupin stories (beginning in 1841) and the later commercial success of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series

(beginning in 1887). The rapid expansion of print culture and serialized novels in the nineteenth century similarly popularized widespread enjoyment of fiction throughout various social classes, and the invention of “Britain’s first indigenous and fully capitalized mass culture form,” the music hall, can be seen as a progenitor of any number of performance-based forms of entertainment, as I will examine later (Faulk 2004, 1). There seems to be a dissonance, then, between the prevalence of “literary” neo-Victorian works and the reality of the pervasiveness of a sense of popular culture present in both the Victorian era and in our contemporary moment.

I aim to rectify this oversight at least in part by illustrating the generative potentials that can come from neo-Victorian reinventions situated in “popular” genres—namely, the Broadway musical and the contemporary romance novel. To do this, I will focus on Rupert Holmes’s 1986 musical *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and KJ Charles’s 2017 *Sins of the Cities* trilogy, works that invoke callbacks to the music hall and one of the most “popular” Victorian genres—the sensation novel—in their reinventions of Victorian realism and culture. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* utilizes a metatheatrical framework to present a twentieth century interpretation of an English music hall, and embraces the unfinished state of the Dickens novel it draws from in Holmes’s adoption of audience interactivity to resolve the narrative. In close reading Holmes’s reinventions of the characters of Helena and Neville Landless, I will examine how he counteracts the Victorian xenophobic tendencies present in Dickens’s novel through his particular metatheatrical framework, incorporating postcolonial notions of the cultural dialectic between colony and metropole. Furthermore, I will compare how KJ Charles balances Victorian notions of sexuality and gender with contemporary representational politics in her queer historical romance trilogy. Her subversion of sensation novel tropes and the generic framework offered by the romance novel heightens her innovative explorations of queer romance and domesticity,

while maintaining a realistic sense of her Victorian setting as a legitimization of her project. Combining the diverse concerns of neo-Victorianism with a particular focus on issues such as postmodern metafictionality, queer theoretical concerns of the self and the domestic space, and the dialectic between literary adaptation and the creation of entirely fictional works, Holmes and Charles stand as exemplars of the potentials offered by the greater inclusion of popular culture into Neo-Victorian Studies. Overall, I argue that the ideas of English identity so crucial to the Victorians's understandings of the self can be articulated, interrogated, and reinvented through neo-Victorian works that draw on popular culture as much as any literary or academic tradition. Such practices of engaging with these popular and nontraditional works, I suggest, advances the project of interrogating the cultural legacy of the Victorian legacy in our contemporary era.

The “Neo-” “Victorians” Onstage in Holmes’s *Drood*
Structure, Sensation, and Audience Participation

The first genre I will discuss as indicative of the potential for neo-Victorian works to adapt, subvert, and reinvent Victorian popular culture is the contemporary Broadway musical, specifically focusing on writer-composer-lyricist Rupert Holmes’s adaptation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.¹ Drawing considerable influence from Charles Dickens’s final unfinished novel of the same name, Holmes utilizes the novel’s unfinished nature in order to recenter the non-Drood characters as significant players in the narrative and offer insights into their potential motivations for murder. On a larger scale, his unique adoption of an interactive musical allows him to explore both these characters’ positions within the Victorian narrative and to reinvent these character types through a contemporary lens.

Holmes’s musical, like Dickens’s book, chronicles the story of Edwin Drood, an orphaned boy on the cusp of manhood ready to inherit his family’s engineering business and marry his longtime fiancée, Rosa Bud. When Drood vanishes one stormy Christmas Eve and is presumed dead, suspicion turns to the community of Cloisterham and those closest to Drood. The appearance of the enigmatic detective Dick Datchery heightens the stakes of the murder to new levels, and a plethora of characters seem both capable and culpable of Drood’s murder. Despite the title of both Holmes and Dickens’s works and its implied focus on Drood himself, both the novel and the Broadway musical are largely concerned with the backstories, fraught relationships, cultural tensions, and interpersonal conflicts of the characters who surround Drood. Characters such as John Jasper (Drood’s uncle), the Reverend Septimus Crisparkle, and the

¹ Hereafter referred to as “Holmes’s *Drood*.”

newly arrived Ceylonese twins Neville and Helena Landless are examined as suspects in Drood's disappearance, escalating to allegations of murder.

The adaptation of a Dickensian novel into an interactive murder-mystery Broadway musical may appear, at first glance, as an odd cultural product for a neo-Victorian study. I argue that Holmes's *Drood* adapts postmodernism principles of audience interaction and metafictionality, as well as the translation of Victorian music hall culture into Broadway spectacle, in order to comment on the opacities of Dickens's authorial position. These techniques serve to lay the groundwork for the specific character revisions in his interpretation of Dickens's narrative, highlighting the creative potentials that come from a basis of performativity and remediated cultural identity.

Popular Then, Popular Now: Music Halls and Musicals

Holmes's musical is indubitably influenced by the cultural and social histories of the Victorian penchant for the music hall, a phenomenon that scholar Barry Faulk has characterized as "Britain's first indigenous and fully capitalized mass culture form" (Faulk 1). Gaining real prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, Victorian music hall symbolized a departure from the class-stratified notions of culture such as opera and ballet, drawing inspiration and an audience from the newly emerging middle class in Victorian London. As Faulk describes it, "fictions of the music hall were often less indebted to high literary models than to the sensational forms popularized by the ongoing sociological exploration of London" (Faulk 113). Along with music hall's accessibility to anyone who could buy a ticket, the sensational spectacles being produced on music hall stages represented a shift towards a more "popular" understanding of entertainment, not just the influence of the aristocratic and upper classes. Music hall can thus be

seen as a precursor to the twentieth century development of the Broadway musical as an American commercial art form, which emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as the popular musical traditions of vaudeville and variety began to be condensed into rough narratives.²

In his musical, Holmes rejects any notions of straightforward linearity to complete Dickens's unfinished novel. Rather, his first major innovation comes from his metatheatrical and metafictional engagement with Victorian music hall culture as a way of resolving the plot, adopting an interactive ending wherein the audience helps determine the "Solution," as Holmes puts it, to Dickens's untimely death. Holmes situates Dickens's *Drood* through the guise of the "Music Hall Royale," a troupe ostensibly performing an adaptation of Dickens's novel in 1892. By adding this further layer of distance between his Victorian intertext and his contemporary sociocultural position, Holmes is thus able to comment on not only on the resolution of Dickens's *Drood* but also the cultural debates that surround Dickensian afterlives. Indeed, Holmes's in-house narrator, the "Chairman" of the Music Hall Royale, is quick to characterize Dickens's *Drood* as "The Greatest Mystery Novel Of Our Time," aware of the novel's status as the literary intertext for their performance (Holmes 1986, 11). The Music Hall actors are thus aware of their own engagement with Dickensian canon, a representation of music hall actors as "the true curators of their culture" (Faulk 23). Of course, the fact that the Music Hall Royale is being further mediated by a twentieth-century creator is indicative of Holmes's interest in extending beyond the direct interpretation of Dickens's *Drood* to how the Victorians themselves interpreted popular media of their day. His adoption of music hall structure thus provides a

² For more on the American development of stage musicals, see Andrew Lamb's "From Pinafore to Porter." (Lamb, Andrew. "From Pinafore to Porter: United States-United Kingdom Interactions in Musical Theater, 1879-1929." *American Music*, vol. 4, no. 1, University of Illinois Press, 1986, pp. 34–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052183>.)

crucial link between literary adaptation and sociohistorical critique, two tenets consistent with the aesthetic concerns of neo-Victorian reimaginings.

The link between the metafictional music hall in Holmes's *Drood* and the overall structure of the Broadway musical emphasizes their shared connection to popular media. Neo-Victorian scholar Marc Napolitano has described this symbiosis as "the notion of increased sensitivity to the romantic possibilities lurking beneath the surface of our everyday experiences," linking the minutiae of an expanding consumer class with representations of theater and performance inherent in Dickens's fictional projects (Napolitano 2010, 118-119). Additionally, the notion of a "fully capitalized mass culture form" further necessitates an increased interrogation of performance, representation, and an overall sense of "English national character" (Faulk 7). If the accessibility and portrayal of what constitutes "popular culture" expands within the boundaries of the music hall, the audience's relationship to the performances being put before them becomes increasingly more important. Translating the earlier Victorian relationship between performance and culture to an explicitly interactive Broadway musical has both an ideological and generic connection to music hall culture. In interrogating the ways in which Holmes deploys his version of the music hall, this chapter aims to deepen our understanding of the nuances of his neo-Victorian project.

Both of Holmes's act openers, "There You Are" and "An English Music Hall," are centered wholly within the sphere of the Music Hall Royale, without any mention of the Dickensian narrative. By beginning both acts with music hall numbers, Holmes both re-emphasizes the structural importance of the music hall as a framework for his performance-based project and the cultural implications of music hall as a basis for radical reinvention. In these numbers, Holmes portrays the music hall as a space for freedom, self-expression, and

participation: eager company members proclaim that “it matters not to me what part of town you come from” and “not a lot we care for / Where you’ve been / And not a jot we care how you got in” (Holmes 8, 10). As a reflection of the widening awareness of the middle class as potential consumers, such flippant attitudes in regards to class and status illustrate the “honest, responsive, and authentic relation to its patrons” that spurred the genesis of the music hall in the nineteenth century (Faulk 2). The performance and communal experience offered by the music hall is rendered equivalent for all participations, a site for a convergence of diverse perspectives. As the Chairman encourages his audience to both “be as vulgar and uncivilized as legally possible” and “kick off your boots, loosen your corsets...and enjoy yourselves,” the popular aspect of music hall becomes correlative to social freedom and experimentation—within reason (Holmes 11). Establishing a metatheatrical music hall frame in which his later Dickensian adaptation is situated thus justifies and explains Holmes’s later, more radical choices. Linking his own neo-Victorian project with the music hall’s history of innovation and experimentation places Holmes in an ideological lineage of sociological interrogation. From East End music halls to Broadway theaters, the invocation of popular audiences and the widening of accessibility among social classes provides a basis for mediation on popular culture as a diverse, multicultural invention.

“Win or Lose, / You’re Grand Inquisitor!”: Audience Interaction and Metafictionality

Associated with his music hall-based innovations, one of Holmes’s *Drood*’s most poignant and postmodern techniques is his aforementioned “Solution” to the obvious challenge presented by Dickens’s “one ungenerous deed of his noble career,” as Holmes’s Chairman proclaims: the issue of how to finish a narrative that left behind few definitive notes as to its

intended conclusion.³ Rather than constructing a definitive ending, as most *Drood* reinventions do, Holmes's musical embraces the uncertainty left by Dickens's death. The show comes to an abrupt halt halfway through the second act, and "the audience may get the uncomfortable feeling that someone has forgotten a line, that something has gone wrong...the play collapses" (Holmes 84). This direction serves a twofold purpose. Initially, Holmes reflects the inherent difficulties in assuming a sense of mastery over such a canonical figure as Dickens. However, his explicit invocation and recognition of such tensions re-emphasizes the necessity for contemporary creators to make authoritative, definitive stances on the past in their projects of reinvention. Any creative project will inevitably fall apart without artistic direction on the part of the creator, and Holmes's twist comes in his literalization of this indecisiveness as a jumping-off point for further reinvention. The metafictional engagement with the historical ambiguity of Dickens's *Drood* illustrates one of the prime concerns of neo-Victorianism as espoused by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, "the issue of narrative endings [...] because of the sense in which [neo-Victorianists's] work seeks to prevent a notion of periodicity and textual closure" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 15). Holmes's refusal of a "narrative ending" and literalization of the "prevent[ion] of textual closure" through interactive endings is thus not only innovative, but solidifies his musical as a neo-Victorian work.

³ Post-Dickens scholars have pointed to Dickens's friend and biographer John Forster and his alleged recollection of letters and conversation he had with Dickens before his death as the "true" ending of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Forster claims that key resolutions involve "Rosa marrying Tartar [an ex-navyman not included in Holmes's *Drood*], and Crisparkle the sister of Landless, who was himself, I think, to have perished in assisting Tartar finally to unmask and seize the murderer" (Forster 1874, 451, 452). However, as the rest of this chapter makes clear, Holmes seems to give the Forster account little, if any, credence.

The two main interactive elements⁴ I will discuss in this chapter involve Holmes allowing the audience to vote on two key questions that have plagued post-Dickens scholars since his death: if Edwin Drood is in fact dead, who killed him? And who is the enigmatic Dick Datchery, the detective who appears late in Dickens's narrative and stands as the archetypal detective figure so common in Victorian sensation narratives?⁵ Here, the discrete spheres of the Victorian and the contemporary come into direct conversation. Contemporary audiences are asked to consume, interpret, and digest Holmes's narrative and, by extension, the tenets of Dickens's original work, and come up with their own conclusion. In other words, the audience undergoes their own process of what Mark Llewellyn has termed "critical f(r)iction," applying their experience of the Holmesian/Dickensian narrative onto their interpretation of both who the murderer could be and who fills the role of Datchery. This decision making and active interpretation thus creates a direct link between the performance, the audience, and the eventual resolution of the musical.

It is in the interactivity of these specific questions that the sensational lineage of Dickens's *Drood* becomes clearest. In preserving his interactivity for the resolutions of the murderer and Datchery's true identities, Holmes draws a surprising connection between what is perhaps his most innovative technique and the history of the Victorian sensation novel, a literary genre that, like the music hall, served as a crucial element of Victorian popular culture. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina identify the central diagnostics of the Victorian sensation novel as follows:

Involving mysteries, murders, and social improprieties usually within the respectable middle class or aristocratic home, the novels capitalized on the Victorian public's

⁴ Holmes's *Drood* has an additional interactive element in the audience selecting two "Lovers" after the murderer's confession; however, unlike the murderer and Datchery songs, the "Lovers' Reprise" does not offer any specific character or structural insights to those selected.

⁵ For specifics on the eligibility of the Murderer and Datchery, see "A Note on *Drood(s)*".

appetite for scandal. [...] Many sensation novels followed suit with narratives that questioned the sanctity of the family and the stability of middle-class mores. (Harrison and Fantina 2006, xii)

Furthermore, Louisa Hadley notes how “sensation and detective fiction adopt a similar plot structure” in their uncovering of a past mystery, and the inclusion of the detective Dick Datchery in *Drood* explicitly links the novel’s sensationalism with the implications of detective fiction (Hadley 63). Taken in aggregate, the murder of Drood, the mystery of both his killer and the true identity of Datchery, and the sheer number of possible and plausible suspects are direct characteristics of the sensation novel according to Harrison, Fantina, and Hadley. In this convergence of sensationalism, detective fiction, and interactivity, Holmes thus realigns his neo-Victorian and postmodern techniques with his Victorian hypertext, drawing on the “appetite for scandal” to form the various “Solutions.”

Holmes’s construction of these contained, individual potentialities means that a plethora of characters have the chance to become narrators of their own stories. Both the determined murderer and Datchery characters perform a song in which they describe how and why they either murdered Drood or sought to uncover his killer, directly relaying their motivations, justifications, and executions of their actions. Each potential murderer or Datchery relies on the larger narrative’s implications as to their involvement in order to establish them as viable candidates, as the audience interprets the same narrative in choosing between the multiple suspects. But each murderer or Datchery song is both possible and plausible, and given the aforementioned interpretation of the same narrative that leads to the “Voting” and “Solutions,” different audiences may thus decide on different candidates depending on their interpretation of the performance. Holmes thus balances the impossibility of truly resolving Dickens’s work through a singular definitive ending, due to an inherent sociocultural dissonance between himself

and Dickens as creators, with the assurance of a sense of an ending for each specific performance. Mark Llewellyn frames this potentiality of neo-Victorianism to offer an imaginative, if not canonical, conclusion as “a critical paradigm precisely because it blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity, with each becoming a reflection on self and other” (Llewellyn 2008, 170). The “reflection on self and other” that occurs in different audiences’ selection of different candidates represents the “critical paradigm” that necessitates the “Solution” itself, the need to rely on personal interpretation to cast votes and resolve the narrative. The combination of intertext-reliant (re)invented narrative and Holmesian intervention, combined with audience interpretation, is what generates the ending to Holmes’s *Drood*, resolving the dissonances between “self and other” into one performance.

However, it is not simply the existence of Holmes’s interactivity that reinvents Dickens’s narrative. The merging of Dickens’s Victorian intertext and Holmes’s contemporary interpretation through the entirety of Holmes’s *Drood*, both before and during the endings, allows for radical narrative and ideological reinventions through Holmes’s particular conception of Dickens’s characters. While the entire cast of Holmes’s *Drood* has moments of interesting commentary and neo-Victorian engagement, I am particularly interested in examining the heightened potential for nuanced representations of historically marginalized characters, and the attention Holmes pays to realizing their identities as individuals rather than archetypes. Focusing on the experiences of Helena and Neville Landless as both characters of color and colonial immigrants, I will examine how their portrayal in Holmes’s *Drood* addresses postcolonial readings of British imperialism and the dialectic between British colonies and the British metropole. While scholars like Marc Napolitano have argued that the metatheatrical frameworks are the true genius of Holmes’s *Drood*, positing that the interactivity and embracing of music

hall culture “reinforces the precedence of the music-hall concept over the Dickensian narrative,” I aim to synthesize both the popular and the particular in Holmes’s *Drood* (Napolitano 122). I argue that reading the reinvention of postcolonial “British subjecthood” in the Landlesses, as bolstered by Holmes’s structural innovations, widens the scope of Dickens’s concern and illustrates the power of Holmes’s postmodern techniques in providing for these nuanced portrayals of personhood. Through his conception of the Landlesses, Holmes’s neo-Victorian performative experiment engages deeply with the varied conceptions of “Britishness” present in Dickens’s novel, and heightens the situational implications of Dickens’s *Drood* as a traditional Victorian sensation plot.

“East of Jaipur, west of Mandalay”: Locating the Landless(es) in Rupert Holmes’s Drood

Reinventing Victorian Race and Articulating Dickensian Ambiguities

Charles Dickens introduces Helena and Neville Landless in his *Drood* as recently orphaned and sent from Ceylon to Cloisterham in order to improve “their defective education [...] whether they like it or not” (Dickens 1999, 45). The question of how “defective” the Landlesses are has been a puzzle and source of anxiety for post-Dickens scholars and readers, left unsolved by Dickens’s death. Their precarious, enigmatic situation in the original novel is ripe with questions about xenophobia and prejudice. What happens when the peripheral spaces of colonial life become visible in the metropolitan British reality? What is the relationship between residents of the British Isles and residents of the British colonies? How does increased immigration brought about by increased transportation between colony and metropole affect the relationship between the two?

Culturally, the question of what Holmes later cleverly divides as “British” (colonial/peripheral) versus “English” (metropolitan) cultures were central to Victorian understandings of the self, and, more importantly, the Other, the enigmatic body against which Victorian metropolitan citizens defined themselves. Defined only by their previous residence in Ceylon, without any direct ties to the English metropole, Helena and Neville are the purest representatives of Otherness and colonial citizens in Dickens’s original text. In Holmes’s adaptation, they become poignant figures of postcoloniality, mediated through twentieth-century hindsight that illustrates some of the nuanced realities of what it was to be a “British subject” in Victorian England.

Marlene Tromp, Maria K. Bachman, and Heidi Kaufman articulate the Victorian cultural anxieties about Victorian xenophobia in their work *Fear, Loathing, and Victorian Xenophobia* (2013). In relation to the question of homelands and the role of place in English identity, they describe how “the ideas of a homeland and or a sense of belonging to a place evoke some of the key tensions that helped to codify a xenophobic mindset in the Victorian period” (Tromp et al. 2013, 12). Given their specification of this concept as “absolute, unchanging, and linked to blood and land,” it follows that the Landlesses’ primary association with Ceylon as opposed to England provides the basis for their ostracization upon their arrival in Cloisterham (Tromp 12). They are from the wrong island, as it were, and the simple act of immigration cannot overwrite their origins. The Landlesses lack a heritage that can be located and distilled into a sense of ideal “English” identity, a problem requiring resolution in both the Dickensian and Holmesian narratives. Helena and Neville embody the cultural tension that Miriam O’Kane Mara identifies in Dickens’s text, one that “creates, but refuses to solve, a *mystery* about Dickens’s stance on

colonialism” (Mara 2002, 244). The question of how “Ceylon” can be reconciled with “England,” if at all, is another mystery Holmes must solve in his musical.

The question of race is necessarily entangled with this discourse on the representation of non-metropolitan Others. The ambiguity of Helena and Neville’s background as being either a) white British subjects merely born and raised among non-white Ceylonese “Others,” or b) non-white and/or mixed-race immigrants whose social stratification is based in racial prejudices as well as xenophobic tendencies, affects how precisely the Landlesses are treated in adaptations of Dickens’s *Drood*.⁶ Allusions to either possibility exist in Dickens’s original text: the original illustrations by Luke Fildes that accompanied the first printings of the novel portray the Landlesses as white British colonials, while their initial description denotes them as being “both very dark, and very rich in colour” (Dickens 49). Later slights made by Drood against Neville concerning an “insulting allusion to [Neville’s] dark skin infuriates Neville to [a] violent degree,” signaling a potential double sense of Otherness on the level of race as well as ethnicity. Laura Peters has identified “the spectre of miscegenation haunting the twins” as a crucial part of post-Dickens scholarship, and the textual ambiguity of how precisely the Landlesses are involved in questions of racism as well as xenophobia creates considerable tension regarding questions of representation in adaptations of Dickens’s *Drood* (Peters 2013, 153).

⁶ Since the first adaptations of Dickens’s *Drood* in the early twentieth century, most films, televisions, and radio plays have cast white actors as the Landlesses, either portraying them as displaced white colonials or verging into brownface-tinged characterizations via the use of makeup. Notably, the 2012 BBC miniseries and a 2020-2021 radio play explicitly cast actors of Southeast Asian descent as Helena and Neville, and more fully incorporated the engagement with Ceylon as a distinct cultural space into their works. While productions of Holmes’s *Drood* have been similarly varied in their portrayals of the Landlesses, as is the nature of theatre, my analysis will be based in the text of Holmes’s songs and libretto as opposed to any past casting decisions, as to rely on the most consistent version of the musical.

While reading the Landlesses as white colonials certainly contributes to the discussions on Victorian xenophobia, the reading of race in Holmes's portrayal of the twins broadens the conversation to discuss the racial dimensions of British imperialism, heightening the opposition of colony and metropole. On the level of the text, Holmes's interpretation of the Landlesses' race perhaps gives more credence to their potential non-white identity than the ambiguity left by Dickens, though in classic Holmesian fashion, he refuses any neat resolution. In his note on "Regarding the Landlesses," Holmes offers the following advice to future productions of his *Drood*:

Helena and Neville hail from Ceylon, and were, in Mr. Dickens's novel, colonialists who, save from their tans, were quite similar in dress and character to any English youths. However, the Music Hall Royale has seized upon and misinterpreted this one bit of geographical information and made them into picturesque, exotically-garbed Orientals. [...] Therefore, no attempt need or should be made to replicate a true Hindu accent or wardrobe; this is a polyglot East, and Helena's accent should be a compendium of Oriental clichés (Holmes 141)

This addendum elucidates a key technique Holmes employs in his project: his ability to "exaggerate [the Landlesses'] racial stereotyping" to the level of parody (Park 2002, 532). Just as the invocation of the Music Hall Royale allows Holmes to comment on both Dickens's text and the cultural afterlives of the narrative, the invocation of parody affords him similar freedoms. Throwing the systems of Victorian racism and xenophobia into almost comic relief enables Holmes to question the textual issue of the Landlesses' race and its implications while also poking fun at the systems of oppression that plagued them within Dickens's text. The assertion of "misinterpretation" and rendering the Landlesses as "picturesque, exotically-garbed orientals" on the part of the Music Hall Royale indicates the absurdity of assumption and prejudice noted by Mara and Peters in their study of Dickens's text. Simultaneously, Holmes's insistence on the Landlesses being inherently "quite similar [...] to any English youths" rejects any easy

assumptions of Othering in his own project, and sets the stage for his reinvention of the Landlesses as figures worthy of postcolonial analysis.

“Display” and Self-Expression in the “Music Hall Royale”

While little (if any) interiority is afforded to the Landlesses in Dickens’s *Drood*, the performative notion of the music hall/Broadway musical provides a plausible basis for Holmes to insert Landless-based songs both in the Dickens-based narrative and in the interactive endings. The nature of performativity in musicals, as opposed to the third-person linearity in Dickens’s novel, enables Helena and Neville to give their own account of their homeland and past. Because much of the mystery about their pre-Cloisterham lives is the root of the xenophobic speculations on their “Otherness,” their ability to speak for themselves counteracts the anxieties about their status as figures of the British periphery.

The two non-interactive Landless-centric numbers in Holmes’s *Drood* are “Ceylon” and “A British Subject,” narrated by Helena and Neville, and serve as their perceptions of the differences between their foregone homeland and the new experience of the British metropole. Following his particular attention to the “misinterpretation” of the Landlesses’s Ceylonese identity, Holmes puts them “on display” for both the Cloisterham public and the metatheatrical audience (Holmes 34). As mentioned before, there is no parallel to either song in Dickens’s narrative; it is the greater strength of the Broadway musical and its lack of a driving narrator that Holmes is able to construct these moments of insight. The creation of “Ceylon” and “A British Subject” as integral explanatory parts of the Holmesian narrative follows Holmes’s established interest in the perception of the Landlesses as both specifically racialized and ambiguously parodic figures of Otherness.

“Ceylon” establishes a divide between imperialist sympathies and the colonial speakers. While the Landlesses and Drood often speak in tandem throughout the course of the song, their content differs drastically, and reveals two distinct perspectives regarding the presence of the Landlesses in Cloisterham. As Helena and Neville opine for “the winds of [their] golden isle,” Drood simultaneously imagines his future taking over his late father’s engineering concerns, “chang[ing] the lay and / Nature of the land” (Holmes, Addendum 6). The preservation of the natural state of colonial peripheries on one hand and imperial domination on the other are juxtaposed between these characters, with Drood as a figure of the imperial project and the Landlesses as those who have witnessed the colonization of their homeland. The attention being paid to this imbalance of power and influence acknowledges the imperial implications absent from Dickens’s characterization of the Landlesses. Gayatri Spivak recognizes the deep implications of these representations in her notion of imperialism as “a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (Spivak 1985, 243). The simultaneity of Drood’s imperial expressions alongside Helena and Neville’s regard for their homeland reflects this insistence on the intertwined nature of imperialism and English identity as a cultural phenomenon.

Holmes’s parody emerges in the fact that Drood’s imperial futures are not located in Ceylon, but in Egypt, a difference that he collapses as “much the same” to the Landlesses when they first meet (Holmes 32). Helena and Neville’s desire for a geographically distinct locality “east of Jaipur, west of Mandalay,” as they denote in “Ceylon,” is interpreted by Drood as merely part of the hegemonic colonial “periphery” he perceives as oppositional to the “metropole” of England (Holmes, Addendum 6). In the attention paid to specifying the Landlesses’s account of their homeland, Drood’s ignorance is rendered in a sharper light. While

Holmes's general interpretation of the Landlesses is one of a "polyglot East," he embraces particularity in moments where it bolsters their agency and narrative potential and emphasizes the futility of Victorian attempts to maintain distinctions from "foreign" subjects.

Additionally, when the Landlesses are allowed to give their own accounts and tell their own stories, moments of cross-cultural sympathy emerge. Rather than relying on imperialist narratives and stereotypes of Othered spaces and people, the firsthand accounts provided by Neville and Helena provide an alternate source of knowledge and authenticity, one where certain characters are able to re-evaluate the "British"- "English" distinctions. During "Ceylon," a stage direction notes that "Rosa joins Helena and Neville during the dance, while Crisparkle compliments Drood," only to have "Drood [pull] Rosa from the dancing company and they exit" (Holmes, Addendum 6). Rosa separates herself from the imperialist sympathizers to directly engage with Helena and Neville, a gesture that is a direct result of the Landlesses proffering their own experience as something Rosa can interpret for herself. In "British Subject," Rosa is once again the only person to speak in favor of the Landlesses, bemoaning that she "fear[s] you soon will be / The subject of scrutiny" as a result of their immigration to Cloisterham (Holmes 35). She is thus able to recognize the wrongful prejudices being levied against them as a result of xenophobic and racist assumptions. Combined with her willingness to engage in the Landlesses' "dance" in "Ceylon," Rosa complicates the neat binary that the rest of the characters seem bent on upholding between "British" and "English" subjects, a complication dependent on the self-expression afforded to the Landlesses in "Ceylon."

These tensions are heightened and elaborated in "A British Subject," where the Landlesses shift from lament to critique in their lambasting of British society and further frustration with how the citizens of Cloisterham interpret them. While "Ceylon" may serve as a

reminiscent spectacle on a lost homeland and the establishment of imperial tensions, “British Subject” reflects the intense self-awareness the Landlesses possess in their knowledge of the existing oppressive structures in Cloisterham and English society at large. This self-conscious performance extends to the recognition of the metafictionality of Holmes’s *Drood*, as Neville’s first line is noted as “confiding to [the] audience” (Holmes 34). The metatheatrical structure not only provides this moment of authenticity, but pays homage to the “scrutiny” of the Landlesses post-Dickens scholars have been concerned with in analyzing their role in the original novel. Neville’s further assertion that “[his] reputation proceeds [him] here” further centers the reality of scrutiny and the imperial gaze, an almost panoptical sense of observation that prevents any notion of an authentic first impression (Holmes 34).

This awareness of the metatheatricality extends into the Landlesses’ first verse, as Helena and Neville question both “what shall I show them / The full effect” and “what do I owe them / What they expect?” (Holmes 34). Aware of their perceived “foreignness” within Cloisterham, the Landlesses speak to the expectations held by Victorian Britons concerning colonial subjects, the prescription of societal roles over any sense of unencumbered self-expression. However, it is precisely this recognition of what is expected and what they can show that reflects a potential subversion bolstered by their situation within a theatrical space. Their recognition of stereotypes and expectations is not simply a defeatist sense of their inability to thrive in England—the Landlesses are shrewd enough to identify a potential exploitation of these expectations. By performing “what they expect” back to the citizens of Cloisterham, Helena and Neville can prevent any further tensions between themselves and the “English.” Describing these expectations as “the full effect” indicates the beginnings of Holmes’s parodical approach in “British Subject,” a nod to the performative (and inauthentic) perceptions of the Other.

This adoption of performativity and parodic exemplification also gives a layer of plausible deniability to the Landlesses' more cutting critiques. It is this combination of criticism and performativity that brings further weight to the reading of the Landlesses as postcolonial figures: John Kucich and Diane Sadoff note this tendency among colonial subjects as "redeployed Victorianism," describing it as "indispensable to what has now come to be called postcolonial culture" (Kucich and Sadoff 200, xxi). Helena's and Neville's replication of Victorian "expectations" alongside their own clear denouncement and criticism of such structures illustrates the power of such "redeployed Victorianism" as a method of resistance for colonial subjects. The chorus of "British Subject" provides a clear example of pure frustration on the part of Helena and Neville, a direct address to the limitations they face in England:

Our emigration
 To this location
 Has brought our station down a mile
 This distant nation
 Divides creation
 In rank and file
 And English are they
 And British am I (Holmes 35)

The use of hyperbolic language such as "down a mile" and "divides creation" exemplifies Holmes's parody, how he amplifies Victorian tendencies to render them ludicrous to a contemporary audience. But it is also important to recognize how Holmes's linguistic approach does not belittle the Landlesses' frustration. Within the narrative of the show, it is their adoption of performativity that allows their critique to become legitimized. Couched in the guise of a sweeping ensemble number, the Landlesses make explicit the latent tensions never fully elucidated in Dickens's novel. The Landlesses need to be succinct enough in "British Subject" to maintain the performativity that provides them with the ability to offer such a recognition of their hardships, but they are nonetheless still able to articulate their dislocation within their ostensibly

performative moments of expression. This dual utilization of performance and authenticity provides a nuanced characterization that speaks to Holmes's larger interest in increasing their role as participants within the narrative.

Inserting "Ceylon" and "A British Subject" into the non-interactive portion of the musical ensures that Helena and Neville have the chance to speak for themselves regardless of the voting in the "Solution." Combining the structural freedom of narration provided by the genre of the Broadway musical and the neo-Victorian impulse to interrogate past prejudices and societal structures generates new moments of truth, performance, and spectacle in the Landlesses' performances. While Holmes creates this space for Helena and Neville to provide an alternate account of "Englishness," it is through the active replication of the cultural clash between colony and metropole that allows for the subversion and critique of this divide. Paying close attention to the Victorian tendency towards prejudiced "expectations" and post-Dickens interest in the implications of the Landlesses within the Dickensian narrative, Holmes is able to use spectacle, parody, and notions of performance to recenter the Landlesses within his *Drood*.

"Guilty am I, I cry / Shamelessly!": Agency in the Landlesses's "Solutions"

Interpreting the Landlesses' respective endings is their final narrative restructuring in Holmes's *Drood*, where their potential culpability in Drood's murder and/or the investigation of his death speaks to their increased importance in Holmes's *Drood* as opposed to Dickens's. As mentioned before, once the "Voting" commences, Helena and Neville are eligible to be selected for both the role of the detective Dick Datchery and the murderer, dependent on the audience's vote. It is of course crucial to remember that both the figure of the detective and the true identity of the murderer are key archetypes of the Victorian sensation genre, and having Helena and

Neville be candidates for both roles is similarly significant. Their implication in both roles re-emphasizes their status as integral to the narrative, and the plausibility of their involvement in either scenario imbues them with narrative significance, agency, and gravitas. Examining the motivations and content of both Helena and Neville's "Confessions" and their respective versions of "Out on a Limerick" (the song performed by the selected Datchery candidate) brings further nuance in their characterization as postcolonial subjects.

Once Drood is presumed dead, the bulk of Cloisterham's suspicion falls on Neville, his presumed guilt being the ultimate manifestation of the xenophobic anxieties that surrounded him and Helena from their arrival in England. Neville's version of "Out on a Limerick" seeks to subvert this prejudice and suspicion, presenting him as a capable, informed narrator and participant in the sensational events. He explains his "motive in taking [the] role" of Datchery as directly related to the marginalization he faced at the hands of the Cloisterham public, prejudices levied by Drood's uncle Jasper in order to distract from his own murderous impulses:

Much too eager is [Jasper]
 That all Cloisterham see
 Me as the murderer—God, are they blind!
 All of these people suspicious
 That I had killed Edwin Drood,
 And with their anger so vicious,
 I wore this costume so crude (Holmes 104)

Rather than the "intrusive" Other that Cloisterham perceives him to be in "A British Subject," Neville is characterized here as not only intelligent but self-aware, conscious of the fact that uncovering the larger "mystery" of the murderer's true identity will be the only exoneration of him as the prime suspect. His impulse to "clear [his] good name / From the blemish of blame," the desire to subvert and deny the pervasive xenophobia of Cloisterham, prompts and enables Neville to become a capable, knowing figure (Holmes 104). Much like the existence of "Ceylon"

and “British Subject” as Holmesian representations of the performative potentials of his musical, the dramatic presence of “Out on a Limerick” as an externalization of interiority and direct narration of past events further shows the generative basis of the musical’s interactivity as a generic format. Neville-Datchery thus not only resolves one of the prominent lingering questions of Dickens’s novel, but offers a resolution indicative of postcolonial neo-Victorian reimaginings. In his selection as Datchery, Neville exhibits a drive and determination no other character is able to manifest, asserting his self-worth and capability as an independent character in the narrative.

“Neville’s Confession” is no doubt more complex, yet far too easy to write off as merely indicative of Holmes’s assertion of the xenophobic prejudices against Neville that led him to become the prime suspect in the first place. Keeping in mind Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that “so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism” specifically in regards to the xenophobic marginalization of colonial migrants, a reading of “Neville’s Confession” as motivated by the micro- and macroaggressions of Cloisterham’s citizens offers a counterpoint to the potential oversimplification of his being selected the murderer (Spivak 250). In this light, Neville is not simply a literalization of xenophobic fears of the Other, but a tragic victim of Victorian ethnocentrism.

His “Confession” addresses his culpability with the wry self-awareness he possesses in “British Subject,” acknowledging that “[he] was the likeliest of suspects you could find” (Holmes 115). He further elucidates his struggles in the following verse:

I came to this place with but one plan
 That you view this face an Englishman
 But all you saw was my hot blood
 And I saw Rosa Bud! (Holmes 115)

Holmes collapses multiple facets of Neville’s complexity into a few succinct lines. The struggle for integration and acceptance that propelled “Ceylon” and “British Subject,” the futility

of that struggle in the face of institutional xenophobia, the Orientalized language of “hot blood” as a detrimental characterization of his actions, and the yearning for a cross-cultural connection are all located in Neville’s perception of himself and his actions. Interestingly, the utilization of derogatory language continues throughout “Neville’s Confession,” as he uses the precise terms that have been previously used to defame him as part of the parodic performativity of his narrative. Both Jasper’s and Drood’s previous mockery of Neville’s “hot-tempered past” and the initial description of the “dark” nature of the Landlesses in Dickens’s text provide the base for Neville’s cynicism (Holmes 34). It is thus worth mentioning that Neville himself notes that “[his] blood was warm” and “[his] mood turned black” when narrating the events of the murder (Holmes 115). Just as both Neville and Helena were aware of being “on display” in the earlier parts of the musical, Neville is just as aware of his scrutiny in his confession. In the (re)use of the language previously used to defame him, Neville’s language mirrors his and Helena’s employment of “the full effect” in “British Subject” as an informed critique of Cloisterham’s prejudice. In his “Confession,” Neville reclaims the very words used against him as a reflection on the corruptive nature of the marginalization he has faced.

Perhaps most strikingly, Neville ends his confession by proclaiming that “English [Drood] stood and English he fell! / I sent him to his good English hell!” (Holmes 115). This explicit repetition-with-a-difference of what had previously been the Landlesses’ lament of their stratification within English society is here re-appropriated into the impetus of murder: Drood’s status as preserver and upholder of the notion of “Englishness” at its most oppressive is a large factor in Neville’s expression of culpability. “Neville’s Confession” is thus the ultimate embodiment of sensational scandal driven by the escalation of xenophobic prejudice. The use of lyrical callbacks to the previous discussions of marginalization in Holmes’s *Drood* in both

“Neville’s Confession” and “Out on a Limerick” combined with Neville’s continued awareness of the potential for subversive performativity in his “Confession” emphasizes the postcolonial reinterpretation of Dickens’s text.

Helena’s rendition of “Out on a Limerick” shares many similarities with her brother’s, though she notes the multiple disadvantages that result not only from xenophobic prejudices against her ethnicity but also her status as a woman in Victorian society:

For strangers who’ll chat with a chap,
And reveal this and that in a snap,
Are remarkably leery
Of women who query
Too much, it’s a great handicap. (Holmes 102)

Her ability to “ably disguise / [her] most feminine size” is what enables her to fulfill the detective role (Holmes 102). The active masking of her femininity can be seen as a parallel to her recognition and performance of what the citizens of Cloisterham expect from her earlier in the musical. In both circumstances her conformity to societal norms is an informed decision, and thus a deliberate subversion of these restrictive expectations. In this, her traditional disadvantages become her strengths: as a woman, no one suspects her of being able to pull off the investigation needed to unmask the murderer. Additionally, Helena invokes her familial relationship to Neville as a prime motive, confiding that “to clear Neville’s name” has served as a powerful impetus in her actions (Holmes 102). Emphasizing the connection between the Landlesses as a family unit further humanizes them in the context of the narrative, lending sympathy to their oppression and excessive scrutiny well documented in the previous numbers.

As in Neville’s “Out on a Limerick,” an undercurrent of speaking back against assumed prejudices is as much a motivator for Helena as it was for Neville. She “confess[es], to [her] shame, / ‘Twas for vengeance as well” as the exoneration of her brother that she took up the

mantle of Datchery (Holmes 102). The “clear[ing of] Neville’s name” and the eventual reveal of Jasper’s role in Drood’s murder proves that there is not an inherent fault in the “foreign” presence in Cloisterham, as previously perceived. Proving Neville’s innocence is thus a familial concern, a humanizing gesture, a subversion of both gendered and ethnocentric stereotypes, and a recognition of the scandal so typified in Victorian sensation novels. Helena-Datchery illustrates the capability not only of colonial subjects but of colonial women in particular, an expression of intelligence, drive, and responsibility that sets her apart from her Dickensian counterpart.

“Helena’s Confession” reveals similar impulses, though through a different set of actions. The desire to protect Neville from harm remains front and center in Helena’s concerns, as she explains:

The words so rude of Drood had caused me great alarm:
That devil might cause Neville to do him some harm!
Sister and mother to my brother I have been –
And so to smother Drood, I had to do Drood in! (Holmes 114)

What is interesting in “Helena’s Confession” is a recognition of the same systematic oppression that Neville notes as a crucial part of his role as murderer. In “the words of Drood” Helena is able to identify the deliberate provoking of the Landlesses (and especially Neville) by Drood as explored in “Ceylon” and “British Subject,” as well as Neville’s intense emotional response to such provocations. It is almost as if Helena is able to foresee the potential existence of “Neville’s Confession”—while the “harm” she believes Neville may cause Drood may not have extended to murder, Helena recognizes both the potential for aggression perpetrated by Neville and the heavy implications of such potential aggression. Any “harm” that befalls Drood as perpetrated by Neville will be returned by the citizens of Cloisterham as a result of their preexisting xenophobic prejudice, and Helena’s preemptive strike in killing Drood is thus a recognition of prejudice and an attempt to lessen its effects. Even in a song where she admits to

murder, her emotional intelligence is well established, as she actively identifies the establishment of the tensions between herself and Neville versus Cloisterham/English society at large and the potential escalation of such rivalries.

It is likewise important to note another key point of “Helena’s Confession”: her insistence that she “meant no violence that Christmas morn,” and indeed only intended to “silence this Edwin’s scorn” instead of killing him (Holmes 114). This again emphasizes Helena’s level of intelligence and awareness; even in her “Confession,” she refuses to concede to a motive that might give credence to the xenophobic prejudices against “British” subjects. While she admits that she would “kill another, to save [her] brother,” it is clear that her familial loyalty is the prime motivator behind her actions, not any penchant for violence or harm. Like Neville’s self-awareness in his proclamation of “send[ing Drood] to his good English hell,” Helena’s murderous actions are contained within her recognition of the extreme institutional disadvantages she and her brother face. In both Helena and Neville’s “Confessions,” the murder of Drood is not simply a murder—it is the parodic extrapolation of xenophobia’s influence on their lives, and the potentially murderous consequences of upholding such prejudices.

By accentuating the misguided nature of the “Music Hall Royale” as a stand-in for the Victorian public that originally interacted with Dickens’s work, Holmes projects himself and his (re)vision of the Landlesses as a distinctly postcolonial force, speaking with both temporal and cultural distance. His creation of Neville- and Helena-centric moments of expression and the rewriting of Dickens’s narrative to more directly incorporate the Landlesses amplifies their presence, and offers a critical counterpoint to the parodies that operate as revisions of their Victorian predecessors. Even in their respective “Confessions,” Helena and Neville are presented as nuanced, complex characters who cannot be contained within a xenophobic narrative of

culpability. It is through showcasing multiple aspects of their personhood that Holmes is able to create these flawed, intelligent, self-conscious individuals. Through parodic amplification of the racism and xenophobia in Dickens's novel and frank discussions of the effects of these prejudices, Holmes recenters the Landlesses away from their Dickensian role as enigmatic "Others." His Landlesses are thus given stellar opportunities to speak out against their oppression, while simultaneously being framed as major players in their own right in the titular mystery.

Revisiting Victorian Romance in KJ Charles's *Sins of the Cities*

Evolving the "Bodice-Ripper"

Rupert Holmes's utilization of postmodern audience interactivity and his metatheatrical structure within the generic form of the Broadway musical helps to illustrate the intersection between Neo-Victorianism and popular culture, but his approach is far from the only one that can be used to examine this relationship. The use of other genres and techniques by Neo-Victorian creators offers the possibility of centering other kinds of non-normative personhood through the varied potentials of popular genres, just as Holmes brought light to the plight of colonial migrants such as Helena and Neville in his musical.

While more "literary" in the sense that her works come in the form of books rather than interactive performances, romance novelist KJ Charles is on par with Rupert Holmes when it comes to producing neo-Victorian reimaginings of the past. As the focus of my second chapter, Charles and her *Sins of the Cities* trilogy represent the generative intersection of queer identities, a commitment to a historically accurate portrayal of the Victorian era, and the affective pleasures of the contemporary romance genre. Rather than engaging with one Victorian text as a basis for reinvention, KJ Charles's *Sins of the Cities* takes the entire Victorian era as its intertext. Along with being located almost wholly within the London metropolis, her plots are set concurrent with the historical London Fog of 1873 a literal atmospheric obfuscation that provides a potent backdrop to the mystery of her novels. Charles draws from traditions of the sensation novel, Victorian notions of sexuality and queerness, and the mediation between the public sphere and the domestic home to construct a trilogy steeped in a Victorian atmosphere, framed within the generic structure of romance novels.

The first book of the trilogy, *An Unseen Attraction*, centers on the romance between Clem Talleyfer, the bastard son of an earl and an Indian domestic servant, and Rowley Green, a taxidermist who lodges at Clem's lodgings-house. Amongst the budding romance, a clandestine marriage between Clem's brother Edmund Taillefer, the current Earl of Moreton, and a provincial woman named Emmeline Godfrey is uncovered, rendering Edmund's current marriage and children illegitimate. Clem, Rowley, and Clem's circle of friends at the Jack and Knave (a public house catering to queer Londoners) become quickly embroiled in the cover-ups and concealments. When it is revealed that Edmund's first wife gave birth to twins shortly after their marriage, Charles's romantic narratives become even more intertwined with the search for the true heirs. Culminating in the final book, *An Unsuitable Heir*, the lost Taillefers are identified as the Flying Starlings, music hall acrobats more suited to spectacle and performance than duties of nobility.

Rather than the explicit metatheatrical framework of Holmes's musical, Charles's project is more centered on the tropes and generic expectations of romance novels, mirroring Rupert Holmes's commitment to replicating the sense of a historically accurate Victorian era through her own popular medium. Through the established format of romance as a genre and callbacks to the legacy of sensation fiction as a prototext for romance novels, *Sins of the Cities* stands as another genre that reinterprets the Victorian past through contemporary sensibilities and frameworks. By interpreting the contemporary romance novel and understandings of queer bodies/sexualities through the lens of the Victorian era, Charles asserts an alternate space of historical queer existence made possible through popular media's ability to reinvent Victorian narratives and spaces.

According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA), the only two necessary tenets of a contemporary “romance novel” as understood by writers and consumers are a) the central love story and b) an “emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending,” colloquially termed a “Happily Ever After” by members of the romance community (“About the Romance Genre” 2017). The capacious scope of the definitions of what a romance novel must be has inspired authors, particularly in the last few decades, to push traditional boundaries of who is portrayed in romance novels. Specifically, the rise of non-white, non-heterosexual, and even non-cisgender romance protagonists is a developmental trend that authors like KJ Charles embrace. Charles and other writers of queer historical romance thus seek to find success by filling gaps that heterosexual romance has traditionally left in the field, crafting stories that situate the reality of diversity in a historical setting while maintaining the promise of an “Happily Ever After” (HEA hereafter).

The presence of sex and frank discussions of sexuality are another hallmark of the contemporary understanding of what constitutes a romance novel, though, as Pamela Regis notes, sex scenes are “widespread but not essential” (Regis 2003, 6). While not denoted as a necessity by the RWA, the commercialization of the genre through the 1950s generated by the rise of romance-focused publishers such as Harlequin has contributed to popular understandings of romance novels as sites for portrayals of explicit sexuality and sexual encounters.⁷ Similarly, the “interest in the nineteenth-century body” is one of the most potent strains of neo-Victorian reinventions, perhaps most famously rendered in Sarah Waters’ lesbian neo-Victorian novels (Van Dam 2017, 160). While novels like Waters’ are not “romance novels” by the RWA’s standards, her inclusion of (queer) sexuality established an important link between more

⁷ Pamela Regis traces this process, what she terms the “Americanization” of romance novels, in her chapter “Harlequin, Silhouette, and the Americanization of the Popular Romance Novel.”

canonical neo-Victorian works and the discussion of historical romances (histroms hereafter) as examples of neo-Victorian works. Neo-Victorianist Marie-Louise Kohlke has coined the term “sexsation” as the tendency towards “erotic excess” in neo-Victorian works, a distillation of what Louisa Hadley earlier described as the desire to “witness the eruption of the passion and emotion believed to be barely contained beneath the high-collars and stiff petticoats” (Kohlke 2008, 54; Hadley 12). Concerning the popular association of romance novels and sex, it follows that Victorian histroms can be read as neo-Victorian reinventions simply by their engagement with sex and sexuality, though as I aim to indicate through my examination of KJ Charles’s work, their reinventions rarely stop there.

As a genre, most romance scholars pinpoint Georgette Heyer as the matriarch of the romance novel as consumers experience it today, beginning with the publication of *The Black Moth* in 1921. The vast majority of Heyer’s works take place in the Regency era, and her prolific oeuvre has cemented the subgenre of “Regency romance” as a driving field within the larger romance genre. Authors and scholars such as Dorothy Sayers and Pamela Regis signal Heyer’s adoption of the historical past for her present audience as one where the Regency is “familiar and comfortable for most romance readers,” and champion her attention to detail as indicative of later hallmarks of the genre (Duvezin-Caubet 2020, 249).⁸ However, Heyer has been criticized for her limited scope in terms of characters, class and situation; her focus on heterosexual, white, largely middle- and upper-class romance has faced scrutiny in recent years from members of the romance community who seek a broader audience and representation of characters across a wide range of races, genders, and sexualities. Speaking against antisemitic portrayals in Heyer’s *The Grand Sophy*, romance author Felicia Grossman asserts that:

⁸ For more on Heyer’s bibliography and work, see “Civil Contracts” in Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*.

“It was written a long time ago, when people didn’t know,” is an argument that’s regularly used to justify all sorts of prejudice in books, including racism and homophobia, as well as antisemitism. But like many authors called out for bigotry, Heyer did know, specifically because of when she was writing. And like many authors who write hateful bigotry into their texts, she didn’t care. (Grossman 2020).

Heyer’s sheer body of work and status as the progenitor of one of romance’s most successful subgenres means that she is almost undeniably a part of the romance canon. But twenty-first century critiques of her work illustrate the dialectic between “historical accuracy” and the structural, generic guarantees of the romance novel as a genre that writers must navigate. The continued popularity of romance in the twenty-first century necessitates that contemporary notions of representation and subsequent sensitivity to “historically accurate” conceptions of oppression and prejudice must be actively negotiated by romance authors, not merely swept away as in the case of Heyer. The increasing popularity of BIPOC- and queer-centered histroms, pioneered by Gordon Merrick with the publication of *The Lord Won’t Mind* in 1970 and bolstered in recent years by the success of contemporary authors such as Alyssa Cole, Courtney Milan, Olivia Waite, Cat Sebastian, and KJ Charles, provides a basis through which to examine the successes and difficulties surrounding the diversification of the romance genre.

Structuring Queer Histroms: The Problem of “Accuracy”

As a writer of specifically queer historical romance, KJ Charles is one such author whose mediation of “historical accuracy” and “romance novels” faces twofold scrutiny. While not a queer author herself, Charles’s oeuvre is entirely centered on portraying a spectrum of queer experiences, and *Sins of the Cities* serves as an exemplar of her artistic endeavors. Amanda Pagan notes a trend throughout the history of the romance genre where “queer romance novels have always existed, but they were overshadowed by the success and demand of heteronormative

narratives” (Pagan 2019). Charles herself describes the consumers of romance novels’ perception of historical romance as divided into “two factions: those who want their histrom to align with modern values about things like consent, equality, and bigotry, and those who don’t because those weren’t the attitudes of the time and that’s part of historical accuracy” (Charles, “Historical Accuracy: Who Gets the HEA,” 2018). One can trace questions of “accuracy” in histroms to the tenuous balance struck by neo-Victorianists between “criticism and creativity,” the moments of “critical f(r)iction” that hint at the dual existence of contemporary author and Victorian subject matter (Llewellyn 170). Authors like Charles have to balance a plot that “embrace[s] a kind of democratism of imaginative representation” that upholds the internal logic of their Victorian setting with the narrative fulfillment of romance novels and contemporary expectations of what constitutes a compelling character (Llewellyn 2008, 170).

In terms of queer romance, Charles is equally aware of the double standard she and other queer histrom writers are subjected to, one that writers of heterosexual romance do not have to consider. This dynamic is undoubtedly rooted in further pressures of “historical accuracy.” In terms of the necessity of self-conscious writing when it comes to queer romance, Charles writes:

There is a powerful strand of opinion that holds that any m/m [male/male] histrom *must* reflect the fear of legal persecution, that any romance starring a POC *must* be about racism and injustice, that marginalised people simply cannot have happy endings [...] because history was too cruel. [...] That sort of fictional escape should not be denied to readers of colour and/or queer readers—and particularly not on grounds of accuracy or historical realism that are not applied elsewhere. (“Historical Romance”)

In other words, Charles demarcates the potentials of romance as a genre as something unique to the genre’s structural and formal identity. The “happy endings” are a non-negotiable, and the inclusion of diverse protagonists does not impact the assurance of this hallmark of the genre. *Sins of the Cities* is not without the hints of oppression that Charles claims certain histrom readers find so integral: in *An Unseen Attraction*, Clem faces microaggressions stemming from his

Indian heritage from family members and acquaintances alike, and the threat of “implications of the most sordid nature” (i.e., “do[ing] ten years for unnatural offences”) hangs over all of Charles’s queer characters as an acknowledged risk of their lived identity (Charles, *An Unseen Attraction* 2017). A later recollection by Pen Starling, the love interest of *An Unsuitable Heir* and the clandestine heir to the Taillefer earldom, recounts “[a] split over his cheekbone, caused by the fist of a man for whom Pen had inconveniently failed to fit his assigned role” (Charles, *An Unsuitable Heir* 2017).

But that does not mean that Clem, Pen, or Charles’ other queer protagonists are disqualified from having their own HEA. It is not that authors of queer histroms want to create utopian spaces of unrealistic, historically inaccurate “alternate universes.” Rather, Charles posits that her adoption of historical romance as a subgenre contains a dual assertion of the reality of the Victorian setting and the desire to provide an HEA regardless of, and not despite, the historical disadvantages her characters might have faced. By utilizing the specific generic confines of a romance novel as opposed to other genres, she is explicitly aligning herself with romance’s implications and assurances. Charles’s portrayal of racism, homophobia, and transphobia is mitigated by the eventual promise of an HEA for the central couple, while those more inclined towards the “historical accuracy” of histroms can read into her portrayal of non-normative heroes as an illustration of the often untold realities of Victorian diversity.

The Sensationalism of Charlesian Romance

Charles’s relationship to the earlier popular form of the “sensation novel” as a genre is one of her most prevalent links to her commitment of portraying a historically accurate Victorian setting. The dramatic tendencies of sensation and the genre’s popularity in the Victorian era are

noted as part of the genre's appeal by Charles's characters within her trilogy. Clem describes his brother Edmund's account of his secret marriage as "the stuff of the Wilkie Collins sensation novels he enjoyed," noting how he is "quite caught up in the tale" and the drastic reveal of secret children and a discarded wife (*An Unseen Attraction*). Rowley also invokes Wilkie Collins when Clem relays Edmund's story, though his reaction is one of exasperation and disbelief at the outlandish narrative. Charles directly invokes sensation novels in terms of Victorian conceptions of the genre at the time as either a) popularly entertaining and narratively engaging or b) implausibly fictional, a sort of metafictional intertextual nod to her readers familiar with the legacy of sensation novels. Given romance's similar reputation as significant for its popular basis and the potential "implausibility" of romance's generic tendencies, Charles's reference to sensation novels in the text provides a subtle link between the two genres.

Following the aforementioned anatomy of the sensation novel as outlined by Harrison and Fantina, the sensational elements of *Sins of the Cities* are just as prevalent as those of *Drood*. Familial anxieties and social ruptures are doubtlessly present in *Sins of the Cities*, given the overarching narrative of bigamy, secret children, and illegitimacy concerning the earldom of Moreton that propels all three novels. Harrison and Fantina take an additional note of the attention to the (re)invention of women in sensation fiction, most notably the recreation of "villainous female characters" as inversions of the "Angel in the House" and the destabilizing force that non-normative expressions of femininity could wield on traditional Victorian households (Harrison and Fantina xvi). It is this notion of femininity and non-normative gender roles that takes particular focus in Charles's trilogy, one that I will examine later in the chapter.

As mentioned before, Charles's particular subversion of notions of "stability" comes in her realization of queerness in the Victorian household. Not only does she literalize queerness in

terms of sexuality and the exploration of sexual identity, but she also pays homage to the gendered concerns of sensation novels in two distinct ways: firstly, the radical domestication of queer couples as a parallel to sensation novels' radical rupturing of domesticity, and secondly, her exploration of transgender identities, both in the in-narrative personal formation of transgender identity as influenced by aspects of Victorian society and the perception of transgender bodies by external observers.

Going off of Louisa Hadley's location of a tenet of sensation fiction as "the disjunction between the public persona and private desires of individuals," the exploration of queerness in what might be described as "neo-sensational fiction" falls in line with Victorian sensibilities (Hadley 150). Set in 1873, *Sins of the Cities* takes place after the 1861 British statute that made "buggery" (a catch-all term for homosexual acts) a non-capital crime and before the 1885 criminalization of "gross indecency," another legalization of general homophobia. Her engagement with queer life in London thus occupies a particular place in the larger scope of British history, a brief period of relative respite in the history of British queerness (though, as mentioned above, the general fear of persecution was a fixture of the nineteenth century). It follows that this unique historical period is inherent concerned with the place of queerness in a public and private sense, given the mediation on its legal definition and place. As queer people, Charles's characters are inevitably concerned with both their perceptions in the outside world given their situation in this historical moment and the fulfillment of their central love story as a hallmark of the genre, a queering of Hadley's public-private dynamic central to sensation fiction.

Combining her structural/generic subversions via the centering of queer identities in histories with the canonical/literary subversions of sensation novels allows Charles to bolster her claims. She is able to draw a line from the history of Victorian interest in narrative surprise to her

own “surprising” agenda of employing a “radical act of imagination to make stories as friendly to women and marginalised people as they are to white cis het men” (Charles, “You Will Take My Fluff From My Cold Dead Hands” 2018). In this, Charles neither entirely rejects nor embraces the legacy of sensation novels in *Sins of the Cities*. Her adoption of specific tropes, structures, and archetypes furthers the necessity of “self-conscious engagement” Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn identify as crucial to any neo-Victorian project.

Queering the Music Hall: Trans(itive) Identities and Rejecting Sensation

Intimacy and Domesticity in Neo-Sensational Romance

The first of Charles’s innovations that she constructs as a fixture of her neo-sensational, neo-Victorian romance is derived from the particular intersection of sensational public-private concerns and the formation of queer sexualities. Like Holmes, she invokes the music hall as both a location and a symbol, harkening to music hall’s history of popular culture and its status as a space for new kinds of identity formation in regard to her queer characters and romances. Many of the aesthetic, sociocultural, and performative implications present in Holmes’s *Drood* can be seen in Charles’s trilogy, once again emphasizing the potentialities of both Victorian and contemporary popular culture in projects of (re)interpretation. But Charles’s alignment of music hall and queer identity is unique to her trilogy, and aligns the “historically accurate” notion of music hall as an inventive space with her inventive notions of queerness in a public space.

Music hall and queer experience first collide in *An Unseen Attraction*, where the central couple, Clem and Rowley, attend music hall performances several times, both before and after the explicit beginning of their relationship. In their initial trip to the music hall, the risks and difficulties of mediating queerness in any kind of public space are lamented by Rowley as

“extraordinarily difficult [...] even if nobody else could hear a word, after a lifetime’s habit of secrecy and allusion and implication” (*An Unseen Attraction*). The inability to fully act on their desires is necessitated by the constraints of public society, the assumption of heteronormativity even in such radical places as music halls.

A turn comes when Clem and Rowley take their seats in one of the theater’s boxes, a discrete private space within the larger public setting. Rowley’s anxiety over the possible overheard words he and Clem could use to initiate any kind of relationship is mediated by the physical separation of the two of them from the rest of the audience, enabling physical intimacy that cannot be eavesdropped upon:

[Rowley] put his hand to Clem’s thigh, not far enough to be a gross intrusion but decidedly too far up for a friendly pat on the knee, and felt him shiver but not move away. He took a deep breath and more or less choked on it as Clem’s hand slid over his, gently interlacing their fingers. [...] The band’s chaotic turning up burst out into a fanfare. [...] He didn’t release Rowley’s hand. Rowley didn’t want to move it. He flattened his palm over the wool of Clem’s trouser leg, feeling the muscle underneath, and the fingers that pushed between his own. (*An Unseen Attraction*)

The interstitial intrusion of “the band’s chaotic tuning” reasserts the presence of the music hall as a significant accompaniment to their physical intimacy. Even if Clem and Rowley are not directly involved with music hall culture, as in Holmes’s *Drood* and with Charles’s later love interest Pen Starling, their attendance and consumption of the art form is not coincidental to the consummation of their queer sexualities. The atmospheric influence of the music hall, the stratification of space and formation of pseudo-privacy within an undeniably public space, evokes the cultural implications of music hall in scholar Keith Wilson’s words as “the ultimate space of liberty for all” (Wilson quoted in Faulk, 12). The tendency of music hall to be “as various an entertainment as the heterogeneous, ethnic, gendered, and classed groups hailed by

the form” thus establishes a physical and cultural space that allows for less rigid adherence to “stable” social norms (Faulk 12).

In Charles, then, it makes sense that this amorphous, liberated space and symbol would correspond to the realization of the “Gaily Ever Afters”⁹ of *Sins of the Cities*. The alignment of music hall and queer sexualities is further emphasized in Clem and Rowley’s subsequent visits to the same box, as “they enlivened the wait for the Flying Starlings with the touches they’d denied themselves before” (*An Unseen Attraction*). Once again, performance and physical intimacy are intertwined in their “touches,” as “Clem, who was thoroughly enjoying his role in their unfolding relationship, spent a good fifteen minutes while the comic singer brayed exploring Rowley’s thighs” (*An Unseen Attraction*). The utilization of the music hall within the structure of a romance novel, predicated on HEAs and explicit sexuality, thus asserts another potential benefit of the freeing lack of constraints that come with certain forms of popular culture. Music hall and romance novels share a wide definitional capaciousness, enabling their collaboration in Charles’s project of neo-Victorian “sexsation” and her interpretation of neo-sensational romance.

Transgender Victorian Bodies in the Music Hall and Beyond

The music hall takes on an additional valence in its connection to perhaps Charles’s most radically inventive character, Pen Starling, the love interest of the trilogy’s concluding installment and the secret heir to the Taillefer earldom. Pen and his sister Greta (christened “Repentance” and “Regret” by their mother) are revealed to be the Flying Starlings, the acrobatic duo whose dazzling feats are the main event at the music hall where Clem and Rowley frequent. It is the existence of the twins, and Pen in particular, that constitute the “secret from the past that

⁹ Coined by Caroline Duvezin-Caubet to describe the “*topos* and *telos* that allows the narratives to re-write the past through creating a happy queer ‘archive’ ” (Duvezin-Caubet 242).

threatens the social order of the present” which Louisa Hadley denotes as another propellant of sensation fiction (Hadley 63). Rather than being raised as aristocrats-in-training, Pen and Greta were brought up in an insular religious community by their mother, who was ashamed at her seduction and abandonment by the twins’ father. Pen and Greta fled their community when they were fourteen in order to join music hall troupes. When their narrative begins in full in *An Unsuitable Heir*, their relationship to music hall, performance, and spectacle is inextricably linked to their particular senses of self. For Pen, this manifests in a sense of gender that would likely be described in contemporary terms as somewhere on the transgender spectrum, as he identifies himself as “not a woman, but that doesn’t make [him] a man either” (Charles, *An Unsuitable Heir* 2017). The intersection of music hall’s fluidity, the sensational archetypes that constitute the twins’ background, and the affective affordances of romance provide a generative base for how precisely Charles is able to use these influences to craft a fully realized exploration of transgender identity within the aforementioned confines of a historical romance.

The first reference to Pen’s gender fluidity and its connection to the music hall is noted by Clem in his first outing with Rowley, wherein he observes the “identical tight sequined costumes” of the Flying Starlings and questions whether they are “both women” (*An Unseen Attraction*). While Rowley identifies Pen as a man based on his “breadth of shoulder and hip,” he also acknowledges that “[he] honestly hadn’t been able to tell the first time he’d seen them,” pointing out that their external gender presentation varies by performance. He strikingly observes that over the various times he has attended their performances, he has seen them “twice both as women, once both as men” (*An Unseen Attraction*). Indeed, on their subsequent visit to the music hall, Clem recognizes the beginnings of a distinction between presentation and gender identity in regard to the Starlings, noting that they “were both male tonight, or at least both clad

in close-fitting costumes that suggested masculinity” (*An Unseen Attraction*). The freedom of the music hall as a space for “liberty for all” extends to the recognition of performativity as a way of subverting gender norms. Wearing costumes that suggest varying gender differences serves to begin the normalization of transgender expressions of identity, beginning at the level of the external spectator.

Once Pen himself gains narrative authority in *An Unsuitable Heir*, his own perceived connection between music hall/performance and his fluid sense of identity becomes more precisely articulated. In his initial conversation with his love interest, private investigator Mark Braglewicz, Pen describes the performative fluidity of his and Greta’s costumes versus his individual concept of gender as follows:

“We costume differently,” [Pen] said. “Depending on the act. You know how music hall is.” Male impersonators, female impersonators; sometimes it seemed half the people on the stage were dressed against what their bodies dictated.
 [Mark] “So is that why the long hair?”
 “Mmm,” Pen said, because it wasn’t not entirely.
 “It looks good.”
 [...] “Thank you. A lot of people think it’s odd.”
 “Well, a lot of people are arseholes.” (*An Unsuitable Heir*)

An interpretation of gender fluidity within the music hall is accepted precisely because of the relationship to performance, a plausible deniability that allows Pen to explore a sense of non-normative gender through the guise of “how music hall is.” Keith Wilson’s aforementioned assertion of music hall as an “ultimate space of liberty for all” not only applies to the expressions of physical intimacy explored by Clem and Rowley, but extends to transgender senses of self. The quasi-normalized notion of performance and clothing as distinct from the body or any sense of gender identity, a distinction separate from the emerging sexological categorizations of gender and sexuality that were beginning to gain prominence in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is realized through the established fluidity of music hall culture. Not only does the music hall

provide a space for external observers like Clem and Mark to recognize potential transgender identities, but it serves as a ground for Pen himself to interrogate this potentiality. The “not entirely” unrelated relationship between music hall and genderfluidity provides a ground for interpreting Pen’s character both in terms of his own understanding of his identity and his perception by external observers, a way of processing his non-normative identity within the existing frameworks of their Victorian society.

Following Charles’s project of the “right to be carelessly happy” regardless of race, sexuality, or gender afforded to her characters, Pen’s utilization of the specific cultural implications of music hall are similarly intertwined with the fulfillment of his love story and the understanding he forms with his love interest Mark. When Mark goes to see Pen perform for the first time, he describes Pen’s costuming, performance, and gender expression as “looking like [he] ought to,” recognizing the convergence of “masculine, feminine, human, animal, physical, and elemental all at once” in the constitution of Pen’s identity (*An Unsuitable Heir*). This realization functions as both a naturalization of Pen’s sense of gender fluidity and a legitimization of the music hall as a locus for identity making. It is within the music hall and in the context of a performance that Mark is first able to understand the non-normative aspects of Pen’s identity. Just as the metatheatrical performativity of Rupert Holmes’s “Music Hall Royale” sets the literal and literary stage for his particular neo-Victorian innovations, Charles’s adoption of the music hall as an way to understand non-normative notions of the self and external perception of others highlights the implications of music-hall-as-popular-phenomenon alongside her own innovations regarding neo-Victorian popular culture.

However, Pen’s exploration and the examination of transgender identity in a neo-sensational, neo-Victorian romance novel extends beyond the music hall, influenced by both

tropes of Victorian sensation fiction and the affective guarantees of the HEA and romance as a genre. Pen's first major introduction outside of the music hall occurs in *An Unnatural Vice*, the middle book of the trilogy, where he is tricked by Mark into showing up at the Taillefer ancestral home in hopes of resolving the succession crisis that has consumed much of the trilogy's narrative. His appearance is noted as looking "like a Taillefer, in fact, except for the small detail that his hair fell halfway down his back in ringlets," a physical feature that denotes him as non-normative amongst the other Taillefers and those in the room (*An Unnatural Vice*). In terms of hair as a marker of gender, Pen himself further identifies his hair as a feature specifically tied to his sense of femininity when he explains that "people tended either to see the long hair and [...] decide he was womanish, or to see the broad shoulders and bulging biceps and conclude he was a fine strong man" (*An Unsuitable Heir*).

The invocation of hair is a direct hallmark of Victorian sensation fiction, particularly used to convey diverse notions of femininity and womanhood. Scholar Galia Olek articulates how the use of hair deployed "contradictions of prevailing versions of femininity" and a "constant negotiation and redefinition of feminine identity," though she allows that some Victorian critics "found the representation of hair in sensation novels excessive and exaggerated" (Olek quoted in Harrison and Fantina, 102). In the case of Pen Starling, Charles's depiction of hair establishes an alignment between him and the women in sensation novels whose hair served as a symbol for identity mediation and potential reinvention. Considering Olek's identification of hair as a mechanism through which notions of femininity were "constant[ly] negotiat[ed]," Pen's long hair likewise serves as a signal for transgressive gender identity. Much like the way Charles's centering of queer couples within the historically heteronormative genre of romance illustrates the subversive potential of her trilogy, the substitution of cisgender women's explorations of

“prevailing versions of femininity” through the symbolic deployment of hair for the centrality of a transgender protagonist reckoning with both masculinity and femininity is emblematic of another way *Sins of the Cities* (re)invents Victorian tropes and narrative. Adopting Victorian symbols of non-normativity in order to fulfill her innovative character arcs aligns Charles with the periodicity and “historical accuracy” she notes as key to pulling off a successful histrom, solidifying a sense of authority and authenticity that legitimizes her engagements with more contemporary notions of gender and identity.

Going off of Charles’s assertion that “the truths of history are not incompatible with romance, when approached from the right angle,” it follows that even when engaging with such radical reinventions such as the exploration of transgender realities in Victorian London, she assures that her commitment to the resolution and affirmation of the HEA results in narrative and character fulfillment. As some of the quotes above illustrate, Pen’s non-normative appearance is not something that creates an insurmountable barrier between him and Mark. Mark’s assurance that Pen’s long hair “looks good” and that his performance persona (couched in expressions of gender fluidity) is how “[he] ought to” look illustrates the compatibility of Pen’s gender expression within their relationship.

Furthermore, the frank conversations between Pen and Mark concerning his identity within the structure of the romance novel illustrates Charles’s attempts to strike a balance between “the truths of history” and historical romances. Rather than relying on the quasi-normalized sense of (trans)gender expression identified as resulting from music hall culture, Charles commits to portraying transgender individuals as a distinct type of *person* beyond matters of dress and appearance. As mentioned earlier, Pen is different from the music hall

performers who merely “dressed against what their bodies dictated,” a fact that Mark identifies as something that needs to be resolved in order to fulfill their HEA:

[Mark]: “Is there anything I ought to know? [...] Like...how you want to be touched. What you like to be called. Are you a woman. [...] I want to do things the way you want them done. That’s it. Pen, mate, I like men, I like women, and I’m not here to tell anyone which they are. I like men who wear dresses, and women who strap on extra bits, and—I just like people, see?” (*An Unsuitable Heir*)

Mark’s reference to “men who wear dresses [sic] and women who strap on extra bits” alludes to the historical existence of non-normative gender expression that Charles further explores in her creation of Pen, once again lending her a sense of authenticity to counterbalance any questions of “accuracy” in her reinventions.¹⁰ Mark’s awareness of such individuals implicates the “Victorian medical discourse in which the body formed an indicator of (non)normativity that could be categorized, measured, and ordered” into his perception and understanding of Pen, while his frank acceptance of Pen (“that’s it”) asserts their romantic connection over established sexological notions of gender (Van Dam 161). Despite the evident lack of appropriate terminology with which to label Pen more clearly, Mark is not deterred by any potential unfamiliarity resulting from Pen’s transgender identity. Pen’s settling on “I’m me, that’s all. I’m Pen Starling, and I can’t be anything else” as the clearest elucidation of his selfhood demonstrates how it is not necessary to directly translate contemporary notions of transgender identity into a Victorian vocabulary (*An Unsuitable Heir*).

The reconciliation of non-normative gender presentation and transgender identity culminates in the final scene of *An Unsuitable Heir*, where these innovations and examinations and enshrined in the HEA:

[Pen] “Do you know what [sic] this lovely woman fancies tonight?”

¹⁰ For a more detailed history of queer and transgender identities in nineteenth-century Europe, see Dagmar Herzog’s *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-century History* (Herzog, Dagmar. *Sexuality In Europe: A Twentieth-century History*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.)

“Uh,” Mark said. “I reckon I’ve got a fair idea.”

[...]

Pen knelt over [Mark], robe open in a shimmering flow of golden silk and fluffy fur.

“Christ, you’re beautiful,” Mark said. “Will you take your hair down? I want to touch it.”

Pen pulled out hairpin after hairpin, tossing them away, letting the river of hair tumble loose over his shoulders and, as he leaned forward, over Mark. (*An Unsuitable Heir*)

Pen’s hair, his most prominent link to the feminine aspects of his identity, is what is most immediately desirable for Mark, and his recognition of its “beauty” is the catalyst for their final sex scene that serves as a resolution for the trilogy. Pen’s confident identification with his femininity is likewise an accepted part of this concluding moment, a normalized part of their HEA that exists without question. The ease and happiness between them is the ultimate manifestation of Charles’s multiple innovations concerning her portrayal of a queer, transgender protagonist, and culminates in the same sense of an HEA that her queer cisgender couples are afforded in the earlier two books.

Imbuing her characters with specificity and individuality allows Charles to embark on such radical reinventions in *Sins of the Cities*. Her balance between direct invocation of Victorian symbols, themes, and archetypes with the refutation of others, combined with her awareness of romance as a genre and its particular potentialities and constraints, constitutes the capaciousness with which *Sins of the Cities* embraces neo-Victorian and neo-sensationalist cultural strains. The potent environment of the music hall and notions of historical accuracy, the vivid portrayal of queer relationships, and the affective affordances of the HEA give emotional and literary weight to Charles’s project, and offer a subversive reckoning with the legacy of Victorian literature and culture.

Conclusion

In a review of the 2012 revival of Holmes's *Drood*, Caroline Reitz posits that “the jarring juxtaposition between late-Victorian entropy and ghosts of disco fever raises the question: is Victorian culture now like disco, the stuff of theme parties and cheerful kitsch?” (Reitz 2014, 142). Similarly, Lisa Hackett and Jo Coghlan recognize that “romance fiction remains stuck in the pulp fiction bubble” when it comes to genre and academic attention (Hackett and Coghlan 2021). But far from decrying their respective genres, Reitz, Hackett, and Coghlan pay considerable homage to the popular connotations of what may be termed “kitsch” and “pulpy”—Reitz embraces Holmes's *Drood* as “a break from our contemporary more-satiric-than-thou attitude” and Hackett and Coghlan assert that “reading historical romance provides an avenue for accessing history without engaging it in a scholarly environment” (Reitz 146, Hackett and Coghlan). In these accounts, the perceived distance from canonical, “scholarly” legitimacy lends another kind of authority and authenticity, one that emphasizes affective connection and the emotional potential in potentially “kitschy” or “pulpy” works.

As I have laid out in these past two chapters, taking a step back from the canon, particularly in exploring the cultural world of neo-Victorianism where reinvention is central to its disciplinary concerns, does not discount such works from having poignant insights. In fact, it is perhaps where the constraints and intense analytic frameworks of academic disciplines and institutions are less keenly felt that generative engagements can emerge alongside the freedoms of popular culture. In Rupert Holmes's *Drood*, the Dickensian narrative and interrogation of British imperial prejudices is rendered *more* visible by the performativity and exaggeration of the format of the Broadway musical, and the invocation of music hall culture through its connection to Broadway provides a link between the past and present. Likewise, KJ Charles' *Sins of the*

Cities trilogy combines the emotional assurance and frank depiction of sexuality so central to contemporary romance, while her detailed rendering of queer identity and devotion to historical accuracy deepens her generic structure beyond so-called “pulp.”

Of course, these two works are not without faults, and these faults are not insignificant. As I mentioned in footnote 6, almost every adaptation of *Drood* (Holmes or otherwise) has relied on makeup-induced “brownface” in order to racializes their Landlesses, rather than casting actors of South Asian descent. Such decisions do much to underscore the truly insightful characterizations and structural innovations of Holmes’s project, and reinforce the puzzling anxieties of Dickens’s narrative. And the question of the place of KJ Charles as a straight woman writing queer (and largely male/male) romance as opposed to hstrom authors who are themselves queer, such as Olivia Waite and Cat Sebastian, is one being discussed in romance communities today. When it comes to such a historically heteronormative genre, what is the responsibility of heterosexual authors, particularly ones portraying queerness? These are questions that cannot and should not be discounted, as their resolution can doubtlessly lead to even more insightful, nuanced creations.

Despite these points of contention, the benefits and analyses these works provide to the burgeoning field of neo-Victorianism signals a much-needed shift within the discipline. Critical attention towards genres with wide audiences can not only foster creative, unique representations of academic concerns, but can potentially initiate a larger conversation about the dialectic between the Victorian era and our present moment. As my chapters have illustrated, the incorporation of diverse genres can and often does generate greater representations of diverse perspectives. There is still a great need to appeal to a greater audience base and lean into the definitional capaciousness of neo-Victorianism in terms of both genre and

aesthetic/political/sociocultural concerns. But the examples of Holmes and Charles indicate that such appeals will doubtless generate more insights, diverse characterizations, and mediations on selfhood and otherness that underscore the constantly evolving relationship between who we are now and who we have been.

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