

Syrie James's *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë*: A Neo-Victorian Biofiction of *Pride and Prejudice*

The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë, de Syrie James: una bioficción neo-victoriana de orgullo y prejuicio

DÍDAC LLORENS-CUBEDO

Institution address: UNED. Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas. Facultad de Filología. Edificio de Humanidades. Paseo Senda del Rey 7. 28040 Madrid. Spain.

E-mail: dllorens@flog.uned.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-9246-0316

Received: 01/11/2021. Accepted: 02/06/2022.

How to cite this article: Llorens-Cubedo, Dídac. "Syrie James's *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë*: A Neo-Victorian Biofiction of *Pride and Prejudice*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 43, 2022, pp. 63–85.



This work is licensed under [CC-BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.43.2022.63-85>

Abstract: Syrie James's *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009) is a first-person narrative of the last ten years of the Victorian novelist's life. It is a neo-Victorian celebrity biofiction, tending to the hagiographic. It draws on various biographies of Brontë, on her letters and on her autobiographical novels. Interestingly, it also evokes Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel that Brontë famously disliked. The present article considers *Secret Diaries* within the parameters of neo-Victorian biofiction; it identifies parallelisms with Austen's classic; it reassesses the relationship between Brontë and Austen; and, in doing all this, shows that the chronological scope of Neo-Victorianism is broad.

Keywords: Syrie James; Charlotte Brontë; biofiction; Jane Austen; *Pride and Prejudice*. **Summary:** Introduction. *Secret Diaries* as a Neo-Victorian Biofiction. *Secret Diaries* as a Retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Secret Diaries* as an Invitation to Re-examine Brontë and Austen. Conclusion.

Resumen: *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009), de Syrie James, narra en primera persona los últimos diez años de la vida de la novelista victoriana. Es una bioficción neo-victoriana de un personaje célebre, tendente a lo hagiográfico. Se basa en varias biografías de Brontë, en sus cartas y novelas autobiográficas. Curiosamente, también evoca *Orgullo y prejuicio*, de Jane Austen, una novela que, como es sabido, no gustó a Brontë. Este artículo analiza *Secret Diaries* dentro de los parámetros de la bioficción neo-victoriana, identifica los paralelismos que guarda con el clásico de Austen y reevalúa la relación entre ambas escritoras, demostrando que el espectro cronológico que abarca el neo-victorianismo es amplio.

Palabras clave: Syrie James; Charlotte Brontë; bioficción; Jane Austen; *Orgullo y prejuicio*.

Sumario: Introducción. *Secret Diaries* como bioficción neo-victoriana. *Secret Diaries* como versión de *Orgullo y prejuicio*. *Secret Diaries* como invitación a reevaluar a Brontë y Austen. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë (2009) by Syrie James is an example of contemporary biofiction. It focuses on the life of a prominent nineteenth-century writer: an exceptional woman who, against all odds, achieved literary fame and celebrity. The phrase “secret diaries” in the novel’s title suggests an eminently introspective tone and a fragmentary structure, but instead the reader finds a conventional first-person narrative. The character of Charlotte Brontë narrates the last ten years of her life (1845–1855) as she experiences love, bereavement and literary recognition.

Because of its temporal setting, protagonist and biographical approach, *Secret Diaries* qualifies as neo-Victorian biofiction. It is one among several biofictions inspired by the Brontës, and one among those fictionalising Charlotte Brontë’s life (1816–1855).¹ It is typical of its kind in drawing on biographies of the author-protagonist, letters and autobiographical texts, but unique in using the plot and characters of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as a storytelling framework—curiously, and as we will see, Brontë was unenthusiastic about Austen’s novel. The aim of the present article is to examine James’s *Secret Diaries* as a special case of neo-Victorian biofiction that fictionalises a Victorian author’s life (Brontë’s), retelling a pre-Victorian text (Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*) that was not particularly esteemed by the author-protagonist.

1. *SECRET DIARIES* AS NEO-VICTORIAN BIOFICTION

We will begin by looking at *Secret Diaries* as a work of biofiction, and specifically neo-Victorian biofiction.

In the late 1990s, Middeke drew attention to the “prominence” of “the artist-protagonist” in biofiction (6). Within the more delimited field of neo-Victorian biofiction, *Secret Diaries* can be classed in the sub-genre of “celebrity biofiction,” which explores the lives of leading figures of the

¹ *Goodreads* lists twenty-one titles (the most recent published in 2020) under “Bronte [sic] Biofiction Books.”

Victorian age, including “writers, poets, and artists” (Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Biofiction” 7). Neo-Victorian biofiction thus introduces artistic celebrity—consolidating precisely in the reference period—as a key aspect. Successful authors became “celebrities” as a result of the establishment, in their time, of new forms of literary distribution and consumption: “the advent of mass-market print culture in the nineteenth century led to the fetishisation and increasing commodification of the author as an exemplary or notorious figure” (Novak and Mayer 25). The Brontës, and especially Charlotte (who lived longer than her siblings and had an opportunity to develop a literary career), are cases in point of these phenomena. Their lives make up “a story that has fossilised into a cultural myth” (Villegas-López 318).

Despite her preference for seclusion and anonymity, in the last years of her life Charlotte Brontë experienced not only the scrutiny of her work, but also the public discussion of her identity and character: “she had indeed become a celebrity” (Miller 1). Soon after her death, when Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) appeared, “she became a legend” on a par with the paragon of literary celebrity: she “would come to rival Byron in personal fame” (Miller 1, 6). Brontë would have relished the comparison with the poet she adored since childhood, when she had dreamt of literary achievement.

Weber has explained how Gaskell’s ground-breaking biography of Charlotte Brontë projected an unprecedented, attractive image of a female writer in a Victorian context, skilfully combining different variables: it “reconfigured the terms of both genius and literary celebrity, allowing a woman to be both conventionally feminine and deservedly famous”; in so doing, it “yielded a brand of celebrity impossible to resist, since the heightening of Charlotte’s artistic stature and gender credibility brought a frenzy of fan responses” (64). As a result of Gaskell’s biography, Haworth (the village where the Brontës lived) became a tourist attraction, demand for Brontë memorabilia increased on both sides of the Atlantic, and Charlotte Brontë became a model for young women aspiring to pursue a (secret) career in writing (Weber 65–66, 67).

A trend of neo-Victorian celebrity biofiction focuses on dark areas of the protagonists’ lives (flaws, weaknesses, traumas), with the intention of challenging official or established biographical narratives (Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Biofiction” 7). This, however, does not seem to be James’s aim in *Secret Diaries*: in an “Author’s Foreword,” she expresses “the greatest admiration and respect for the woman who inspired them” (xvi). In

considering neo-Victorian biofiction, Novak and Mayer distinguish “between the two poles of hagiography and demythologisation” (26)—James’s avowal indicates that her novel is closer to the former. Hagiographic biofictions have the result of “affirming their author subjects’ central cultural status,” causing their main characters to “emerge as embodiments of the positive values inscribed in the historical authors’ literary output” (Novak and Mayer 31, 45). This is certainly true of James’s portrayal of Charlotte Brontë as a determined, courageous and dignified woman, representative of what Miller called “the positive myth of female self-creation embodied by her [Brontë’s] autobiographical heroines, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe” (2).

Both *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) are based on Brontë’s own life experiences, from her grim school days at the Clergy Daughters’ School in Cowan Bridge, where two of her sisters died, to her stay in Brussels as a student, where her writing vocation grew and where she fell in love with one of her teachers. The earlier novel was originally published as “an autobiography edited by Currer Bell,” conflating character with author, and shielding the actual author (under an androgynous pseudonym) behind editor. James, on the other hand, presents the narrative of her subject’s life as a collection of “diaries,” choosing an autobiographical form characterised by the use of first person. As a record of an author’s everyday or inner life with the potential to shed light on published material (Cottam 268), the diary also seems particularly appropriate for the biofiction of a writer, which builds on “the close association of the subject’s life and work” (Novak and Mayer 26).

Furthermore, in her title James defines the diaries as “secret.” Apart from being redundant and making the diaries more attractive for the curious, the adjective distinctly sets them apart from any writings published by Charlotte Brontë. It also promises to explore the private life of an author comfortable in her obscurity, as well as pointing to an essential characteristic of the diary as a genre: “it is a communication-that-is-not-to-be-communicated. Secrecy defines the diary as both text and practice” (Cottam 268). In principle, the secret nature of diaries would preclude their reception by a reader, although the act of reading may always be contemplated, “acknowledged by writer and reader as implicitly furtive” (268). In *Secret Diaries*, which no readers are supposed to have access to, James follows a convention of diary writing: she creates the illusion of communication with an interlocutor, by having Charlotte confide in the diary itself. We find an example of this as she commences her narration in

bewilderment, trying to come to terms with an unexpected marriage proposal: “Diary, this offer, which came some months past, has thrown my entire household—nay, the entire village—into an uproar” (3). In this way, James evokes a memorable aspect of *Jane Eyre*, where Jane famously addresses her “reader” at crucial points in the story. The object-diary in James’s biofiction, therefore, is identified with Jane’s “reader.”

Despite its title and the sporadic use of the typical formulaic address, *Secret Diaries* reads like a conventional work of fiction: the text is not a succession of varied dated entries, but instead reproduces the traditional three-volume structure of Victorian novels. Each volume contains eight chapters of similar length that follow a chronological order, broken only by occasional flashbacks. In her “Author’s Foreword,” James admits that “some may consider the unfolding tale to more closely resemble one of Charlotte’s beloved novels than a traditional diary” (xvi). Specific and deliberate coincidences between James’s novel and those by Brontë (especially *Jane Eyre*) certainly exist. Celebrity biofictions often rely on connections between authors’ lives on the one hand, and their characters and plots on the other—the interrelation is, of course, easier to establish when the fictional works in question have an important autobiographical component. An example from *Secret Diaries* is Charlotte’s fortuitous encounter with the teacher she has fallen in love with, Monsieur Héger, in the garden of the Brussels *Pensionnat* where she is a resident student. As she tells Héger, Charlotte is sad to think of her inevitable future departure:

Brussels—this Pensionnat—it has been my home for more than a year now. I have lived here a delightful life. Here, I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence, and with what I delight in—with an original, with a vigorous, an expanded mind. I have come to know you, Monsieur; and it fills me with sadness to contemplate that one day I must leave you—that we will no longer be able to talk in this way. (204)

A reader familiar with *Jane Eyre* will instantly recognise Jane’s reaction when Rochester makes her believe that he is about to marry, and that she should therefore leave Thornfield. James does not only reproduce the heroine’s feelings and key evocative elements (the spring setting, the smell of a cigar); if the garden scenes in both texts are collated, it is easy to identify where she has also quoted or slightly altered phrases, even full

sentences.² Quotation is used again later in James's novel: in this instance, it is overtly introduced by Charlotte, who compares her idyllic relationship with her husband with Jane Eyre's fulfilment in love at the end of the story. The passage from *Jane Eyre* that describes the "perfect concord" of husband and wife as equals (*Jane Eyre* 383–84) is preceded, in *Secret Diaries*, by the following introduction:

I was thumbing through *Jane Eyre* one day, and found this passage. Tears stung my eyes as I read it; for at the time of its composition, these words were but an expression of marital bliss which – until now – had existed only in my imagination . . . (444)

These allusions and quotations show how Jane's story is useful in narrating Charlotte's story; how the fictional happy ending, after fortunes and misfortunes, turns out to be prophetic for the writer who imagined it. As indicated above, biofictions of literary authors draw on their works and biographies. James's "Author's Foreword" tells us that, in order to write *Secret Diaries*, she undertook "a meticulous study of Charlotte's life" and that she chose to focus on one of its lesser-known aspects: her relationship with Alfred Bell Nicholls (xvi), the parsonage's curate and the man she would eventually marry. James explains that she was able "to spin the tale based almost entirely on fact, conjecturing only where I deemed necessary to enhance dramatic conflict or to fill in gaps in the history" (xvi).

The main source of inspiration is therefore factual or documentary, which allows James to connect her biographical fiction with Brontë's autobiographical novels, particularly *Jane Eyre*. This is combined with a narrative strategy less predictable for a neo-Victorian biofiction. In being fictionalised by James, Charlotte and Mr. Nicholls's love story incorporates erroneous first impressions, misunderstandings and plot evolutions mirroring how the two main characters gradually fall in love with each other—all ingredients that unmistakably evoke Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

² The "garden" or "proposal scene" is in chapter XXIII (vol. 2) of *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 210–19).

2. *SECRET DIARIES* AS A RETELLING OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Imaginative and structural parallelisms connecting *Secret Diaries* and *Pride and Prejudice* will be identified and discussed in this section.

James's *Secret Diaries* begins with the protagonist briefly describing the dilemma at the centre of the narrative: how should she react to an unexpected marriage proposal from her father's curate? Charlotte has never entertained romantic feelings for him. Furthermore, Mr. Brontë has reacted angrily against Mr. Nicholls, whom he considers unsuitable for his daughter.

Soon after these introductory paragraphs, the diarist goes back to the day she met Mr. Nicholls in 1845, and the narration continues chronologically, spanning the last ten years of her life, up to the months following her happy marriage, in 1854–1855. James's biographical narration, therefore, explores a period of special intensity, including the writing of the Brontë novels, Charlotte's success as a published author and the deaths of her siblings. It does not adopt the earlier starting-point of a *Bildungsroman* like *Jane Eyre*, although the narration is interspersed with recollections from childhood and early youth, such as Charlotte's traumatic memories of the Clergy Daughters' School, her years as a teacher and governess and her stays in Brussels to perfect her French. Essentially, *Secret Diaries* tells a young woman's love story in parallel with the flourishing of her career as a writer.

In James's novel, Charlotte's first impression of Mr. Nicholls is far from favourable. They seem to have very little in common: as Beer remarks, "no responsible marriage bureau would have brought them within miles of each other" (8). He arrives at the Haworth Parsonage on a rainy day and is received by Charlotte. The new curate mistakes the young woman for a servant, then proudly rejects her invitation to dry before the kitchen fire. When she brings the tea, Charlotte overhears Mr. Nicholls agreeing wholeheartedly to Mr. Brontë's reactionary comments on women's domestic duties and referring to her and Emily as the parson's "spinster daughters" (16).³ Initial dislike is later confirmed: on an evening when Mr. Nicholls and Mr. Grant (the curate of Oxenhope, a neighbouring parish) dine with the Brontës, conversation turns to the supposed coquetry of women and their obsession with husband-hunting. Charlotte heatedly

³ Mr. Brontë's words reproduce, almost word per word, Mr. Helstone's admonition to his niece Caroline in chapter VII of *Shirley* (1849), "The Curates at Tea" (94–120).

argues that women should not be attacked for wanting to marry, since no other life choices are open to them. Her vindication is dismissed by Mr. Nicholls—when he thinks Charlotte cannot hear him—as “the words . . . of an ugly, old maid,” and an “outburst of laughter” follows (45).

We know that, as Beer puts it, the real author “hugged the idea of her plainness to her” (5). James’s Charlotte is consequently deeply hurt by Mr. Nicholls’s remark.⁴ In *Pride and Prejudice*, when Bingley draws his attention to Elizabeth, Darcy defines the girl—not realising that she is within earshot—as “tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (11). As in James’s narrative, a discourteous statement from the male protagonist sets the romance plot in motion: “Darcy’s disparagement of Elizabeth at the first ball initiates the chief instability” (Anderson 368). James’s characters are more passionate, and therefore closer to Brontë’s than to Austen’s: Mr. Nicholls is more offensive than Darcy, and Charlotte’s lingering resentment is very different from Elizabeth’s contained annoyance: “Mr. Darcy walked off; and Elizabeth remained with no cordial feelings towards him. She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous” (*Pride and Prejudice* 12).

Charlotte, however, can derive no amusement from Mr. Nicholls’s attack, which has touched a raw nerve. Apart from reflecting the novelist’s well-known self-consciousness regarding her physical appearance, James is echoing two letters that Brontë sent to her closest friend, Ellen Nussey. In the first one (18? June 1845), she recalls how the three curates in the Haworth Parish (including Mr. Nicholls and Mr. Grant) “rushed in unexpectedly to tea,” and how she was unable to repress her indignation at their patriarchal conservatism: “my temper lost its balance and I pronounced a few sentences sharply & rapidly which struck them all dumb” (Smith 61). In the second (10 July 1846), she emphatically denies that she might have a romantic interest in Mr. Nicholls, referring to him and his circle with a curious combination of sensitivity and defiance: they are “highly uninteresting, narrow and unattractive specimens of the ‘coarser sex’” who “regard me as an old maid” (Smith 77).⁵

⁴ It pains Charlotte to recall these words until, at the beginning of volume III, she finds out that Mr. Nicholls said and meant something quite different.

⁵ Excerpts from most of the letters used by James are reproduced as an appendix in the edition of the novel used.

Wilks has observed that these “specimens of the ‘coarser sex’” were a favourite butt of satire for the young Brontës: on his arrival at the parsonage, “Nicholls was just another ‘curate,’ something which qualified him as an object of comic scorn in the family” (7). In fact, Mr. Nicholls and Mr. Grant can be identified as the originals of Mr. Macarthey and Mr. Donne respectively, two of the satirised clergymen in Charlotte Brontë’s second published novel, *Shirley* (1849), where, in chapter VII, the scene described in the first letter to Nussey is recreated as it is in *Secret Diaries*. James’s Mr. Grant, because of his pompous diction and the conceited belief that all the single women in his parish—including five sisters in the same family—would be ready to marry him, may remind readers of *Secret Diaries* and Austen of Mr. Collins, that other comical representative of the clergy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Believing himself an irresistible catch, Mr. Collins’s only aim is to make a socially convenient marriage.

In an episode that has both a documental and a fictional basis (Brontë’s letters and her novel *Shirley* respectively), Charlotte is passionately angry at the curates, especially at Mr. Nicholls. In Austen’s novel, Darcy’s discourtesy also meets Elizabeth’s chagrin, however softened by her good-humoured nature. As Anderson points out, the possibility of romance is “further complicated,” after initial tension, when Darcy urges his friend Bingley to return to London and suppress his warm feelings for Jane, Elizabeth’s sister (368). Darcy’s meddling is the main reason for Elizabeth’s rejection of his first marriage proposal.

In *Secret Diaries*, Charlotte is compelled to reassess her opinion of Mr. Nicholls on the basis of conflicting actions and contradictory reports. On the one hand, the curate is fond of Emily’s and Anne’s dogs (Keeper and Flossy), he is sympathetic to the family when Branwell’s crises begin, he is praised by both a prominent Haworth family and by the servants at the parsonage, he offers Charlotte and her sisters desperately needed writing paper as a gift, and he caters for the needs of the poor in the parish. On the other hand, as Charlotte already knows, Mr. Nicholls defends firm traditionalist views inimical to female fulfilment, and she continues to observe signs of his overdeveloped sense of religious propriety, as when he controversially forbids the women in Haworth to do their laundry in the churchyard, as it had long been the custom to do. This is a fact confirmed by Nicholls’s biographer, who uses it to contrast the curate’s and the Brontë sisters’ priorities: “While Arthur was preoccupied with laundry in the churchyard, Patrick’s three daughters were quietly and anonymously making literary history” (Adamson 28–29).

Apart from the curate's inflexibility, certain events are decisive in strengthening Charlotte's aversion to him. A specific episode connects with the plot of Austen's novel. On meeting Wickham, Elizabeth blindly believes his narrative of Darcy's annulling, out of jealousy, the provision that the late Darcy (Wickham's godfather) had made for his godson and protégé in his will. Similarly, in *Secret Diaries*, Charlotte lends total credibility to a story intended to damage Mr. Nicholls's reputation. The author has clarified that this is one of the few purely fictional episodes in the novel (James n. p.). It exemplifies a characteristic of biofiction that its neo-Victorian subdivision conforms to: "a *refusal* to rely exclusively on extant historical texts and documented facts" (Kohlke and Gutleben 44) and the consequent taking of "chances to fictionalise by infilling . . . blanks and elisions in the documented record" (Villegas-López 318).

Interestingly, this particular fictional episode evokes *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte and Anne have walked to Keighley (in much the same way as the Bennet sisters walk to Meryton), where they run into Mr. Nicholls. Sylvia Malone, a Haworth neighbour, then joins them and introduces her cousin Bridget, visiting from Dublin. Charlotte (like Elizabeth) immediately realises that Bridget and Mr. Nicholls (like Wickham and Darcy) have met before and are uncomfortable in each other's presence. Mr. Nicholls leaves immediately and Bridget unburdens herself: the curate had been her suitor, but he forsook her as soon as he realised that paternal opposition to the marriage was firm, confirming the family's suspicion that he was only interested in their money.

Austen's Elizabeth and James's Charlotte are equally predisposed to believe anything that will feed their prejudice against Darcy and Mr. Nicholls respectively, and their reactions to the discrediting stories are comparable. After listening to Wickham, Elizabeth concludes:

I had not thought Mr. Darcy so bad as this—though I have never liked him, I had not thought so very ill of him—I had supposed him to be despising his fellow-creatures in general, but did not suspect him of descending to such malicious revenge, such injustice, such inhumanity as this! (*Pride and Prejudice* 65)

Bridget's revelation also has the effect of deepening Charlotte's antipathy to Mr. Nicholls. She comments on his insensitivity, contrasting his fondness of dogs with his lack of sympathy for women:

I disliked Mr. Nicholls before, but my regard for him has plummeted to new depths. . . . If Mr. Nicholls saw a young woman and a common hound lying bleeding in the street, I believe he would go first to the aid of the dog, before he would even think to help the human being. (*Secret Diaries* 137)

Charlotte characterises Mr. Nicholls thus to her sister Anne, who is less prejudiced and less ready to take Bridget at face value: “I would not be so quick to judge Mr. Nicholls . . . There may be some other explanation for all this” (*Secret Diaries* 137). Later in the novel, when Charlotte calls Mr. Nicholls “prejudiced,” Anne defends him again, playing down and perhaps reverting the accusation: “we all have prejudices. It is a measure of our complexity as people, and some of the best people I know are complex” (226). In James’s novel, Anne Brontë’s impartial and diplomatic views are reminiscent of Jane Bennet’s in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane also attempts to reason her sister Elizabeth out of her prejudice, after they learn about Wickham’s grudge against Darcy: “Interested people have perhaps misrepresented each to the other. It is, in short, impossible for us to conjecture the causes or circumstances which may have alienated them, without actual blame on either side” (*Pride and Prejudice* 69).

Jane’s remark does not influence Elizabeth’s opinion of Darcy; nor does Charlotte Lucas’s teasing comment that Darcy might be in love with Elizabeth. In James’s novel, Ellen Nussey makes a similar suggestion about Mr. Nicholls and Charlotte, and Anne agrees. A further parallelism between the two pairs of friends (Elizabeth Bennet–Charlotte Lucas, Charlotte Brontë–Ellen Nussey) is their estrangement because of unexpected responses to marriage proposals: Elizabeth can neither understand nor approve of Charlotte Lucas’s decision to accept Mr. Collins; in *Secret Diaries*, Ellen is glad that Mr. Nicholls’s first proposal has been turned down by Charlotte, who is disappointed by what seems a jealous reaction in her friend.

The two motives put forward by Elizabeth for declining the offer of marriage received at Hunsford Parsonage are Darcy’s interference in Bingley and Jane’s courtship and his responsibility in ruining Wickham’s prospects. In *Secret Diaries*, apart from Mr. Nicholls’s cruelty to Bridget, Charlotte has another reason to confront him and call him “an insufferable cad” (286): he adamantly refuses to carry out a funeral service for the baby of a poor Haworth family who has died unexpectedly without having been christened. This fictional incident may echo Mr. Nicholls’s actual failure to intercede with the authorities so that Michael Heaton, a Haworth

notable, could be buried in his family's grounds, an attitude evidencing "the rigid scrupulosity that often characterized him [Nicholls] when dealing with matters of protocol" (Adamson 119). Interestingly, in both novels, one objection—rooted in classist prejudice or religious narrow-mindedness—can justifiably be made to Darcy's and Mr. Nicholls's behaviour; the other objection grows out of excessive credulity (Elizabeth's and Charlotte's) and is proved ungrounded in both cases. The men's actual flaws and the women's unfair censure are manifestations of the various facets of pride and prejudice, and of the way these imbricate.

Neither Darcy nor Mr. Nicholls react immediately to the unexpected accusations. The former sends Elizabeth a letter that tells a very different story about Wickham: he has taken advantage of the special consideration that Darcy's father showed for him to extract money from the family, with no intention of settling down. In addition to that, he attempted to seduce Darcy's fifteen-year-old sister, Georgiana. The letter causes Elizabeth to regret her bias and her behaviour:

How despicable have I acted! . . . I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! Who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! (*Pride and Prejudice* 162)

Shortly after reading Darcy's letter, events are to confirm Wickham's true nature for Elizabeth: his elopement with her younger sister, Lydia, threatens to bring the family into disrepute, and condemn the Bennet sisters to spinsterhood and poverty.

Comparably, in James's novel, Charlotte regrets her anger against the curate when he finally reconsiders his decision not to celebrate a funeral for the unchristened baby, and when she hears from Sylvia that Bridget maliciously lied about Mr. Nicholls, whose only fault had been his honesty in confessing that he was not in love. Upon reflection, Charlotte is as mortified as Elizabeth:

How imprudently I had acted! How foolish I had been, to accept the word of some one of whom I knew so little! . . . Based on my injured pride over something he [Nicholls] had once said to me, and my distaste for his stricter religious principles, I had thought the worst of him, blindly accepting the words of a spurious, recalcitrant stranger. (290)

Charlotte's remorse results in an apology and a pleasant walk with Mr. Nicholls on the moors, which has the effect of dispelling her pride and prejudice. It would also have encouraged the curate to propose a few months later, if the bereavement caused by the successive deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne within months had not prevented it. Darcy makes his second proposal to Elizabeth during a walk, after she humbly thanks him for having decisively contributed to the resolution of the elopement crisis. Darcy has done this discreetly, in the same way as Mr. Nicholls is unobtrusively there for the Brontës through their tragedy. It is the supportiveness of the two men that endears them to Elizabeth and Charlotte. The latter, however, does not expect a proposal from Mr. Nicholls phrased in passionate terms:

I tried to tell myself I must be satisfied to be Miss Brontë's friend. I tried in vain. . . . I must say it now: I love you, Miss Brontë. I love you with all my heart and all my soul. (*Secret Diaries* 342–43)

Here James draws on another letter sent by Brontë to Nussey on 15 December 1852 (Smith 211–12). Wilks notes that this is the only existing record of Nicholls's proposal, and that it "reads as well as any episode in Charlotte Brontë's fiction" (26–27). Interestingly, as fictionalised by James, it also recalls Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth. As opposed to Austen's proud hero, Mr. Nicholls feels socially and intellectually inferior to the woman he loves. Yet his words, quoted above, are reminiscent of those addressed to Elizabeth: "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (*Pride and Prejudice* 147). Darcy's first proposal is rejected for reasons that have been discussed; Charlotte initially rejects Mr. Nicholls because of her father's bitter opposition and her own doubts. A successful second proposal arrives in both stories, similarly phrased: Darcy's "My affections and wishes are unchanged" (*Pride and Prejudice* 282), and Mr. Nicholls's "you know my feelings: they remain unchanged" (*Secret Diaries* 389).

When Elizabeth finally accepts Darcy, there is no trace of her former prejudice. Previously, her visit to Pemberley, Darcy's stately home, has been decisive in presenting an impressive and more appealing image of him: it "provides a confirming basis . . . for the alteration of Elizabeth's opinion . . . his change and her recognition of all it implies open the way to their happy union" (Anderson 380–01). Austen's heroine's perception

is influenced by the magnificence of a setting analogous with its owner and, in particular, by Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper, who sincerely praises the lord of Pemberley:

He is the best landlord, and the best master . . . that ever lived . . . There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name. Some people call him proud; but I am sure I never saw anything of it. (*Pride and Prejudice* 190–01)

In *Secret Diaries*, James's protagonist has a similar experience. The plot includes Charlotte's honeymoon, during which her last misgivings about the marriage dissipate. The visit to Cuba House, Mr. Nicholls's home in Banagher, Ireland, contributes to this effect. In writing about this episode of Brontë's biography, Beer noted the parallelism between the actual Cuba House and Pemberley: "It is ironical to see a woman who was as unlike Elizabeth Bennet as could well be, inspired by the sight of her husband's beautiful grounds at Banagher" (10). Charlotte is impressed by the house and the estate, surprised to discover that her husband's background is not only less deprived than she had imagined, but actually more privileged than hers. In fact, the actual Cuba House had a connection with the nobility, for the Earls of Rosse had traditionally been patrons of the school (the Royal School) that was part of the estate (Wilks 181–82). In a letter sent from Banagher, dated 10 July 1854, Brontë tells Margaret Wooler, her former teacher and friend, how it pleases her to hear her husband praised by the aunt who reared him and by the servants (Smith 234). As Mrs. Reynolds denied Darcy's pride, Agnes, a fictional servant in James's novel, emphasises Mr. Nicholls's integrity to Charlotte:

Yer husband is a good man, if I do say so myself, Mrs. Nicholls. I've known him since th' first day he come here—such a sweet little lad he was . . . I've never heard him speak a complaint, nor a word against anybody, nor a word that wasn't th' God's honest truth, an' ye don't often find that i' a boy—or a man. I tell ye, ma'am, ye're a most fortunate person, for that ye've got one o' th' best gentlemen i' th' country. (434)

Darcy's and Nicholls's family homes allow their best qualities to shine. Both heroines' visits to Pemberley and Banagher kindle and confirm love respectively. Charlotte and Arthur's love story, like Elizabeth and Darcy's, begins with disagreements resulting from mutual pride and prejudice. It ends with a declaration of love: Charlotte is happily married

to Arthur, as Elizabeth is to Darcy. An extradiegetic, third-person "Author's Afterword" in *Secret Diaries* describes the circumstances of Charlotte Brontë's death nine months after her wedding, and thus offers a contrast to the adaptation of events in the last decade of her life to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, which culminates in a happy ending.

3. *SECRET DIARIES* AS AN INVITATION TO RE-EXAMINE BRONTË AND AUSTEN

In presenting *Secret Diaries* as a neo-Victorian biofiction, we noted the singularity of adapting a Victorian writer's love story to the plot of a Regency classic. The choice seems puzzling if we consider that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* famously disappointed Brontë. The connection established by James, nonetheless, is an invitation to re-examine the two nineteenth-century novelists comparatively.

In James's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is discussed by the Brontë sisters. In accordance with her balanced and gentle character, Anne praises its plot and characters; Emily and Charlotte, on the other hand, find it lacking in poetry and passion. Their conversation is interspersed with phrases quoted from Brontë's letters to George Henry Lewes. The critic and novelist had reviewed *Jane Eyre* favourably, but had written to its author advising to avoid "melodrama," and to take Austen as a model. In her reply (12 Jan. 1848), after having read *Pride and Prejudice*, Brontë expresses her dislike in revealing metaphorical terms:

Why do you like Jane Austen so much? I am puzzled on that point. . . . I got the book and studied it. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a common-place face; a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers—but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy—no open country—no fresh air—no blue hill—no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses. (Smith 99)

In her next letter (18 Jan. 1848), Brontë praises neoclassical qualities in Austen's style: her "clear common sense and subtle shrewdness," the fact that "she exquisitely adapts her means to her end" (Smith 101). Nevertheless, she is still unable to share Lewes's deep admiration, and her criticism of Austen, as the above quote shows, is also a vindication of the

notions that guide her own task as a writer: inspiration, imagination, depth, sentiment, nature.

In 1859, eleven years after his correspondence with Brontë and four years after her death, Lewes published the essay “The Novels of Jane Austen.” Even though Austen is eulogised and Brontë belittled, Lewes admits “deficiencies in poetry and passion” in the former’s style and clarifies that “she has little or no sympathy with what is picturesque and passionate” (106)—curiously, his criticism has a resonance with Brontë’s. Lewes considers *Pride and Prejudice* an example of “high comedy” (112) and, malevolently, explains why Brontë failed to appreciate her predecessor’s talent: “she was utterly without a sense of humour” (107).

Although Lewes’s accusation can be proved wrong by any attentive reader, we must concede that Brontë’s novels, notwithstanding their satirical component, are less akin to the spirit of “high comedy.” As Herbert Read put it, Austen’s comedy relies on “faculties directed outwards, to the observation of things”; Brontë’s fiction, on the other hand, on “faculties directed inwards, to the observation of feeling” (182). In Kinkead-Weekes’s words, Austen’s is an “art of apartness” whose object is “the life of behaviour,” whereas Brontë concerns herself with “the individual heart and psyche . . . , the hidden and private consciousness in which one finally lives and dies, irrespective of society and one’s relative place in it” (401, 400). Brontë’s “passionate individualism” is, in a sense, the antithesis of Austen’s “perception of life as primarily social” (Kinkead-Weekes 419).

Unlike Austen, Brontë chiefly focuses on the private, individual sphere of feeling. This difference of perception also has a bearing on the two novelists’ respective depiction of love and marriage. Austen’s work shows how the politics of marriage had changed from the end of the eighteenth century, with the emergence and gradual acceptance of the “love match,” based on “the importance of rationality and judgement, companionship, sensible affection and admiration for good character,” rather than social and economic convenience (Ostrov Weisser 95). Brontë’s novels, on the other hand, are true to “the Victorian definition of romantic love,” which adds “the Romantic idea of feeling charged with sexual passion” to “the domestic virtues, affectionate intimacy and support, and suitability of temperament” (Ostrov Weisser 93, 97). By examining the social settings in which Austen’s and Brontë’s heroines live, therefore, we can trace an evolution from the marriage of convenience to the “love match” or companionate marriage (Elizabeth and Darcy, Jane

and Bingley), and then to marriage where passionate love plays an essential role (Jane and Rochester). Furthermore, Brontë's heroines tend to see marriage as the fulfilment of love, rather than a means for their financial and social survival, as we often see in Austen's world; Jane Eyre earns her living as a governess and teacher until she marries into a position of economic equality with Rochester (Beer 86, 92).

Jane Austen died one year after Charlotte Brontë's birth. In the thirty-four years that separate the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* from that of *Jane Eyre*, the Industrial Revolution had caused women to join the labour force; the "Woman Question" was becoming a dominant topic for public debate; and Romanticism had redefined love by foregrounding passion. Austen lived and wrote in the heyday of Romanticism, but her work has been considered a continuation of Restoration comedy and Augustan satire (Read 182; Kinkead-Weekes 410, 419). Deresiewicz qualifies this view by distinguishing a pre-Romantic "early phase" in Austen's oeuvre (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*), and a "major phase" (*Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*) influenced by the first wave of Romanticism (1). During the first phase, Austen's referents were Richardson, Johnson, Cowper and Burney; during the second, she had become familiar with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott and Byron (Deresiewicz 2–3). This contact caused Austen to transcend the mere marriage plot, however skilfully constructed: "Austen's encounter with the Romantics deepened her art, darkened it, made it more intuitive, ambiguous and unsettled, but also more bold and mature" (Deresiewicz 3).

We may conjecture that Brontë's opinion on Austen would have been less critical, had she read *Emma* instead of *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's first novel did not allow Brontë to recognise their confluence in a Romantic sensibility characterised by emotional complexity and intensity. They both admired Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1779) (Deresiewicz 166–67), and the Romantic authors that most influenced Brontë were also Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott and Byron (Miller 5–6). The main difference in this respect is that Romanticism coloured Austen's work in the middle of its development and more faintly, whereas Brontë received its full influence since her childhood, when her Romantic readings shaped her imagination: "It is not difficult to trace much of Charlotte's imagery to the Romantic sense of harmony in man and nature, their [the Romantics'] high valuation of imagination and imaginative freedom, and their

admiration for liberty and equality rather than authoritarianism” (Ostrov Weisser 95).

In spite of all these differences in temperament, style and socio-historical background between Brontë and Austen, James’s narrative strategy in *Secret Diaries* suggests an association between them. From the perspective of literary history and gender studies, it can be argued that they owe their canonical status to comparable achievements:

Both were of primary importance in the British literary tradition as major female novelists; both were influential in inventing the modern novel; and both situated their love stories in frames that engaged these narratives with issues of money, class and social prestige. (Ostrov Weisser 93)

James links Brontë’s biography with one of these narratives, *Pride and Prejudice*, which, ironically, the Victorian author disliked. Apart from occasionally echoing its language, James finds a suitable pattern, archetypal of romantic fiction, in Austen: negative first impressions, a process of mutual recognition including trials and tribulations, and finally the triumph of love. The sequence is compatible with the events as told by Brontë in her letters: these reflect how the differences separating her from Mr. Nicholls gradually evolved into genuine love, which recalls the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, “one of the finest in our literature,” mainly because it is so perfectly and innovatively attuned to character development (Anderson 368, 369).

Despite Brontë’s lukewarm reception of Austen’s first novel, *Secret Diaries* establishes an unexpected connection between the two authors that proves effective and suggestive. As shown in this section, this association can lead to a substantial comparison of styles and cultural contexts, differences and confluences, continuities and discontinuities.

CONCLUSIONS

The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë is an intimately autobiographical text, as its title indicates, but it reads as a linear narrative covering the last and most intense years of the protagonist’s life. James’s novel can be defined, in more specific terms, as a neo-Victorian, hagiographic celebrity biofiction; as such, it draws on various biographies, Brontë’s letters and her autobiographical novels. The use of the first person evokes the last two sources, conforms to the conventions of the diary form, and contributes to

vivid characterisation. Less predictably, *Secret Diaries* fictionalises Brontë's life drawing on a pre-Victorian classic, *Pride and Prejudice*. Accordingly, the plot and characters of Austen's novel are adapted to Brontë's love story, its language is calqued at crucial points, and letters are occasionally inserted in order to present other perspectives and clarify misunderstandings. James's narrative strategy makes her novel singular as a Brontë biofiction, while simultaneously setting it apart from "the aesthetically dubious . . . phenomenon of countless sequels to the novels of . . . Jane Austen" (Middeke 4).

James's transposition of Brontë's life in the early/mid-Victorian period to a Regency/Romantic Austenian world has other relevant implications. The narrative's retrocession and the literary connection it creates draw attention to the continuity of nineteenth-century women's writing, converging in Romanticism. Furthermore, in a biofiction that we can justly call neo-Victorian, these features contribute to widening the scope of neo-Victorianism. Seminal theoretical discussions of the field opt for "the widest possible interpretation of 'neo-Victorian', so as to include the whole of the nineteenth century" (Kohlke, "Speculations" 2) and to define "an interdisciplinary perspective that refuses to be tied to the chronological range of 1837–1901" (Llewellyn 166). The presence of Austen and her work in contemporary literature can therefore be the object of study of neo-Victorianism, just as the Brontës' lives and literature have been.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, specifically, is a particularly powerful Victorian text, discussed and revisited almost obsessively. Kaplan has compared it to Freudian mnemonic symbols, as a record of traumatic experience that causes it to be relived; *Jane Eyre* has retained its power because it deals with issues that have never ceased to be relevant to its readers: women's desires, their frustrations, their wish for independence (15, 25). *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, is "the work of an astonishingly gifted young woman," an outstanding achievement in its "conception, design and execution" (Deresiewicz 10). Although, because of its emotional transparency and the relative lightness of its tone, Austen's novel can hardly be regarded as a mnemonic symbol, contemporary readers can still relate to Elizabeth Bennet's experience of love and the gentry's

marriage market, to judge from the innumerable rewrites and adaptations in different media.⁶

Among these Austen rewrites, we can find several works by James: *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen* (2007), which preceded *Secret Diaries* and is comparable in plan and purpose; “Jane Austen’s Nightmare,” a short story included in the anthology *Jane Austen Made Me Do It* (2011); *The Missing Manuscript of Jane Austen* (2012), a combination of romance and detective fiction; and *Jane Austen’s First Love* (2014), another example of biofiction. Apart from an authentic and knowledgeable fascination with the Regency author, there seem to be obvious marketing reasons for James’s choice of subject matter. These differ from the emphasis on “a socio-economic or psycho-political truth” attributable to “authors of biofiction” (Lackey 10) and exemplifies the “repurposing of historical lives into commodities for profit and consumption” that Kohlke and Gutleben identify in certain neo-Victorian biofictions (3). In her website, James is presented as “the queen of nineteenth-century re-imaginings,” and in blurbs as “the best-selling author of *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*.” Given the nature of her previous work, it is not surprising that she resorted to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* in retelling Charlotte Brontë’s love story.

Despite its commercial orientation, *Secret Diaries* is based on a convincing connection (Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Brontë and their love stories) worth studying as a creative approach to neo-Victorian biofiction. Furthermore, James’s novel associates Brontë and Austen—two women writers of consecutive generations—beyond partial critical views and strict period divisions. Finally, it broadens the scope of Neo-Victorianism beyond Victoria’s reign and within the long nineteenth century.

REFERENCES

Adamson, Alan H. *Mr. Charlotte Brontë: The Life of Arthur Bell Nicholls*. McGill-Queen’s UP, 2008.

⁶ Rolf Breuer lists seventy-one “completions, sequels and adaptations” of *Pride and Prejudice* (“Jane Austen etc.”); the list is extensive, although it only includes works published until the 1990s. The *Wikipedia* entry “List of Literary Adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*” presents works by author and includes 159 authors.

Anderson, Walter E. "Plot, Character, Speech, and Place in *Pride and Prejudice*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1975, pp. 367–82.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Penguin, 1994.

Beer, Patricia. *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot*. MacMillan, 1974.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*, edited by Richard J. Dunn, Norton, 2001.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Shirley*, edited by Jessica Cox, Penguin, 2006.

"Brontë Biofiction Books." *Goodreads*, 2022, www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/bronte-biofiction/.

Breuer, Rolf. "Jane Austen etc. The Completions, Continuations and Adaptations of her Novels." *EESE Resources*, 2000, webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/breuer/biblio.html/.

Cottam, Rachel. "Diaries and Journals." *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, 2 vols, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, Vol. 1: A–K, pp. 267–69.

James, Syrie. *Syrie James*. AuthorBytes, 2021, syriejames.com/.

James, Syrie. *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë*. Avon/Harper Collins, 2009.

Kaplan, Cora. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Columbia UP, 2007.

Kinkead-Weekes, Mark. "This Old Maid: Jane Austen Replies to Charlotte Brontë and D. H. Lawrence." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1975, pp. 399–419.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise. "Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special/Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus*." *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2013, pp. 4–21.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise. "Speculations in and on the neo-Victorian Encounter." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–18.

- Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben. "Taking Biofictional Liberties: Tactical Games and Gambits with Nineteenth-Century Lives." *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, edited by Kohlke and Gutleben, Neo-Victorian Series 6, Brill, 2020, pp. 1–53.
- Lackey, Michael. Introduction. *Biographical Fiction: A Reader*, edited by Lackey, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 1–15.
- Lewes, George Henry. "The Novels of Jane Austen." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, no. 86, 1859, pp. 99–113.
- "List of Literary Adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 23 July 2022, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_literary_adaptations_of_Pride_and_Prejudice/.
- Llewellyn, Mark. "What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?" *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 164–85.
- Middeke, Martin. Introduction. *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, edited by Middeke and Werner Huber, Camden House, 1999, pp. 1–25.
- Miller, Lucasta. *The Brontë Myth*. Vintage, 2002.
- Novak, Julia, and Sandra Mayer. "Disparate Images: Literary Heroism and the 'Work vs. Life' Topos in Contemporary Biofictions about Victorian Authors." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, pp. 25–51.
- Ostrov Weisser, Susan. "Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, and the Meaning of Love." *Brontë Studies*, no. 31, 2006, pp. 93–100.
- Read, Herbert. *Reason and Romanticism: Essays in Literary Criticism*, Faber and Gwyer, 1926.
- Smith, Margaret, editor. *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Villegas-López, Sonia. "(Re)Tracing Charlotte Brontë's Steps: Biofiction as Memory Text in Michèle Roberts's *The Mistressclass*." *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, Neo-Victorian Series 6, Brill, 2020, pp. 294–321.

Wilks, Brian. *Charlotte in Love: The Courtship and Marriage of Charlotte Brontë*. Michael O'Mara Books, 1998.