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Oscar Wilde's Trials as a Haunting Presence: An Approach to the Role of Fantasy in Contemporary Neo-Victorian Novels Depicting Same-Sex Romance Between Men

La presencia fantasmal de los juicios de Oscar Wilde: Una aproximación al rol de la fantasía en las novelas neo-victorianas contemporáneas que representa el romance entre hombres

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Abstract: The main aim of this essay is to assess the impact of Oscar Wilde's trials on neo-Victorian representations of same-sex desire between men. Throughout the text, I argue that the consequences of Wilde's imprisonment have become a haunting presence that still pervades how male sexual dissidence is represented in neo-Victorian novels. The works examined in this essay are therefore considered differently than those which portray sapphic relationships or other forms of non-heterosexual desires. Ultimately, I argue that a new trend within neo-Victorianism, in which fantasy elements are intertwined with queer desire among men, could offer a new way of portraying same-sex desire between men; this new portrayal could be more in compliance with the political, cultural, and social agenda of neo-Victorianism. Through a brief analysis of Natasha Pulley's *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street* and a more in-depth exploration of Freya Marske's *A Marvellous Light*, I conclude that fantasy may—if the writer wishes it—allow a portrayal of queer desire that overcomes many of the traumatising and haunting obstacles which resulted from Wilde's plight.
Keywords: Neo-Victorian; Oscar Wilde; fantasy; Queer studies.

Summary: Introduction: The Labouchère Amendment. A Haunting Presence in Neo-Victorian Literature. Fantasy and the Representation of Same-Sex Desire Between Men in Contemporary Neo-Victorian Fiction. Conclusions.

Resumen: El objetivo principal de este ensayo es el de evaluar el impacto que los juicios de Oscar Wilde aún tienen sobre las representaciones del deseo homosexual entre hombres en los textos neo-victorianos. A lo largo del ensayo, desarrollo la idea de que las consecuencias del encarcelamiento de Wilde se han convertido en una especie de presencia espectral que se infiltra en la forma en la que el deseo sexualmente disidente es representado en las novelas neo-victorianas, separando así estos textos en un contexto completamente distinto al de las novelas del mismo género que representan relaciones heterosexuales o sáficas. Mi intención es demostrar la existencia de una nueva corriente dentro del neo-victorianismo que emplea elementos fantásticos en interacción con el deseo sexual y romántico entre hombres y que ofrece, de esta forma, una nueva representación de este tipo de deseo que está más en consonancia con la agenda cultural, política y social del neo-victorianismo. A través de un análisis breve de la obra *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street* de Natasha Pulley y de una exploración crítica más específica de la novela *A Marvellous Light* de Freya Marske, concluyó que lo fantástico puede—si así lo desean—ofrecer a los escritores de prosa neo-victoriana una manera de representar el deseo queer que consigue superar los efectos traumatizantes y espectrales heredados de los juicios de Wilde.
Palabras clave: Neo-Victoriano; Oscar Wilde; Fantasía; Estudios Queer
Sumario: Introducción: La Enmienda Labouchère. Una presencia espectral en la literatura neo-Victoriana. Fantasía y la representación del deseo homosexual entre hombre en la literatura contemporánea neo-Victoriana. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION: THE LABOUCHÈRE AMENDMENT

On April 26, 1895, a series of judicial proceedings concerning the Irish author and aesthete Oscar Wilde began at the Old Bailey in London. Wilde was sentenced to two years of imprisonment with hard labour, the harshest sentence that the British legal code could impose upon those found guilty of the crime of "gross indecency." In this paper, I explore whether Wilde's hugely traumatic experience acquired such power over culture and literature that it continues to haunt the neo-Victorian fictional genre. Furthermore, I explore how the recent surge in neo-Victorian novels depicting same-sex relationships between men that incorporate fantasy elements may demonstrate the direct impact of the trials' haunting on this genre. These elements may actually dissipate or exorcise some of the representational restraints that can be found in the genre's representation of male same-sex desire. Considering the fluid nature of a literary trend that has always been open to re-assessing and critically approaching the past; this new branch of novels may therefore be another milestone in neo-

Victorianism's quest to be "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4).

In other words, this essay poses two questions. Firstly, has the fear generated by Wilde's ordeal been encrypted into neo-Victorian representations of queer desire between men? Secondly, and more importantly, do fantasy elements have the potential to challenge this influence and portray this desire in a way that engages with the cultural agenda of neo-Victorianism without focusing on criminality and fear? Many late twentieth-century and contemporary texts set in the Victorian past represent loving and positive relationships between men. In asking the above questions, this paper thus examines whether neo-Victorian fantasy tales have a special potential to showcase these relationships while simultaneously engaging with other cultural concerns in a freer way than realistic novels, which are still influenced by Wilde's trials.

To achieve this aim, I follow a methodological approach in which I consider the way Queer Studies, neo-Victorianism, and fantasy interact, influence, and accommodate each other, with a special emphasis on how these three areas of academic interest may offer new ways to create and understand LGBTQ+ representation in a positive, considerate, and holistic manner. In my analysis, I focus on the representation of sexual dissidence in Natasha Pulley's *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street* and in Freya Marske's *A Marvellous Light*, and consider how this representation seems to defy the spectral presence of traumatic events which are often present in queer narratives between men.[1] I also briefly mention the many aspects in which this topic seems to interact with other issues related to gender, race, and legal history, thus indicating how the ideas presented here may offer great potential for further research.

However, before addressing these concerns, the social and cultural context of Wilde's trials must be carefully considered. Wilde's conviction was the direct result of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, specifically its eleventh section, known as the Labouchère Amendment:

> Outrages on decency. Any male person who, *in public or private* commits, or is party to the commission of or procures (a) or attempts (b) to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency (c) with

[1] This trauma is often illustrated as fear and anxiety about discovery, or shown by portraying homosexuality in an almost voyeuristic, reductive way.

> another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (48 & 49 Vic. C. 69 s. 11 qtd. in Fone 335, my emphasis,)

Although the Labouchère Amendment did not consider the death penalty for homosexual acts, its text fomented a sense of paranoia and unsafety for queer men throughout the United Kingdom (Fize 5). For the first time in Britain's legal history, the acts condemned were those committed both in public and in private, meaning that men who had sex with other men had to be wary not only of what they did in public, but also of what might happen behind closed doors. The wording of the amendment was ambiguous, so many different affective displays between men could be condemned.

The amendment's greater accomplishment, however, came not only with Wilde's imprisonment, but also with the way in which this event consolidated the already pervasive sense of fear and paranoia among queer men. After Wilde's conviction became public, masses of people congregated outside the Old Bailey to celebrate the event (Bristow 405). The decades following Wilde's trials have been described as an era "understandabl[y] rife with sexual inhibitions in the aftermath of the Wilde's trials" (Martin and Piggford 12). These times, according to Eric Haralson carried within themselves a rage "unleashed by the 1895 trials [which] sought to demonize Wilde and to purge his kind out of the system" (19). As a consequence, many men "were fearful of being publicly linked with Wilde's milieu, especially after his arrest, which produced a 'general shudder' not only among gentlemen in London (as [Henry] James reported) but throughout all of Anglo-American society" (Bristow 59). Indeed, Henry James stated in a letter to his friend Edmund Gosse: "These are days in which one's modesty is, in every direction, much exposed, and one should be thankful for every veil that one can hastily snatch up" (James 12). We can therefore assume that Wilde's imprisonment, along with the public sexual scandals that followed the amendment, became a constant presence in the minds of queer men who were always aware of the legal consequences of their sexual orientations, even years after the trial's conclusion. Furthermore, considering that the Labouchère Amendment was not completely abolished in England until the passing of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, (whereas homosexuality remained illegal in Scotland until 1980 and in Ireland until 1993), the fear induced by

Wilde's trials may still have remained encrypted in popular consciousness for almost a century. This lingering fear is addressed in the following section, and is arguably accountable for many of the points therein.

1. A Haunting Presence in Neo-Victorian Literature

Wilde's trials and the socio-cultural context surrounding them were a traumatising event for queer individuals. Considering, then, the self-evident interest of neo-Victorianism in the Victorian past, it follows that these events may appear as a ghost or spectre that haunts narratives dealing with romance and desire between men, even when they are not openly articulated or acknowledged. As Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham argue:

> the impact of the Victorian age on contemporary culture can be interpreted as a form of haunting and spectrality. The ghost's liminal existence, neither present nor absent, functions as a powerful metaphor for the dynamic relationship maintained between Victorianism and neo-Victorianism. (xxv)

In this sense, I believe that Wilde's trials and their surrounding context are an easily identifiable ghost that haunts neo-Victorianism. This is because, after all, the presence of same-sex desire between men in this literary current is neither an absence nor a presence, but something in between, something far more liminal, and contextualised by Wilde's legal misfortunes. For if "literature is permanently haunted by ghosts, revenants and spirits which travel across time and make an appearance in the form of textual/spectral traces" (Arias and Pulham xix), the neo-Victorian fiction—considering the way in which same sex desire between men is featured compared to that of sapphic desire—is definitely brimming with spectral and ominous traces. And these traces can, indeed, be better understood through the perspective of haunting conceived by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok: as a dark knowledge that conditions an individual and haunts their psyche through a process of generational trauma (17–20).

Neo-Victorianism is deeply connected to lesbian desire, romance, and identities. Of course, this literary and cultural phenomenon is vastly plural and encompasses many contemporary and historic concerns grounded in the Victorian era; as Cora Kaplan argues, neo-Victorianism perpetuates and updates Victorian concerns about "class, gender, empire and race" (5). However, it is possible to claim that some of the founding texts of this

genre are directly linked to sapphic desire and representation. Even before the term "neo-Victorian" was coined, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, a clear precursor to the genre, featured a (doomed) lesbian relationship that outlined the path followed by later contemporary novelists interested in the Victorian past. As such, we must remember that one of the founding stones of neo-Victorianism is Sarah Waters's Victorian trilogy. According to Caroline Koegler and Marlena Tronicke, the first novel within this trilogy, *Tipping the Velvet*:

> was hailed as ground-breaking . . . It not only shifted the lesbian novel away from the margins and into the mainstream of popular fiction, but also popularised a literary approach of queer writing-back to heteronormative historiography, illuminating the struggles, vibrancy, and desires of a diverse community operating in the interstices. (1)

With the ensuing publication of Waters's *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, "the cultural representation of nineteenth-century queerness . . . gained considerable momentum" regarding queer subjectivities and their potential existence in the Victorian era (Koegler and Tronicke 2–5). These novels, of course, still contain a sense of being haunted; their protagonists experience many harrowing situations (especially in *Affinity*). However, the novels portray sapphic desire in such a way that—contrary to how many texts that represent same-sex desire between men—resonates with the finer cultural expectations of neo-Victorianism, as explained below. This resonance may be unsurprising if we consider how one of the main tenets of neo-Victorian literature, as excellently argued by Linda Hutcheon, is its staging of "the nineteenth century for contemporary readers who look back into the past in search for a different view of history" (Petterson 11), and even more so for LGBTQ+ authors and readers, who, as Christopher Chitty argues, live with a "homosexual desire for history" (149).

Furthermore, the impact of Waters's works on the whole genre is clear: they have set a significant precedent for how neo-Victorian narratives of sexual dissidence imply a political and humane commitment to queer modes of living:

> Particularly when centred on queer concerns, neo-Victorianism has followed a visionary politics of resurrecting forgotten queer lives for the sake of the living. With its illumination of queer Victorian interstices, it has had much

> to offer to queer individuals, with "queer" here understood as a self-ascribed marker of gender and/or sexual positionality or identification for LGBTQIA+ persons. (Koegler and Tronicke 6)

However, while Koegler and Tronicke's article aims to explore "Neo-Victorianism's queer potentiality" (1), most of the novels examined within are connected to same-sex desire between women, showcasing the larger queer potential that has been attributed to neo-Victorian representations of sapphic desire. The reasons behind this exclusion of male same-sex desire are perhaps better understood when one considers how these novels, in contrast with other works within the genre inspired by Waters's political commitment, fail to resurrect "forgotten queer lives" in any way that is significant or relevant to contemporary queer individuals.

Contrary to the representation of sapphic relationships in neo-Victorian fiction, the genre's ability to portray sexual and romantic relationships between men seems oddly stunted from the very beginning. As Caroline Duvezin-Caubet argues regarding the role of same-sex romance between men in neo-Victorian fiction, the genre's way of dealing with sapphic romance "does not exactly map onto" the representation of male homosexual desire (245). Although Duvezin-Caubet does not expand this discussion, I argue that the divergence occurs because of the (generally) rather shallow analysis of dissident sexualities and the early instances of contemporary portrayals of same-sex desire between men in the Victorian era. She does state that "[t]he mass of published works [dealing with homosexual relationships between men set in the Victorian era] comprises some very obscure books and a lot of problematic ones, which reiterate heterosexism, queerphobia, and other forms of discrimination" (Duvezin-Caubet 243). If we consider this and contrast it with how Waters's novels and their successors engage in a "writing-back to heteronormative historiography" (Koegler and Tronicke 1), while also following a "visionary politics of resurrecting forgotten queer lives for the sake of the living" (Koegler and Tronicke 6), it is clear that the treatment of same-sex desire between men in neo-Victorian fiction has not lived up to the expectations set by other authors dealing with women and sexuality.

As Duvezin-Caubet indicates, there are many examples (often obscure) of how same-sex desire between men in neo-Victorian fiction has been not only problematic but has also failed to engage with both the political agenda of lesbian texts and with the main ideological foundations of neo-Victorianism. These foundations, identified by Ann Heilmann and

Mark Llewellyn in their now seminal *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*, can be summarised in the genre's potential and determination to represent texts that go beyond contemporary narratives set in the past but that also establish a dialogue between contemporary concerns, theories, and concepts and the Victorian past (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4–5). According to Kaplan, the neo-Victorian genre experiments with new forms and aesthetics while at the same time being "philosophical [and] political" (9). However, early examples of neo-Victorian depictions of same-sex relationships between men are better understood as catering to the erotic interests of their readers, rather than as self-conscious reinterpretations of the past and its impact on the present. These novels "wrestle with the pitfalls of representation" (Koegler and Tronicke 11) as they present tales that can be read as erotic fiction rather than as well-researched incursions into the Victorian past from a contemporary perspective. The novels written by Christ Hunt during the 1980s are a clear example of this. His novel *Street Lavender* is regarded in certain circles (as Goodreads shows) as a classic and even as a direct precedent to Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*. However, its plot poses several problematic questions that seem to run counter to the genre's spirit of political and humanitarian revision and rediscovery.

Street Lavender asks us to sympathise with the protagonist, William—a male sex worker—who sexually abuses his minor cousin. The scene, described in painstaking detail, uses erotically titillating language, and the request for empathy towards William during the rest of the novel begs the question of whom this scene is designed to cater towards. While the fourteen-year-old cousin of William repeats sentences such as "I don't like it, Willie; it hurts, it's horrible, take it out" (Hunt 115), the sixteen-year-old William answers in an abusive and violent manner: "Lie still then, else it'll hurt more" (Hunt 115). Despite this disturbing rape scene carried out by William, as readers, we are then asked to feel empathy for the protagonist throughout the remaining 200 pages of the book. In short, the novel caters to the erotic interests of an audience that seems to expect only a certain fetishisation or eroticisation of the past as a place of libidinal expression.[2]

[2] A clear example of the text's lack of self-conscious reflection between the Victorian era and its own period can be seen in how the novel avoids any mentions of sexual diseases, despite the fact that its protagonist is, as said before, a male sex worker and that it was written during the peak of the AIDS crisis.

The same seems to be true for many contemporary novels, such as Ruth Sims's *The Phoenix*, which, while dealing with some of the tropes present in Waters's trilogy—such as dramatic performances and class differences—also reads as an eroticised account of a "forbidden" relationship. The protagonist, for instance, constantly thinks about both the legal and religious consequences of his sexual orientation, in a way that is full of guilt and consistently suggests condemnation: "Nick's lust was replaced by fear. '*One of my kind.*' Hugh had said the same thing. If St. Denys and Hugh could recognize his demon so did God" (Sims 94, original emphasis). Both these novels, then, fit in the group of neo-Victorian novels that Koegler and Tronicke have identified as "reactionary exoticisations of sexual deviance" that do little more than "cater to the expectations of white conservative audiences regarding queer obscenity, or overlap with imperial fantasies of racialisation and miscegenation" (Koegler and Tronicke 11). In other words, Sims's novel, and Hunt's entire historical fiction, can stand as representatives of a way of portraying same-sex desire between men that is more concerned with their potential readers' interests in an exoticised sense of white eroticism. This entails a failure to represent a form of queerness that could be read as a "writing-back to heteronormative historiography" (Koegler and Tronicke 1) because, as Duvezin-Caubet argues, these texts "reiterate heterosexism, queerphobia, and other forms of discrimination" (243). It is possible to assume, thus, that these texts fall short of the "philosophical" and "political" status of neo-Victorianism defended by Kaplan, Heilmann, and Llewellyn, while also failing to stage the past for those who are searching "for a different [homosexual] view of history" (Kaplan 9; Petterson 11). In fact, and whilst they may engage in "discovering the dark underbelly of Victorian respectability" with which, according to Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, neo-Victorian texts are concerned, this type of novel also overlooks the contemporary "equal rights claim" that is shared by many sapphic novels within the genre (Kohlke and Gutleben 15).[3]

These are just two examples of the "obscure" and "problematic" novels that, according to Duvezin-Caubet, conform the genealogy of neo-

[3] For instance, Georges Letissier makes a compelling case on how Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* challenge patriarchal assumptions through the creation of queer (sapphic) families. Other novels, such as Emma Donogue's *Frog Music*, or Sara Collins's *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*, perpetuate these challenges, that could be traced back to one of the first published neo-Victorian narratives involving sapphic love: Isabel Miller's *Patience & Sarah*.

Victorian representations of same-sex love and desire between men (243). Queer sexualities in men are neither an absence, because there are novels that deal with them, nor a presence, as these novels fall dramatically short of both the reflexive and political stances taken in the representation of lesbian desire within the genre. They constitute, thus, a kind of spectre, of haunting presence as defined by Abraham and Torok, as explained below. The novels which consider queer sexuality in men limit themselves to presenting erotic situations that do not question the *status-quo* of Victorian traditions. The following questions are therefore raised: Why is there such a significant difference between how male and female same-sex desire has been portrayed in neo-Victorian fiction? Secondly, why does male homosexuality have a spectral status in this genre? The reason, I argue, may be found precisely in the way Wilde's trials still haunt our collective memory. While queer women were, according to Terry Castle, rarely openly acknowledged in the Victorian era (5)—resulting in "limited scientific effort to define lesbianism" (Vicinus 71)—Wilde's trials and their surrounding socio-legal context put male queerness under heavy scrutiny during this period. Indeed, the Labouchère Amendment was not modified to include same-sex acts between women until 1921, while, as noted before, Wilde's experience became a traumatic one that strongly linked male homosexuality with legal discourses and judicial punishments.

This transgenerational traumatic experience can be better understood when examined using the concepts of the crypt and the phantom as defined by Abraham and Torok. They suggest that the "crypt," when applied to both psychoanalysis and literature, represents a psychic tomb "arising from . . . inassimilable life experiences," whereas the "phantom" is "the unwitting reception of a secret which was someone else's psychic burden" (Abraham and Torok 19). I argue that the kind of haunting that Wilde's trials entail is a mixture of both concepts.

On the one hand, same-sex desire between men had to become cryptic for fear of both the Labouchère Amendment and Wilde's conviction. As Henry James's previously quoted letter shows, the experiences lived by Wilde and by others under this harsh law were regarded as "inassimilable life experience" in as much as they promoted a sense of unsafety even in private, and a clear reminder of the punishment that queer men could fear if they were caught. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that James, who has been related to queerness himself on numerous occasions, suggested to Gosse the necessity to "hastily snatch up" as many "veil[s]"

as possible (James 12).[4] However, this experience is also phantasmagorical in as much as it was, undoubtedly, transmitted beyond the period of its occurrence. Even if only Wilde and the other men directly affected by the Amendment had carried the "psychic burden" of the affective and vital consequences of their convictions, this psychic burden was, undoubtably, received unwittingly by those who contemplated it and felt a sense of affinity with the victims. Considering that "[t]he phantom that returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other" (Abraham and Torok 175), we could say that the fear that Wilde's situation inspired in others can be interpreted as a dead buried within the collective memory of queer men, and that its haunting of neo-Victorian fiction bears witness to his suffering.

Indeed, this phantasmagorical and cryptic haunting of Wilde's trials is arguably one reason for the different approaches to same-sex desire between men and women within neo-Victorianism. The traumatic implications of male homosexual love and sex during the nineteenth century—still alive through the buried memory of Wilde's trials and the lengthy process of revoking the Labouchère Amendment—are one of the reasons why novels, such as those written by Hunt and Sims, refuse to revisit, reinterpret, or rediscover the Victorian past in a way that is meaningful, political, or that illuminates the interstices of queer experience. The collective haunting of the atmosphere of fear surrounding same-sex relationships between men during the Victorian era makes it difficult for contemporary authors to approach this topic without engaging with the legal and medical discourses of the period, which would inevitably restrict the ways in which these authors can explore male homosexuality.

This does not mean that there are no neo-Victorian novels in which same-sex desire between men is not represented thoughtfully. Texts such as Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and *The Magician*, or Louis Edward's *Oscar*

[4] There is an ongoing debate regarding James's own sexuality. This debate, however, tends to be rather unproductive as the author's novels and letters can be interpreted from many different angles. However, there is an academic consensus that relates James's life and works with queerness (Haralson 27). Studies such as Hugh Stevens's *Henry James and Sexuality* or Eric Haralson's *Henry James and Queer Modernity*, for instance, claim that the author's texts are an integral part of queer history (Stevens 1–2). What is most pertinent in this case is to understand that regardless of his sexuality, James contributed to the queer circles of his time, just as he keeps contributing to the field of Queer studies thanks to his ambiguous and experimental prose.

Wilde Discovers America, to name but three, engage with the Victorian past while still highlighting contemporary concerns for queer men. However, these works, albeit more complex and much less problematic than the ones by Sims and Hunt, still carry some legal-related fears and concerns that seem to have been avoided by the neo-Victorian fantasy novels analysed below. In this sense, I am more concerned with how the alliance between fantasy and neo-Victorian fiction can facilitate a thought-provoking and culturally engaging representation of same-sex desire between men that re-signifies the haunting potential of Wilde's experience. In other words, the negative outcome of Wilde's trials and the social anxiety it generated in later years complicates the potential ways in which contemporary authors can engage in depictions of homosexual love between men without also simultaneously engaging, at the same time, with negative and legal consequences that leave no space for hope or for developing characters in different contexts unrelated to hiding and fear. This does not justify, of course, the eroticisation and the exoticisation of the past that these novels represent, but it can explain why the development of the representation of queer love between men has been so stunted in neo-Victorian literature compared to the representation of sapphic relationships. However, and as Allan Lloyd Smith argues, the hauntings of the past encrypted within our own selves vastly, and silently, condition our identities (294), which explains the recurring presence of traumatic experiences in neo-Victorian queer representations of desire between men. It is admittedly difficult to illuminate the interstices of queer experience and to approach a specific topic from a political perspective when criminality, unresolved trauma, and the collective memory of the people these novels ought to deal with are being phantasmagorically haunted by the burden of those who suffered under Labouchère's Amendment.

2. Fantasy and the Representation of Same-Sex Desire Between Men in Contemporary Neo-Victorian Fiction

Despite all previous considerations, I would like to draw attention towards a new trend within neo-Victorian literature that seems to treat same-sex romances and desire between queer men in a rather different light. In the last ten years, a group of novels set in the long nineteenth-century depicting same-sex love between men have been published, setting sales records and receiving major public attention. These novels differ from previously mentioned examples of the same kind of text in that they mix

the Victorian past with fantasy elements. They also engage with the Victorian past in a more profound, political, and self-conscious manner than their predecessors. This is not surprising if we consider Irina Golovacheva's argument that despite being a generally neglected genre, fantasy possesses a "cross-genre nature" that does not seek to completely obliterate what we consider real but, rather, to disrupt it through the "irruption of the inadmissible" (Golovacheva 63). Recent novels by British and Australian female authors such as Natasha Pulley's *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street*, and Freya Marske's *A Marvellous Light* represent sexual and romantic interactions between men in the Victorian era with an added element of fantasy. These fantasy elements substitute the traumatising context of Wilde's trials by creating alternatively—magical or otherwise—ways for characters to explore their sexual identities while being able to mock, disrupt, or ignore the Labouchère Amendment and its ominous social consequences. More importantly, these novels approach other issues, such as class, race, or education, from a more innovative perspective, and simultaneously establish narratives that elude the extreme eroticisation of their characters.

Notably, the novels I consider here have all been written by women. A more in-depth analysis of the relationship between gender and queer desire would be, without a doubt, both illuminating and conducive to new, revealing conclusions for those researching the representation of same-sex desire in neo-Victorian fiction. Why do women write fantasy queer novels set in the Victorian era that engage with neo-Victorianism's interest in the present? Does this imply that Wilde's trials have affected literature written by men differently from how it has affected women? These topics could constitute extremely interesting avenues of research for those who wish to explore neo-Victorian fiction and queer desire. In this instance, however, I am more interested in finding out how the use of fantasy in these novels can lead to new ways to represent queer desire between men in the genre.

The use of fantasy to articulate male same-sex desire is not exclusively a neo-Victorian phenomenon. A number of Victorian texts have already connected fantasy and queerness in ways that have been widely discussed by many scholars through the years.[5] Wilde himself

[5] For a more exhaustive understanding of the connection between fantasy, the Gothic, and dissident sexualities in the Victorian era, the reader should direct their attention to Ardel Haefele-Thomas's *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic*, and their brilliantly edited volume *Queer Gothic*.

famously encoded this desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a tale whose supernatural elements seem intrinsically entangled in the homoerotic tensions within the plot. In addition, many other scholars have read sublimated sexual desire in the narratives of other late Victorian fantasies/Gothic fictions, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *The Curious Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Additionally, while late Victorian Gothic, with its array of fantasy elements, certainly shows an encoded "sympathy" or affinity with the queer (Haefele-Thomas 4), its neo-Victorian counterpart (or, rather, evolution), does not only display this same affinity, it also more openly discusses same-sex desire between men, facilitating these novels' engagement with other neo-Victorian cultural concerns.

The relevance of the connection between neo-Victorian revision, fantasy, and same-sex relationships between men is better understood if we look closely at the state of what Duvezin-Caubet calls "M[ale]/M[ale] genre romance" (242) in contemporary neo-Victorianism. In her article "Gaily Ever After: Neo-Victorian M/M Genre Romance for the Twenty-First Century," Duvezin-Caubet focuses on neo-Victorian novels that represent "a central love story between two male characters and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (243). She bases her research on a series of novels written by two female authors, K.J. Charles and Cat Sebastian, arguing that "the selected books are representative of what the subgenre can do in terms of raising up marginalised voices and building a fictional past of joyful queerness from a popular perspective" (Duvezin-Caubet 243) and stating that these novels' "happy endings" constitute a "Gaily Ever After" effect that can be deeply healing to contemporary audiences (Duvezin-Caubet 244). While I do agree with Duvezin-Caubet's assessment of these authors' works and the narrative, self-awareness, and historical growth they represent in contrast with earlier instances of texts that deal with same-sex love between men set in the Victorian era, I also believe that Charles's and Sebastian's (non-fantasy) novels are still influenced by the haunting presence of Wilde's trials and the law.

Even if many of these novels are set before the Labouchère amendment was passed, it must be noted that its protagonists "are much more careful than most heterosexual romance protagonists, and that the threat of exposure never completely disappears" (Duvezin-Caubet 253). What this implies is that these authors have incorporated the phantasmagorical impact of the amendment and are writing about the long

nineteenth century while also remembering a very specific set of laws that would not necessarily be active at the moment the narrative is set. Despite the obvious dangers that same-sex relationships between men entailed all throughout the Victorian era, the constant fear of the sexually private becoming publicly exposed, which constitutes almost invariably the central trope of Charles's and Sebastian's texts, belongs more clearly to the aftermath of the amendment's passing. In other words, even if there is a new set of writers dealing with queer desire between men in a neo-Victorian context, their representational strategies are still quite haunted by the Labouchère Amendment and Wilde's trials, in as much as the central issue in their plots is the fear of the private becoming public. However, when fantasy is added to the formula, this kind of novel seems to provide further insight into the interstices of the complex relationship between queerness, the present, and the past.

While we may agree that

> [t]he affective focus of the romance genre can go a long way towards depicting the inner lives of characters who are marginalised in different ways, as long as the authors do their research and get help from sensitivity readers to avoid harmful tropes. (Duvezin-Caubet 258)

the phantasmagorical presence of the fear of discovery and legal punishment is hardly conducive to a profound exploration of Victorian queer identities in relation to the present. In this sense, fantasy provides authors with the chance to explore sexuality in its relation to other issues more freely, without Wilde's conviction acting as a constant reminder of the danger that was imperative during the period. Rosemary Jackson, for instance, defends the idea that the fantastic provides authors with a way to look at reality more closely. As fantasy represents "the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent" (Jackson 4), it allows a clearer view of both the present and the past. Fantasy can therefore be considered as an exorcising agent that articulates that which has become cryptic or entombed within an individual's—or a whole society's—memory.

In the case of Wilde's trials and their haunting potential, this means that the fantastic can break the phantasmagorical presence of this trauma by exposing it and moving beyond its constricting implications, and thus articulating ways in which it can be left behind. If, after all, Wilde's trials act as some sort of negative haunting presence that conditions the

representation of same-sex desire between men in a considerable number of neo-Victorian texts, fantasy can be said to have the potential to subvert its entombed traumatic trace into a more complex kind of haunting, one to which neo-Victorian narratives can talk back or reinterpret in order to show readers different approaches to queer affection. Furthermore, fantasy can depict the inner lives of those who have been mostly represented as erotic agents of fear and social dispossession because it allows harmful tropes to be sidestepped in favour of a more nuanced analysis of the psyche of the characters that are still deeply embedded in the real world without necessarily following its rules. As Roger Caillois states, in fantastic narratives,

> the intrusion of the strange does not lead to the replacement of the naturalistic world by a totally different one where there is nothing but miracles. The established and acknowledged order of things, its regularity, is transformed by the irruption of the inadmissible. (349)

In other words, neo-Victorian texts that incorporate fantastic elements can both faithfully reflect the peculiarities of the era and allow for the incorporation of "the inadmissible," that is, those occurrences that—whether magical or not—allow the characters to engage with their own identities in more profound ways. In this sense, fantasy allows for the exorcisation of those "secret[s] which w[ere] someone else's psychic burden" (Abraham and Torok 19) because it allows for the inadmissible to happen. The inherited fear produced by Wilde's trials is expelled from the narrative by the presence of certain elements that, in a way, unburden the protagonists of the weight of the real-life potential and legal consequences of their sexual and romantic identities.

A clear example of this and of the way in which contemporary fantastic neo-Victorianism deals with same-sex relationships between men in a more self-conscious, reflexive, and intersectional way than its non-fantasy counterpart, can clearly be seen in Pulley's *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street*. The novel tells the story of a British civil servant, Thaniel Steepleton, and of a Japanese watchmaker, Keita Mori. Set in 1883,[6]

[6] Even if the novel is set before the actual passing of Labouchère's Amendment, we must take into consideration that it has been written in the Twenty-first Century. This means that despite its taking place before the Amendment's passing, the novel is affected by the author's consciousness of both its approval and of the dangers of being queer in the Victorian era, even if Wilde's trials have yet to take place in the novel's plotline.

Pulley's text deals with both the evolving romantic relationship between the two characters and with the clash between Japanese and Victorian culture at the height of British imperialism. Mori's clairvoyance and unusual technological skills provide the narrative's fantastic element. These skills become morally suspicious to the other characters in the novel, who otherwise mostly ignore the legal consequences of Steepleton and Mori's desire for each other. In fact, Thaniel's fiancée, Grace, is almost unconcerned about her intended's growing relationship with Mori, but she becomes aggressively unsympathetic towards him when she learns about his fantastic otherness, convinced that, due to his clairvoyance, he has the power to manipulate others to mistrust her: "I don't think you'll make any real choices until you're away from him" (Pulley 246). Furthermore, she continues to link Mori to the bombing of Scotland Yard, the opening engine of the text (Pulley 246). Even Mori's fellow countrymen grow suspicious of him—not because of his sexual orientation, which is hinted at in the first part of the novel—but because of his powers (Pulley 255, 274).

Finally, Thaniel and Mori's growing confidence and romantic feelings toward each other achieve two different purposes. First, it depicts a relationship between men in which, unlike most previous examples of neo-Victorian representations of same-sex desire between men, neither character is described in erotic terms. Instead, Thaniel and Mori's love seems to be based on a deep understanding of the other's personality, as Thaniel comes to realise Mori's deep humanity despite his otherness: "[n]o one asked [Mori] if he wanted anything or if he was all right. It was Mori who asked those things" (Pulley 274). Their feelings are also used to portray a queer relationship free of moral prejudice, which allows readers to reflect on the complex racial relationships between Victorian England and Japan. For example, Thaniel comes to realise the many outrages committed by Britain against Japan, such as the 1856 bombing of Canton (Pulley 192). Also, Mori introduces him to Japanese culture by guiding him through a decorative Japanese villa built in London to promote Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *The Mikado*.[7] Furthermore, Thaniel, originally a pianist, manages to find work in this musical production through Mori's

[7] Gilbert and Sullivan's original musical is a rather racist and exoticized representation of Japan created to cater to a Victorian, white, and imperialist sense of humour. In the novel, however, Pulley reimagines *The Mikado* as a well-intended effort by the British government to establish better relationships with Japan (Pulley 207–09).

intervention (Pulley 192–200). In this sense, the fantasy elements within the narrative exorcises the haunting of Labouchère's Amendment by shifting the focus from the punitive and legal consequences of same-sex desire to other aspects that have scarcely been depicted in neo-Victorian representations of love between men. This is because fantasy orientates the readers, mostly, towards issues of race and otherness, thus exploring an interstice of queer experience that is usually forgotten in this genre of novel. It downplays the legal aspects of the period to enhance the otherness produced by clairvoyance, thus effectively re-thinking Victorian dissident sexualities. *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street* can be said to represent the opposite of Koegler and Tronicke's idea that many queer neo-Victorian texts are

> reactionary exoticisations of sexual "deviance" that do little more than cater to the expectations of white conservative audiences regarding queer obscenity, or overlap with imperial fantasies of racialisation and miscegenation. (Koegler and Tronicke 11)

Thus, in this specific case, fantasy allows the real-life haunting of the Labouchère Amendment in the lives of queer men during that period to be downplayed, propelling the narrative into a more nuanced account of same-sex love. In its place, fantasy lends the narrative the ability to focus on other aspects of same-sex relationships that were often overlooked in previous neo-Victorian depictions of these relationships: race, class, and the dynamics of imperialism. As Mark Fabrizi states: "[o]ne of the most interesting aspects of fantasy literature is that it tends to ask the 'big' questions of life . . . the role of the individual in society, and the importance of cultural diversity" (1). In other words, this implies that the phantasmagorical, cryptical fear caused by the law in the aftermath of Wilde's trials is somehow exorcised by fantasy's ability to overlook certain aspects of reality and focus, instead, on other aspects that are more in accordance with the agenda of neo-Victorian studies and literature. Thaniel and Mori are protected by Mori's divination abilities from being arrested or condemned, opening a new field of racial and imperial exploration. The author then conjures up an in-depth exploration of the clash of two different cultures on the cusp of Victorian imperialism instead of focusing on the dangers of the character's love story or on creating "reactionary exoticisations of sexual 'deviance'" (Koegler and Tronicke 11).

Following this narrative intersection of the neo-Victorian and fantasy genres, Marske's *A Marvellous Light* offers yet another, more nuanced example of how productive this combination can be. Throughout the book, the anxious atmosphere surrounding queer men after Wilde's trials is acknowledged. The novel, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, articulates these fears through one of its protagonists, Robin, a non-magical baronet who finds himself acting as a government liaison to England's magical population. After meeting Edwin, a magician, and starting a relationship with him, magic—the fantasy element within this novel—acts, once again, as an exorcising element that allows the protagonists to investigate their identities and configure their relationship without being in constant fear or having to hide behind a veil.

However, because Marske's novel openly articulates the atmosphere of fear and anxiety that haunted queer men after Wilde's conviction, when Robin discovers that magicians talk openly about their sexual orientations, he states the following: "It was unthinkable. Nobody would confess offhandedly to that particular crime in front of a complete stranger" (Marske 54). His incomprehension is, in fact, justified by a direct mention of Wilde's conviction, contemplating how despite the passing of several years "since Wilde's trial, . . . one still had to face the possibility of being pulled up before a jury, and considering oneself lucky if the charge was merely *gross indecency and not buggery*" (Marske 151, original emphasis). The fantasy element in the text soon begins to act as an agent that liberates Robin from Wilde's phantom. As magical society proves more sexually aware and open-minded, offering its members protection against ordinary British law, Robin and Edwin's relationship is inspected through a lens that pays attention to the problems that establishing such a relationship would entail in a complex context, rather than focusing on the potential legal consequences. In fact, when Robin argues that he had never before thought about establishing a romantic relationship with someone, he claims that this is because "[f]or men like them, only the impossible was absolutely safe" (Marske 235). Of course, magic—being, indeed, the *impossible*—offers safety and an escape from criminal concerns, just as the other impossible, or fantasy, elements do in the other novels explored here.

Once Robin discovers that he can feel safe with Edwin, the novel undertakes a serious analysis of the complexities of establishing a relationship with another man in a time when there are no patterns or almost no models for doing so. Robin lacks the vocabulary for defining

such a relationship: "It's never been someone in particular, for me. I mean to say—at university, there were a few fellows. But all my encounters were, ah. Well. It was understood that there were limits" (Marske 150). As the plot unfolds, he begins to consider how to define his own relationship in terms that are not conditioned by fear:

> Should Robin simply ask if what had happened between them could happen again, or if it could even be the start of . . . what? Robin's mind was trying to fit itself around an unfamiliar shape, an implausible future . . . All he knew was that he didn't want to let this slide beneath the surface of their tentative friendship as though it had never happened. (Marske 212, my emphasis)

Finally, in an echo of Sarah Waters, Robin decides that what they share is a powerful "affinity" that can be the basis for building a strong relationship together (Marske 232). The unfamiliar shape of their affinity and the ways in which it could translate into a real-life project together becomes, thus, the main focus of the novel, and the concerns surrounding Wilde consequently disappear.

Furthermore, the novel's ending can be read as an echo of how the haunting of the legal world is definitively exorcised from the narrative. Ultimately, the protagonists are being blackmailed by Edwin's manipulative older brother. While they are being blackmailed over a coveted magical artefact as opposed to their sexuality, the act can be easily correlated with the blackmailing craze that the Labouchère Amendment generated in the decade following the trials (Bristow 17–20). Robin and Edwin come together, however, to defy their blackmailer and succeed, as they both are motivated by the possibilities of "[f]reedom. Safety. And a chance [to be together]" (Marske 348). In this sense, and as indicated before, the novel manages to establish a dialogue between the Victorian reality of fear of queer relationships among men while also delving into a revision of the period by exploring the many ways in which potential homosexual relationships between men in this era struggled with a lack of vocabulary and the challenge of establishing their own norms and priorities without any previous patterns. In terms of Abraham and Torok's theory of haunting through the crypt, this entails a process of "introjection," an exorcism of intergenerational trauma that takes place when the haunted subject expands their potential "to open onto [their] own emerging desires and feelings as well as the external world" (Raid 100).

Marske's novel perfectly illustrates Nathan Fredrickson's idea that fantasy "allows one to approach the perspective of the other both in safety and yet with vulnerability" (58). While Marske does not shy away from portraying the difficulties of maintaining same-sex relationships in the aftermath of Wilde's trials (as seen in Marske 151), her novel ultimately exorcises these fears by creating a magical community that not only accepts queerness but whose magic protects her protagonists from the realities of the Labouchère Amendment. Robin's fears, thus, become more focused on the investigation and the naming and discovery of new affective and sexual categories, than on the phantasmagorical presence of the law and its consequences. In this sense, fantasy allows the narrative to form new patterns for exploring sexuality and even for the appearance of hope as the offer of a potential future in which being together is possible for the characters. This, of course, has the potential to assuage contemporary concerns related to queerness by anchoring them in a history that offers a positive representation of queer communities. In consonance with Sarah Waters's novels, thus, the text becomes a liberating negotiation of same-sex affection that replicates the political and cultural interest in exploration and re-evaluation typical of the neo-Victorian genre. By embracing other cultural concerns beyond the stereotypical fears of discovery and the law, these texts manage to re-signify the spectral traces of Wilde's trials, and what could previously be conceived as a haunting presence that generates fear and anxiety becomes, instead, a connection between Victorian and neo-Victorian literatures with which authors can establish a far more complex dialogue. Furthermore, and if we accept Lin Petterson's claim that "neo-Victorianism considers not only how we relate to the Victorians, but also how the Victorian retroactively establishes a relationship with us" (12), we can state that these novels successfully manage to connect contemporary concerns and the past in a way that is open to new interpretations away from the haunting presence of Wilde's trials.

Despite featuring different periods in the nineteenth century and different types of magical elements, these two novels use fantasy as a means to deal with the phantasmagorical, haunting presence of Wilde's trials and the surrounding context of fear and paranoia produced by the Labouchère Amendment of 1885. They both share, however, one important feature: a "self-conscious . . . revisionary capacity" that challenges "collective cultural experiences" (such as the potential haunting of Wilde's trials) and confronts contemporary readers with them

(Heilmann and Llewellyn 245). These novels, thus, fit in the "political" criterion assigned to neo-Victorianism by Cora Kaplan, in as much as they seem to conform to neo-Victorianism's interest in "elective non-heteronormative families [and in the contemporary] climate of growing public debate about the appropriate treatment of same-sex relationships by the law" (Kohlke and Gutleben 15). Notably, as these two texts illustrate, the neo-Victorian agenda and contemporary fantasy have more in common than may appear at first glance:

> [C]ontemporary fantasy authors have been some of the most adventurous and experimental in pushing the boundaries of categories like gender, sexuality, and even the bounds of human nature, again giving a voice to the silenced and representations of empowerment to the oppressed. (Fredrickson 58)

Writing about new relational patterns, social class, and racial status in novels that were frequently known for their exoticisation and eroticisation of its characters—that is, previous examples of neo-Victorian take on same-sex romance between men—through fantasy constitutes, thus, an important development within the field of neo-Victorian studies that should be carefully considered.

CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to draw conclusions about a phenomenon that is not only still being currently developed, but whose continuity is also by no means ensured. If neo-Victorianism is characterised by something, it is by its mutability and its ability to adapt, interrogate, and present itself in new forms and styles. Despite this, the two novels briefly explored in this paper suggest that the combination of neo-Victorian depictions of same-sex desire between men and fantasy could lead to a productive and liberating path in which fear, anguish, and anxiety about legal consequences are downplayed in favour of exploring the different interstices of queer identities in the Victorian era and their relationship with contemporary culture.

Considering Dana Shiller's claim that "the past comes to us in textualized forms, what we are left with is a proliferation of possible 'truths,' some more persuasive than others" (556), we could argue that the combination of fantasy and neo-Victorian narratives of same-sex desire

between men textualise a persuasive truth about the many cultural and contemporary aspects entwined in this desire while simultaneously grounding them in history. Thus, the novels presented here deal with rather different issues: race, power, the social imbalance between lovers, and the need to imagine a space that allows for the socially forbidden. However, they have something in common, because their use of fantasy as an enabler to deal with these issues creates a sharp separation between them and other examples of the neo-Victorian genre. In achieving this separation from previous popular eroticised and white narratives of same-sex desire between men, these novels fit in Koegler and Tronicke's ideas of how the treatment of queerness in neo-Victorian fiction can lead to a "writing-back to heteronormative historiography" (1). Furthermore, these novels also fit within the "visionary politics of resurrecting forgotten queer lives for the sake of the living" (Koegler and Tronicke 6). Even if fantasy may seem like a deterrent to exploring reality in depth, its usage in these texts shows that fantasy may be politically useful as it permits contemporary members of the LGBTQIA+ community to see their struggles reflected in the past; and this may help them realise the many issues that still constitute a point of struggle within the community beyond legal questions.[8]

What this fantasisation of neo-Victorian portrayals of love and desire between men entails, thus, is a repositioning of Wilde's trials as a haunting presence in queer literature and culture. The phantom, the inextricable and personal realisation that one's sexuality may be dangerous or something to fear, was instilled in several generations of queer men by Wilde's conviction and the Labouchère Amendment. In these novels, that phantom is exorcised through fantasy, in as much as it appears not as an overbearing and all-encompassing presence dictating the narrative, but rather as a contextual framework which the characters can subvert or ignore. Ultimately, returning to Arias and Pulham's ideas about haunting and spectrality in neo-Victorian fiction, Wilde's "ghost" will always be an important part of the relationship between Victorianism and neo-Victorianism (xix), but these texts demonstrate that there is not a unique way of dealing with ghosts. Much fear and anguish can be extracted from Wilde's experience, and these feelings might continue to appear in neo-Victorian narrations of same-sex love; however, Wilde, with his immense

[8] Complementarily, there are already some studies that address how science fiction has been used to explore contemporary concerns. For more on this, the reader is advised to consult the works of Ursula K. Le Guin or John Rieder.

imagination and aesthetic creativity, might have welcomed fantasy—as he in fact did in many of his stories and texts—as a liberating factor that can shed new light on how we think about Victorianism and queerness.

My approach has focused on the importance of reconsidering the role that fantasy can play in contemporary neo-Victorian fiction which portrays same-sex desire between men. The novels I address here have been written by women, an interesting fact that demands careful research in and of itself. The way in which Wilde's trials are still felt in other cultural products may also be of interest to scholars invested in neo-Victorianism, as its spectre is an intermittent presence in contemporary media. Notably, the relationship between contemporary homoerotic fantasy and the Gothic (as an element mostly associated with Otherness in Victorian fiction) is also undoubtedly at play in some of the thoughts I have developed here.

In the future, however, there may be other novels that follow this pattern, which effectively mixes queerness and fantasy in neo-Victorian texts, but there may also be those that do so without the same effect, for different reasons, or without actually engaging in a revision or reassessment of the Victorian era. Be that as it may, I would like to conclude this paper by pointing out that these novels are worthy of studying since they allow us to better understand how an event that took place more than a hundred and twenty years ago can still influence our way of representing queerness in literature.

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