



Dead Husbands and Deviant Women: Investigating the Detective Widow in Neo-Victorian Crime Fiction

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Abstract. Over the past decade, the detective widow has become a well-established character in the little-explored subgenre of neo-Victorian crime fiction. In Tasha Alexander's *Lady Emily* series, the author argues, the detective widow investigates the gendered characteristics and complexities of Victorian widowhood while detecting the artistic crimes associated with historical fiction's imitations and adaptations of the past.

In outlining the scope of the academic journal *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Marie-Luise Kohlke describes neo-Victorianism as “the contemporary fascination with reimagining the nineteenth century and its varied literary, artistic, socio-political and historical contexts”; this fascination is “perhaps most evident in the proliferation of so-called neo-Victorian novels” (“Aims and Scopes”). Fictional revisitings of the nineteenth century by authors such as A. S. Byatt, Michel Faber, Amitav Ghosh, and Sarah Waters have topped bestseller lists and have begun to form part of a neo-Victorian canon that, since the turn of the new millennium, has begun to receive significant critical attention.¹ Despite this burgeoning academic interest in literary manifestations of the neo-Victorian, however, critics have largely neglected neo-Victorian crime fiction.² This essay considers the significance of one particularly striking feature of recent examples in the subgenre: the figure of the detective widow. A dilettante sleuth, this character strives to break, or at least occasionally transgress, the boundaries of respectable femininity, not only through her investigative association with the crimes of others but also through her own deviant (if not criminal) intellectual pursuits (usually in the form of certain reading and/or writing activities) as well as her partial disregard for mourning customs and other matters of social etiquette. This figure, who usu-

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ally is from the upper echelons of society, has become the trademark heroine of at least three popular neo-Victorian crime series.³ This essay focuses on one set of novels in particular that prove especially resourceful in their combination of the historical and cultural significance of the widow and the female detective: Tasha Alexander's *Lady Emily* mysteries (2005–present; see figure 1).

To date, Alexander's series consists of six novels in which the heroine, Lady Emily Ashton, investigates a range of crimes both domestic and political, in England and abroad. Emily is the young, aristocratic widow of Viscount Philip Ashton, whom she married primarily to escape the matchmaking of her influential mother, Lady Bromley, a society matron who is a former lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria. The dashing Colin Hargreaves, Philip's best friend and, by the end of the first novel, a romantic interest of Emily's, is her co-detective as well as a diplomat and investigator for the Crown. *And Only to Deceive* (2005), the first novel in the series and the most significant within the scope of this essay, centers on Philip's death and his involvement in the forgery of ancient artifacts, primarily involving the Greco-Roman galleries of the British Museum. In subsequent installments, the nature of the crimes faced by Emily shifts and diversifies, ranging from the realm of the home and the museum to the political arena. Emily's cases include a dubious Frenchman's attempt to overturn the French government and re-establish the monarchy (*A Poisoned Season*, 2007); the anarchist forces, political ploys, and suicides of 1890s Vienna (*A Fatal Waltz*, 2008); a murder in the sultan's harem in Constantinople (*Tears of Pearl*, 2009); and killings in Normandy that resemble those of Jack the Ripper across the Channel (*Dangerous to Know*, 2010).

In Emily, Alexander merges two figures—the female detective and the widow—whose roles and representations in mid- and late-Victorian literature, art, and culture signified their dangerous potential to uphold as well as disrupt traditional gender conventions. The

widow remained respectable because, unlike the spinster, she once had occupied the role of wife (Jalland 231). At the same time, however, she also posed a threat through her sexual experience, availability, and—if her late husband had provided adequate means—status as a property-owning woman of independent means without a male guardian. Similarly, through their investigative pursuits, female detectives such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Eleanor Vane (*Eleanor's Victory*, 1863) and Margaret Dunbar (*Henry Dunbar*, 1864) or William Stephens Hayward's Mrs. Paschal (*Revelations of a Lady Detective*, 1864) could police the moral and social boundaries of the middle and upper classes at the same time as transgressing them (Bredesen 20). The New Woman detectives of the fin de siècle such as Catherine Louisa Pirkis's Loveday Brooke finally “evolved out of and in response to the com-



Figure 1. Author Tasha Alexander by Jerry Bauer. Photograph courtesy of the author.

plexities and contradictions of the normative cultural constructions of women” — in other words, their threat lay in their defiance of definition (Hendrey-Seabrook 86). Through the detective widow, Alexander instigates an act of historical detection that inspects, through Emily’s investigative work, the complex gendered role of the Victorian widow as manifested in her mourning fashion, economic situation, and social position. The author also explores — through Emily’s preoccupation with art forgery — the artistic “crime” inherent within this very act of adapting history — that is, within historical fiction’s imitations and appropriations of the past.

When Alexander’s heroine debuts in *And Only to Deceive*, it soon transpires that Emily’s widowhood — much like that of Hayward’s Mrs. Paschal — instigates her career as a dilettante sleuth as it is itself a subject of investigation. Only six months after his marriage, the keen adventurer Philip dies during a hunting trip in Africa, leaving Emily a widow with “a large fortune” (3). Unlike Mrs. Paschal, who becomes a professional investigator because she has no other income after her husband’s death, Emily does not take up detection as a means of earning a living. Yet her activities as an amateur sleuth are, like Mrs. Paschal’s, motivated directly by her widowhood, as the mystery of Philip’s death develops into her first case. Significantly, Emily’s detection of the crime — that is, of the cause of her widowhood — coincides with her experience and negotiation — and our readerly inspection — of the Victorian mourning customs to which she must comply as well as of the problems and potentials of her new status.

From the outset Emily admits that she had no romantic feelings for her husband. Accepting Philip after refusing “several good offers” of marriage, she states that she is sure that living with him “could not be worse than continued subjection to my mother’s ranting” about “the beginning of the end of [her daughter’s] wasted beauty” and her seeming “determination to be a spinster” (2–3). As Emily considered marriage “a simple way out of an increasingly unbearable situation” and did not spend much time with her husband other than a “brief wedding trip,” she thus “felt no grief for the loss of Philip” and instead, after reading of his death, is overcome by “a feeling of relief and freedom” (2–3). Consequently, a disparity arises between her sentiments and the “prescribed period of mourning” after her husband’s passing (3). Familiarizing readers with contemporary mourning etiquette for a widow, Emily explains: “For twelve months I would have to wear nothing but black crepe and avoid nearly all social events. After that I would be allowed silk, but in dull grays and black stripes. Not until two years had passed would I be able to return to an ordinary existence” (3). Jalland notes that this prescribed period of mourning was assumed to “approximate to the period of personal grief” (300), but, as Emily’s father points out, it ironically means that his daughter is expected “to be in mourning longer than she knew Ashton” (Alexander, *Deceive* 7). Madame Cécile du Lac, a new acquaintance who soon becomes Emily’s close confidante, empathizes with Emily’s peculiar situation:

I am not judging you. Like yours, my husband died soon after our marriage, and I was plagued by his friends. They all assumed I knew him as well as they did, when in fact I rarely conversed with him.... After he died, it was quite embarrassing and very difficult to keep up the appearance of having been close to him. (35).

Mourning clothes, in Cécile’s opinion, are a “silly” and unfairly gendered custom; according to her, “men wouldn’t stand” (37) for it if they were subjected to an equally severe dress code and degree of social isolation.

The pointed discrepancy between Emily’s and Cécile’s external observance of mourning etiquette and the lack of genuine sentiment allows readers to explore the potentially

deviant nature of the widow that was voiced in fiction as well as in periodicals and fashion magazines during the second half of the nineteenth century. In *Manners and Social Usages* (1884), which Alexander quotes in her afterword (319),⁴ Mrs. John Sherwood, daughter of a U.S. senator, calls attention not only to the minute details of Victorian mourning customs but also to their function for the mourner and the widow:

A heartless wife who, instead of being grieved at the death of her husband, is rejoiced at it, should be taught that society will not respect her unless she pays to the memory of the man whose name she bears that “homage which vice pays to virtue,” a commendable respect to the usages of society in the matter of mourning and of retirement from the world. Mourning garments ... are a shield to the real mourner, and they are often a curtain of respectability to the person who should be a mourner but is not. (96)

For the grieving widow, mourning dress serves as a form of protection from the outside world, whereas for a widow like Emily, who “rejoices” in the loss of her spouse, it functions as masque that maintains her respectability, determined by the external appearance of genuine mourning rather than by sincerity of feeling. Her mourning clothes, then, reinforce an inherent distrust attached to the widow, who can be at once respectable and transgressive. This ambiguous image is reproduced in several sensation novels (of which Emily confesses to be an avid reader) in the form of women who hide their deviant identities by posing as widows. Wilkie Collins’s Miss Gwilt in *Armadale* (1866) and Ellen Wood’s Isabel Vane in *East Lynne* (1861) are only two cases in which authors capitalize on and accentuate the paradoxical status of the widow as a woman who represented respectability and possessed, at the same time, an unsettling potential for transgression; her role “stigmatized less than that of spinster, but ... considerably inferior to that of wife” (Jalland 231).⁵

As Dagny Bredesen highlights, this ambiguous propriety was at least partly grounded in the economic and legal situations of widows, particularly among the middle and upper classes. The death of their husbands required them to act on their own behalf and, unless left impoverished, they “functioned in commercial enterprises, handled their own estates, and made decisions regarding remarriage without recourse to parent or male guardian” (Bredesen 22). Thus legally in a much stronger position than a wife and socially less limited than a spinster, the widow’s “legal status [as] a propertied subject ... explains, in part, societal unease with widowhood” (Bredesen 22). Equipped with a large fortune and a villa on Santorini irrevocably settled on her, Emily certainly resembles the newly empowered widow described by Bredesen. Her financial prosperity and social status facilitate (rather than necessitate, as in Mrs. Paschal’s case) her continuing, unpaid work as a detective, because she has the leisure to pursue this interest and because her fortune can contribute to her methods of investigation. In *And Only to Deceive*, for example, it is the wealth of Emily and Cécile that enables Emily to trick Andrew Palmer, convincing him to sell artifact forgeries to them and thus setting in motion the exposure of the villain and the solution to the crime.

Yet, despite Emily’s seemingly comfortable position as an aristocratic widow, there also is a quite different and much less empowering side of her situation. Philip’s family estate, as well as the townhouse in which Emily resides, are not her property. As she and Philip were childless, these properties pass to Philip’s heir — his three-year-old nephew — but his parents insist that Emily continue to live in the family’s townhouse, Berkeley Square. However, like Mrs. Gereth in Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), who must give up her home and its contents after her son’s marriage,⁶ Emily could be turned out of Berkeley Square by Philip’s family at any point. The consciousness that her home is only a temporary one haunts Alexander’s heroine, particularly when rumors swirl regarding her con-

duct, and Philip's sister insinuates that, should Emily have "the family name embroiled in scandal" (Alexander, *Poisoned Season* 163), she may be asked to leave. Reflecting on her reliance on her relatives' good will, she must face the prospects of a finding a new home and "furnish[ing] it entirely, fill[ing] it with books, and hir[ing] a staff" — a realization that leaves her "feeling thoroughly downtrodden, as if my life were being taken apart a piece at a time" (164). Although Emily's situation does not resemble that of so many Victorian widows who, according to Jalland, "suffered from alarm or panic at the loss of security and protection ... [and whose] financial vulnerability, inexperience in business affairs, and lack of a paid occupation compounded their problems" (236), Alexander highlights that even at the "more prosperous level of society" widows are certainly not exempt from the "feelings of dislocation and insecurity" common to those who are obliged to leave their home after their husband's death (Jalland 236).

Whereas widowhood prompts Emily's investigative pursuits both literally, as she investigates her husband's death, and economically, due to the freedom provided by her fortune, it also proves almost physically essential to her ability to carry out investigative tasks. As Bredesen observes in her discussion of Mrs. Paschal, "Victorian society, working with historically entrenched notions concerning widowhood, allowed, however grudgingly, an agency to widows that was discouraged in other women" (21). At the same time, it enabled and required these widow detectives to act on their own initiative rather than resorting to a male guardian to act on their behalf. This agency entails a significant liberty of movement, both literally and socially, despite mourning customs, in the form of a greater freedom from the restrictions of social protocol. Convinced that "married women ... did scarcely more than bear children and order around their servants" (2), Emily notes that, when she was single, she "had time to pursue [her] own interests, read voraciously, and travel when opportunity presented" (2). Reflecting on her short period as a wife after her husband's death, however, she asks, "If Philip were still alive, would my life be much different than it was when I lived with my parents?" (14). Thus, she admits, "now I have a freedom unprecedented in my life" (14), free from the reign of both mother and husband and endowed with more liberties. Widowhood, then, brings the benefits of marriage in that it has removed Emily from her parents' guardianship and accorded greater benefits than those of a single woman, as she also possesses money and is much more at liberty to "go about as she pleased" (31).

One prime example of a widow who exploits these freedoms to her fullest is Cécile, whose combination of wealth, widowhood, and advanced age allows her to greet Emily on their first meeting with the warning, "I'm afraid you shall find my manners somewhat lacking. I am old enough to disregard them. If that makes you uncomfortable, I am sorry for you" (34). Shortly after, she confesses that she drinks only champagne (at any time of day). In Emily's case, the exploration of such new liberties occurs in two realms: her work as a detective and her behavior in her social life. Her investigative pursuits, unlike Mrs. Paschal's, do not include disguises, but they nevertheless rely on her status as widow and aristocrat. Repeatedly it is Emily's eligibility as a young, rich widow that enables her to extract valuable information from suspected villains either at balls or private occasions. At other times, she presents herself as a respectable and trustworthy confidante to women who know details crucial to the solving of a case; a significant example of this is in *Tears of Pearl*, when Colin, as a man, cannot enter a sultan's harem to interview concubines, unlike Emily. Emily's education and intellect prove invaluable when she must undertake code-breaking in secret letters by Marie Antoinette, and her ability to travel alone throughout cities such as London and Vienna are not only useful but also essential when she is required to shadow suspects or lose villainous followers such as in *A Fatal Waltz*.

She begins, too, to explore her new liberties in the social circles of the upper classes. Pushing the boundaries initially by her open admission of interest in the classics, particularly Homer's *Iliad*, she soon begins to insist not only on drinking port instead of brandy after dinner but also on consuming it in the company of her male guests instead of joining the ladies in the drawing room. It is these social transgressions in particular that offer insight not only into Alexander's investigation of the Victorian widow and her significance in society and culture but also into the ways in which Alexander exploits and adapts this transgressive potential to create a neo-Victorian heroine. As Jeannette King suggests, neo-Victorian novels "tend to be characterised by their engagement with gender issues" (2) and can, through their return to the past and their preoccupations with gender and sexuality, be considered as a form of feminist historiography. In other words, neo-Victorian fiction can function as "part of the wider project, pioneered by second-wave feminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded and marginalised" (3-4). Yet, despite this potential, Kohlke approaches the genre's seemingly liberal tendencies with caution. Neo-Victorianism, she argues, represents for the present day what Orientalism did for the Victorians. However, "a displacement occurs from the spatial to the temporal axis," as the nineteenth-century past and its sexscape replaces the "unexplored geographical 'dark areas' of Orientalism" and shapes what she terms the "new Orientalism" ("Neo-Victorian" 352). Therefore, Kohlke suggests, neo-Victorianism functions for the twenty-first century as a way of "conveniently reassert[ing] our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress" by creating the impression of an "insurmountable difference in sexual sophistication between the Victorians—'them'—and us" (345, 347).

It is in these seemingly contradictory approaches to neo-Victorian fiction that readers can locate Alexander's investigation and appropriation of the Victorian widow as a neo-Victorian heroine. There is little doubt that Alexander engages in an act of feminist historiography through Emily's literal detection of the various facades of the social, legal, and cultural role of the widow in the nineteenth century. Yet the very choice of the widow as well as the series' emphasis on her transgressive potential and complex role enables Alexander to create a heroine who can cater to twenty-first-century sensibilities without discarding the act of historical detection. It is easy to dismiss Emily's frequent disregard of social etiquette, critique of mourning customs, and intellectual pursuits as little more but stereotypical, neo-Victorian tokens that allow Alexander's modern reader to feel superior to these gendered social and cultural norms. Yet Alexander renders the matter much more complex. Although Emily's new habits certainly cause some shock among her family, friends, acquaintances, and staff, she is soon forced to reconsider her behavior when rumors about her respectability lead to social exclusion. Rather than portraying Emily as a martyr to her own modern mind, Alexander complicates matters. Emily cannot simply ignore the ostracism of her social circle, because it affects her closest friends and family as well as separates her from the only society she knows. The sweet and innocent Ivy, Emily's childhood friend who is much more conventionally minded than Emily, finds herself linked to Emily's transgression, as well as her patronizing view of social etiquette and those who obey it. Thus, Emily learns not to discard her new habits but instead negotiate them, taking Cécile's advice that ignoring society's conventions purely for the sake of defiance is as senseless as obeying them blindly. As Emily notes, "Although I was not about to embrace all the nonsense required by society, I was going to make a very deliberate effort to make sure that no one ever felt belittled but me for having chosen to play all its games" (*Poisoned Season* 168).

Equally, readers are challenged to doubt — rather than admire — Emily's views regard-

ing issues of gender and sexuality. Perhaps the most interesting instance of this situation occurs in the fourth installment of Alexander's series, when Emily and Colin encounter a murder case in a sultan's harem in Constantinople. Rather than replicating nineteenth-century Orientalism by establishing Emily's moral superiority over the women in the harem, Emily — and, by extension, the reader — is forced to reinvestigate and interrogate her views. When Emily attempts to assume the moral high ground regarding class boundaries and women's opportunities in British society, Bezime, the sultan's mother, swiftly puts her into her place:

I did not come to the harem as a child. I worked in a *hamam* — a bath — in the city. Mahmut — he was the sultan then, Mahmut the Second — saw me carrying linen from a laundry across the street. My beauty enchanted him.... And I was brought to the harem, where I became his favourite, and I gave him a son. And when that son was made sultan, I was valide sultan, the most powerful woman in the empire.... Tell me, Emily Hargreaves, can an English girl, working for a living, aspire to someday marry the Prince of Wales and give birth to a future king?... The lack of enlightenment in your country is unfortunate. I cannot see how your women bother to live when they have no hope of advancing their positions. (*Tears of Pearl* 38)

Turning the Orientalist gaze back on the West, Bezime's speech highlights that, although Emily so frequently voices her dissatisfaction with the customs and structures that restrict women in Britain, she does, nevertheless, not hesitate to claim her culture's superiority.

But although readers — and Emily — are thus confronted with the hypocrisy of such assumptions, Bezime's status and empowerment must be investigated critically, as they are dependent on the romantic and sexual preferences of a man and her subsequent role as the mother of the future sultan. Significantly, the question of whether Bezime is as powerful as she claims is an important part of the mystery that Emily is required to solve. The exchange between Emily and Bezime, then, certainly emphasizes, as Rosemary Erickson Johnsen observes, that the genre is "naturally allied" not only with a focus on agency of the female detective but also of its women readers who "are asked to think about women's agency in the past and to consider the possibilities for enacting their own power to create change" (1–2). Outside the narrative, Alexander's readers are further encouraged to discover "The History Inside the Story" (*Deceive* 311). The sections bearing this title appear at the end of the first three installments of the series. Another form, "Emily's Environs," appears on Alexander's Web site, focusing on the historical contexts, settings, and characters of Alexander's novels, including links to sites such as the *Victorian Web* (Landow) that are used and maintained by Victorianist scholars. Thus, through the figures of the Victorian widow and the female detective, Alexander can "assert the absence of women from conventional history" and "[bring] to life some of that 'hidden' reality" (Johnsen 5). At the same time as the reader — through Emily — investigates the potential for deviance of these historical figures, it is precisely their ambivalent relationship to social norms that renders Emily, the detective widow, such a fitting neo-Victorian heroine.

Encouraging her readers to further explore history for themselves inevitably prompts a questioning of, or at least a reflective glance toward, the ways in which history is constructed, written, and related to the present. Here, it is not the widow's transgression but her ambivalence that, on a metafictional level, renders her a fitting neo-Victorian agent. By definition, the widow — not unlike neo-Victorianism and, indeed, narratives of detection — remains constantly defined by an inextricable link between past and present, as she is always defined by her previous status as wife and her subsequent loss — and thus current existence without — that role. Defined by what came before but no longer exists, the widow's

status in the present is always dependent on her past. Emily's investigation of her late husband's death exemplifies precisely this link. As Anne-Marie Beller argues in her discussion of Collins's and Braddon's sensation fiction, these writers' detectives and their "investigations are not merely concerned with finding out the truth about others, but more crucially about oneself and one's place in the world" (51). Similar to the female sleuth of one of Emily's favorite novelists—Braddon's Eleanor Vane—Emily's quest to solve the mystery of her husband's death is "a catalyst and metaphor for a crisis in psychological and social constructions of identity" (Beller 51)—in her case, her new identity as a widow. Through her investigation, she reconstructs not only the details of Philip's death but also her role as his wife and her relationship with him. The detection of this past is crucial to Emily's "detection of self" (Beller 49) in the present as she strives to find her own identity as a widow and later as an independent woman. After her inspection of Philip's diaries and pursuit of his research interests in the classics, Emily develops a belated but genuine affection for her late husband. The past—once it has become that—is open to reinterpretation and, in Emily's case, nostalgia, as is evident when she recalls a moment that, at the time, meant little to her: "I am sitting here contemplating the first time Philip kissed me after we were married and realize now how romantic and enrapturing it was. At the time, however, I didn't feel much other than fatigue. Had I been able to step back and observe us, I might have found the scene thrilling" (Alexander, *Deceive* 145).

Yet Cécile is critical of her friend's perspective on her marital past and her husband's identity as anything more than a "stupid hunter," observing that "had you known about his passions before his death, you most likely would have decided they were boring and wouldn't be able to enjoy them so thoroughly now" (35–36). Clearly, the past—personal as much as historical—becomes desirable only once it has become the past, can be considered from a distance, and thus can be admired or criticized in retrospect. Whatever the outcome of such a reappraisal, Emily's detection of her past identity as wife is essential to her existence and self-definition in the present and to her move toward the future. The widow's detection of her past thus resembles the literary inspection of history in neo-Victorian fiction, a genre through which novelists, according to Peter Widdowson, "explore how the scars of the past persist into the present, how the past's presence in the present determines the nature of that present" (492).

These metafictional investigations become perhaps most apparent when, during her investigation into Philip's death, Emily delves into the world of forged historical artifacts. The crime at hand—the copy of original artifacts—raises questions that apply as much to the nature of artistic production more generally as to neo-Victorianism's "re-production" of the nineteenth-century past more specifically. In a discussion among Emily, forger Mr. Attewater, and drawing instructor Pontiero, Pontiero argues that "copying requires nothing more than mechanical skill ... [as] the genius of the artist can never be duplicated [and] a work done by someone else's hand will always lack the spark of brilliance" (Alexander, *Deceive* 55). Consequently, he suggests that Emily's "money would be better spent on Renoir or Sisley [than on an imitation]" (55) and thus perhaps implies that Alexander's readers should read Victorian fiction rather than its neo-Victorian counterpart. He claims, "At least their works are original" (55). However, Emily (and perhaps Alexander as well) asserts that a copy is a piece of art in its own right and that, as long as the work "is of exquisite beauty," the artist's "source of inspiration is of not much consequence" (55). Thus she suggests by extension that a neo-Victorian novel such as Alexander's need not be judged against its literary, cultural, or other source texts, or by its relationship to them.

Attewater supports Emily in her defense of copies but also complicates the debate

when he questions the very definitions of original and copy as well as the value of the distinctions between them, pointing out a Roman sculpture in the British Museum that is a copy of a bronze piece created during the fourth century BC by a Greek (35–36). Naturally, his antagonist Pontiero asserts that this work could not be considered a copy, as it is still an ancient piece. Attewater’s challenge correlates almost directly to the multiple layers of adaptation in neo-Victorianism. As is well documented, the Victorians had a keen interest in, for example, all things medieval, adapting medieval narratives, subjects, themes, and forms in literature, art, and beyond; such a practice thus renders the question of whether such works can ever function as the “original” source text of a neo-Victorian piece a difficult one at best. Equally, television adaptations of neo-Victorian novels (such as Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* [1998], *Affinity* [1999], *Fingersmith* [2002], or Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* [2002]) have a much more complex, often intertextual relationship not only with their neo-Victorian source text but also with other screen adaptations of both Victorian and neo-Victorian texts (see Heilmann and Llewellyn 211–45). Finally, as if to interrogate the merit of her own neo-Victorian venture, Alexander’s Emily concludes the conversation with the following question: “Mr. Attewater, do you think our descendants will look at our copies in museums thousands of years from now, appreciating them as art in their own right, the way we do with this statue?” (56). This suggests, perhaps, that the very art of neo-Victorian adaptation may — as it already has begun to become — an artistic and critical arena of its own that can be interpreted and admired on its own merit.

In Alexander’s Lady Emily novels, then, the neo-Victorian detective widow allows contemporary readers to investigate the hidden or less visible corners of history as well as prompt them to inspect their own reading and writing practices as they relate to the construction of that past. Cécile may well caution Emily, the investigator of history and neo-Victorianism, that she must not “fall in love with her dead husband ... [as] it can bring no joy” (*Deceive* 36), it seems that Alexander’s novels are testament to the fact that our own love for the dead, the Victorians, can indeed bring just that.

Keywords: Alexander, Tasha; female detectives; neo-Victorian; widowhood

NOTES

1. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, *Neo-Victorian Studies* was founded and special journal issues, edited collections, and monographs were published on neo-Victorianism as a literary phenomenon and as a significant aspect of (popular and material) culture, politics, education, economy, the media, and the arts. In 2010 alone, two edited collections and three monographs on neo-Victorianism were published. See Arias and Pulham; Hadley; Heilmann and Llewellyn; Kohlke and Gutleben; and Mitchell.

2. One important exception, here, is Johnsen, who discusses contemporary feminist revisions of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories as well as texts by Miriam Grace Monfredo. Kelly A. Marsh’s work on the “neo-sensation novel” is, arguably, another exception. However, as Marsh’s terminology suggests, her approach focuses strictly on texts that adapt the specific conventions of Victorian sensation fiction and thus excludes those neo-Victorian crime novels that do not.

3. Both Alexander’s Lady Emily novels (2005–present) and Deanna Raybourn’s Lady Julia series (2006–present) feature aristocratic widow-investigators as protagonists in the 1880s and 1890s, whereas Brian Thompson’s Bella Wallis mysteries (2008–11) follow a widow whose exploits as an amateur detective in the late 1870s serve as her inspiration for her racy sensation novels published under a male pseudonym. In the Thomas Pitt series set in the late-nineteenth century, Anne Perry’s Lady Ashworth (née Emily Ellison), who often assists her sister, Charlotte Pitt, in the latter’s amateur investigations, is widowed in *Cardington Crescent* (1987) and remarries later in the series.

4. Sherwood's chapter on "Mourning and Funeral Usages" from *Manners and Social Usages* was later reprinted anonymously in the 17 April 1886 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*.

5. In *Armadale*, Collins's Miss Gwilt poses as Alan Armadale's widow so she can inherit his estate, whereas Wood's Isabel Vane in *East Lynne* takes a position as governess to her own children under the guise of the widowed Madame Vine. Later in the century, novelists frequently critique the etiquette of mourning in accordance with the demands of the Funeral and Mourning Reform Associations established in 1875, which promoted the "abolition of outside show, parade, ostentation, and unnecessary expense, and the substitution in their place of simpler and less conventional practices at funerals" ("Reform in Funeral Usages" 10). See, for example, Caroline Emily Cameron's *The Ways of a Widow* (1898), in which the young widow Nina shows more concern for the latest mourning fashions than her husband's death.

6. By extension, Emily's position also highlights the vulnerability of middle- and working-class widows, who were rarely left with sufficient financial security after their husband's death and thus became reliant on the charity of friends and family, or on the Poor Law. In an article on the economic situation of Victorian middle-class widows, Cynthia Curren points out that, because of a combination of "the highly speculative, often fraudulent nature of many of the life assurance companies," low earnings, and high living costs, adequate life insurance remained unattainable for the majority of the middle class (220–21).

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