

## CHAPTER 4

# ‘Awaiting the death blow’: Gendered Violence and Miss Havisham’s Afterlives

Claire O’Callaghan, Loughborough University

‘If you knew all my story’, she pleaded, ‘you would have some compassion for me and a better understanding of me.’

‘Miss Havisham’, I answered, as delicately as I could, ‘I believe I may say that I do know your story...’

(Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*)

In a novel that is, otherwise, largely about deception, this short exchange between Pip Pirrip, the protagonist of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861) and Miss Havisham, the emotionally abusive spinster who haunts Satis House in her withered wedding gown, stands as a moment of integrity. Here, Havisham ‘pleads’ – as Dickens put it – for empathy from Pip (and therein the reader) because, as she implies, there is a rationale (albeit a troubling one) for her lifelong manipulation of Pip and her stepdaughter, Estella, which stems from violence and deceit (366). Being careful not to agitate the elder woman further, Pip gently reveals that he is already fully aware of Havisham’s past. Thanks to Herbert Pocket, on his arrival in London, Pip had

---

**How to cite this book chapter:**

O’Callaghan, C. 2020. ‘Awaiting the death blow’: Gendered Violence and Miss Havisham’s Afterlives. In: Bell, E. (ed.), *Dickens After Dickens*, pp. 83–100. York: White Rose University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22599/DickensAfterDickens.e>. Licence, apart from specified exceptions: CC BY-NC 4.0

learned that, at a much younger age, Miss Havisham had been cruelly overthrown by a professional conman, the villainous Mr Compeyson, who had conspired with her half-brother, Arthur, to defraud her of her inheritance, before then abandoning her on their wedding day. Havisham had, as Herbert put it, ‘passionately loved’ and ‘perfectly idolised’ Compeyson with ‘all the susceptibility she possessed’ (*GE* 177). But, traumatised by the brutality and manipulation she had suffered, Miss Havisham turned to misandry. Using her stepdaughter, Estella, as a weapon, Havisham trained the young woman to be ‘hard and haughty and capricious to the last degree’ and ‘wreak revenge on all the male sex’ for Compeyson’s cruel and criminal behaviour (*GE* 173).

Despite the charge of misogyny so often levied at Dickens, here is one of the instances where he invites compassion for women. Pip, the novel’s flawed hero, reports to Havisham that her story has ‘inspired’ him ‘with great commiseration, and I hope I understand it and its influences’ (*GE* 366).<sup>1</sup> Yet, while *Great Expectations* provides *some* insight into how the young and beautiful expectant bride morphed into the ‘immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion’, Dickens does not show us the traumatic events, merely their extended aftermath (*GE* 66). Put another way, we do not get see how Miss Havisham ‘became’ Miss Havisham, so to speak.

Nonetheless, the iconic nature of Dickens’s ‘most compelling and most haunting’ matriarch has been seized upon by contemporary adaptors who have reworked the ‘gothic potential’ (Slater 291) of Dickens’s ‘most sinister, spectacular bride’ in new and various guises (Regis and Wynne 37). Onscreen, Miss Havisham has been reimagined in numerous film and television adaptations of *Great Expectations* and animated by many of the 20th and 21st century’s most celebrated actors, including Martita Hunt in David Lean’s iconic 1946 production, as well more recently by Charlotte Rampling (1999), Gillian Anderson (2011), and Helena Bonham Carter (2012), among others. Elsewhere, Havisham’s life and death have inspired musical theatre. Dominick Argento’s opera *Miss Havisham’s Fire* (1979/1996), memorably subtitled ‘Being an investigation into the unusual and violent death of Aurelia Havisham on the 17 of April in the year 1860’, reworks Miss Havisham’s life story as the subject of investigative scrutiny. Likewise, the darkness of Miss Havisham’s rage has been immortalised in verse by the former poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy. In ‘Havisham’, a short poem published in Duffy’s collection *Mean Time* (1993), the poet reimagines the morbid anger felt by Dickens’s jilted bride as she reflected on her trauma from old age:

Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then  
 I haven’t wished him dead. Prayed for it  
 so hard I’ve dark green pebbles for eyes,  
 ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.  
 ... I stabbed at a wedding cake.

Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.  
 Don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks. (Duffy 1–4, 15–16).

Duffy's poetic monologue emphasises the violence of Miss Havisham's emotions, something she relays through profanity as well as the references to Havisham's murderous desire. In the hyperbolic breakdown of the final sentence, Duffy brings together the speaker's pain with the vengeful cut that the speaker wishes to inflict on her former fiancé; just as her heart broke, so too will his, and slowly, it seems. But, amid the rage expressed here, Duffy's poem also implicitly alerts us to something else: namely, that there are long-term and devastating effects to the experience of criminal and domestic violence, something also vividly relayed by Dickens's original novel, where the reader bears after-witness to the legacy of Havisham's trauma.

More recently, 21st-century authors and screenwriters have returned to Dickens's ill-fated bride, with many, like Duffy, portraying the violent incidents from Havisham's backstory.<sup>2</sup> In particular, neo-Victorian works like Ronald Frame's novel *Havisham* (2012) and Tony Jordan's BBC drama *Dickensian* (2015) have appropriated the brief glimpses of Havisham's past offered by Dickens and fleshed them out to imagine more fully to show the trail of events that led to her ill-fated wedding day. Frame's book, which was published in the year of Dickens's bicentenary, presents Miss Havisham's tale via a first-person, retrospective biography, beginning with her own traumatic birth (as a breech baby) that resulted in her mother's death and concluding with the events of *Great Expectations*. Jordan's drama, meanwhile, builds on his expertise in soap opera, incorporating Havisham's story into a wildly playful mash-up of Dickens's most iconic characters. It too focuses on the immediate events prior to the fateful wedding day, specifically the fraudulent conspiracy surrounding the wealthy heiress.

As Clare Clark remarked in her review of Frame's novel for *The Guardian*, these particular prequels intentionally 'recast Miss Havisham as a woman of flesh and blood' (para. 5). She is no longer the cadaverous Miss Havisham of Dickens's novel or, indeed, Miss Havisham at all; instead, she is a young woman granted subjectivity, something bestowed on her symbolically by the attribution of a first name: in Frame's novel, she is Catherine, and in *Dickensian* Amelia. But, as Clark also noted, in 'making a real person of her', the prequels are obliged to 'explain all the awkward logistical quibbles that Dickens imperiously overlooked' (para. 5). In other words, they must portray the criminal conspiracy that led to Miss Havisham's destruction, as well as render visible her gothic 'becoming' (so to speak); *that* is their *raison d'être*.

However, as numerous commentators have suggested, neo-Victorianism – as a genre – often engages critically with injustices of the past, especially those relating to gender, sexuality, race, disability, and class. In fact, as Cora Kaplan put it, neo-Victorian texts are celebrated for their 'critique of the less admirable Victorian values and practices – those attitudes, institutions or social conditions

described as “Dickensian” (81). But if, as noted, neo-Victorian reimaginings of Dickens’s hopeful bride-to-be necessarily aver this very point, what are the ethical and cultural issues at stake in such Dickensian prequels?

In considering Dickens’s afterlives, then, this chapter considers the politics of representation at play in prequels to *Great Expectations*. Building on Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben’s observation that neo-Victorian texts are not always motivated by the ‘best of intentions’ (23) and can be, as Helen Davies has noted, ‘sensationalist, cynical, trivialising, coarse’ (8), this chapter explores the feminist politics of *Havisham* and *Dickensian*. I argue that, despite their representation of romance fraud, both Frame’s novel and Jordan’s screenplay exhibit an unsettling preoccupation with gendered violence. While, as noted, the rehumanising of Dickens’s larger-than-life recluse necessarily portray misogyny and forms of domestic abuse (physical, emotional, and financial), Jordan and Frame rework these abject states and embellish – rather than critique – scenes of gendered violence.

In approaching my argument, this chapter begins with a contextual discussion of narrative ethics with regard to neo-Victorians prequels concerned with trauma, before examining the representation of physical violence in *Dickensian*. I then turn to the portrayal of emotional violence in Frame’s novel, before offering a comparative reading of the sensationalism of trauma in the portrayal of Miss Havisham’s wedding day. Across these readings, I will show how these sources employ various storytelling strategies to animate uncomfortably Dickens’s short tale of gendered violence.

### The violence of knowingness

In her invaluable conceptualisation of neo-Victorianism, Andrea Kirchknopf remarks that prequels, sequels, and ‘after’ texts are nearly always ‘exclusively referential to dramatic, filmic or fictional adaptations of Victorian material’, and this undoubtedly informs their popularity (72). But what also interests Kirchknopf is how the presence of such referential knowledge also reflects a change in 21st-century ‘reading habits’ (72). For Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, such habits refer, in fact, to an ‘authorial knowingness’ on the part of the writer that actively ‘collude[s] with readers’ because ‘we’ – the author and viewer – already know what will happen to the characters that we are reading of (15).

In the case of prequels to *Great Expectations* this means watching a brutal tale of criminal violence against a young woman unfold and witnessing the trauma that ensues. *Havisham*’s tale presents a story of romance fraud (or ‘sweetheart swindle’), a crime whereby an individual is defrauded by through ‘what the victim had perceived as a genuine relationship’ (Cross, Dragiewicz, and Richards 2). As Cassandra Cross, Molly Dragiewicz, and Kelly Richards have shown persuasively, romance fraud unequivocally equates to domestic violence, especially in relation to emotional control and manipulation, the common non-violent tactics

used by offenders to 'ensure compliance with ongoing demands for money' (1). Moreover, the focus on emotional abuse here is significant here, for it is only as recent as 2015 that the law on gendered violence in the UK was widened to recognise the role of control and coercion as forms of domestic abuse. 'Controlling behaviour', in this context, describes a range of acts 'designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour' (Home Office n.pag.). 'Coercive behaviour', meanwhile, describes an 'act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim' (Home Office n.pag.). To return to Jordan and Frame's texts, these neo-Victorian narratives of trauma not only reimagine the criminal violence of Dickens's backstory but re-present the events such that we bear witness to Compeyson's duplicity *and* after-witness to Havisham's trauma, a concept explored by Kohlke and Gutleben in their edited collection *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma* (2010). This is timely given that current statistics from the World Health Organization indicate that approximately 35% of women globally experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime (both inside and outside of marriage), while almost one-third of women will be physically abused at some point (World Health Organization n.pag.). However, while the portrayal of Miss Havisham's past seeks to 'bridge comprehension' between the timelines described in *Great Expectations*, here such insight is not offered by way of critique, feminist or otherwise (Kohlke and Gutleben 18). On the contrary, Jordan and Frame merely rework Dickens's tale of gendered and criminal violence in exploitative fashion, making Miss Havisham's trauma a 'light-hearted' spectacle for primetime entertainment (and, in the case of Frame's novel, one might suggest to capitalise on the appetite for all things Dickensian in the year of his bicentenary celebrations). A sense of misogyny as sensationalism is present in the spectacle being retold here, something picked up by one reviewer of *Dickensian* who eloquently remarked that:

This is a lady who, in a single moment (one morning, at twenty to nine), is so psychologically injured that she dedicates both her own life and the lives of several young people to wreaking revenge on men, without a care for personal hygiene or whether bedraggled white lace remains on-trend. [W]e are slowly watching bad things happening to a young woman... (Kelly 1)

Despite the fact that, as Kelly reminds us here, Miss Havisham – in Dickens's novel – lives in a disrupted and traumatised way of being, prequels devoted to her past eagerly invite the reader/viewer to participate in her destruction. In fact, 'we' – the reader colluding with the writer/author – are waiting for the moment whereby the Miss Havisham of Dickens's novel comes to life, which effectively means seeing her trauma and witnessing her becoming. As Catherine puts it in

Frame's novel, we, like her, are 'awaiting the death blow' (76). This has a pernicious edge given that, as Georges Letissier reminds us, Dickens's character was inspired by 'a series of reported cases of mentally disturbed, broken-hearted women' from London and Australia (31).<sup>3</sup>

While *Dickensian* nominally presents Havisham's tale within the 'traditionally masculine genre of detective fiction' – a whodunnit plot concerning the death of Jacob Marley, with Stephen Rea's Inspector Bucket assuming the lead role in solving the murder mystery – in actuality, the drama gravitates around Miss Havisham's plight (played by Tuppence Middleton) (Cuklanz and Moorti 303). Taking place over 20 episodes, the series commences in the Havisham household, with Mr Havisham's funeral, and concludes with Amelia's ominous wedding day in episode 20 (notably, Marley's murder is solved in episode 17). From the outset, *Dickensian* concentrates on the violence of the criminal conspiracy between Merriweather Compeyson (as he is called here) (played by Tom Weston-Jones) and Amelia's brother, Arthur (played by Joseph Quinn). Indeed, apart from Amelia's friendship with Honoria (soon to be Lady Dedlock – from Dickens's *Bleak House* [1853], played by Sophie Rundle), *Dickensian* offers no wider investment in Amelia's character development. Instead, she is an expendable prop around whom a tale of domestic and criminal violence unfolds.

In fact, as episode one indicates, Amelia is a linchpin for Jordan's shock-driven, soap opera tactics to portray patriarchal cruelty and romantic fraud. Although the episode begins with Mr Havisham's funeral, it very quickly descends into a tale of domestic violence. Arthur insists that his father's will should be read that same day, but following the reading, in which he discovers that he is only receiving a 10% share in Havisham's brewery and Amelia is to inherit the rest of their father's estate, Arthur becomes violent. We see him assault Amelia, grabbing her arm and dragging her along the street, before snatching a whip from a parked carriage and physically threatening her: 'you're a spoilt little brat, spoilt for the want of a good beating. Well maybe it's time you had one!' (23:50). Jordan's focus on Arthur's bitterness leaves no doubt that, in Arthur's view, Amelia is to blame for the violence; she deserves 'a good beating' because she is 'spoilt' (23:50). In doing so, the show rightly portrays victim-blaming, the skewed, misogynist logic that suggests that women are 'asking for it' ('it' being violence – whether physical, emotional, or sexual). Arthur's bitter and self-interested behaviour denotes his repugnance, but his wrath is given particular emphasis when he whips the wall next to his sister, a moment which symbolises the threat of domestic violence that he now poses to her. We see Amelia flinch in fear. The moment is disrupted, however, by Mr Compeyson, who appears as a well-meaning passer-by keen to prevent further physical violence. By way of interjection, Compeyson punches Arthur, who falls to the floor in shock with a bloodied lip as his sister looks on in horror. Although, therefore, the show worryingly uses violence to temper violence, here Merriweather's actions serve as an added reminder that violence against women is not to be tolerated.

Yet, thanks to our knowledge of Compeyson from Dickens's novel, 'we' – the knowing viewer, 'collud[ing] with the writer' – are fully cognisant of the dubious nature of this apparently well-intentioned bystander (Heilmann and Llewellyn 15). Indeed, the subsequent scene between Arthur and Compeyson makes explicit the sense of collusion, as the exchange between the men reveals the former moment to have been a ruse, a premediated drama intended to scare and threaten Amelia, and ingratiate Merriweather in the guise of hero. We see Arthur in an alleyway, sat wiping the blood from his face as Merriweather approaches him. 'You didn't have to hit me quite so hard', he resentfully tells his co-conspirator; 'You told me to be convincing', retorts Compeyson, words that Tom Weston-Jones delivers with a rather sinister smile (28:03). In this way, 'we' – the viewer – are now privy to the men's criminal conspiracy.

Although forms of violence are undoubtedly present (and inherent) to Miss Havisham's tale, *Dickensian* narrates this with troubling effect. This particular scene serves as the second-to-last moment of episode one. With the sinister disclosure that the previous scene of domestic violence was a scam, the viewer is, therefore, encouraged to eagerly await the worse events to follow in episode two. In other words, criminality and gendered violence are transformed from problematic to exhilarating, and this sensationalism is intensified onscreen by Compeyson's ominous smile, which connotes a chilling delight in male power. The drama thus creates an ambivalence about whose 'side' we should be on. There is no retort for the violence that Amelia has just experienced; in fact, after Arthur's assault we merely see Merriweather take her home before the focus shifts back to the men. In other words, she is a dispensable subject to be objectified and we are participating in their agenda, thus offering little explicit critique of emotional and physical violence.

Episode two takes this dubious representation further. Here, Compeyson and Arthur openly indulge their misogyny as they elucidate their plan to destroy Amelia:

COMPEYSON: You described your sister as head strong, wilful.

ARTHUR: Yes.

COMPEYSON: It's no doubt because she is accustomed to getting what she wants?

ARTHUR: Father doted on her.

COMPEYSON: Then it is high time that she learns a very valuable lesson: that not *all* men will do her bidding. ... Leave the goose to the fox, Arthur. I shall deliver her once she's been plucked. (03:10)

Compeyson's use of the predator/prey motif dramatises the animalistic nature of the men's plan, thus providing a troubling (albeit unspecified) insight into the men's intended violence towards Amelia. As the dialogue makes clear, their violence is born from misogyny: in Arthur's case, it is petty sibling jealousy coupled with his emasculation at being passed over in his father's will (he is subservient to a woman), while Merriweather is affronted by Amelia's independence

and wants to steal her wealth. Understanding the rationale behind such brutality is, of course, as Dickens himself suggested in the words that opened this chapter, one way in which we might understand Miss Havisham better. However, as suggested, this is not the point of these particular prequels. To the contrary, as Compeyson's motif makes abundantly clear, they are about watching a male 'predator' stalk a female 'prey' as light-hearted entertainment.

Indeed, in the same scene just moments later, *Dickensian* underlines this focus on patriarchy and masculine domination when Compeyson feigns the need to 'make amends' for his former 'eagerness to protect' Amelia by way of reconciling the siblings, something he offers 'In memory of her late father and the true spirit of Christmas' (03:59). Amelia, however, rejects Compeyson's interjection:

Mr Compeyson. Much as I applaud your good intentions, what on earth could I or anyone else have said or done to give you the impression that I would ask a total stranger to involve himself in my family business? Arthur and I will no doubt resolve our differences as we have always done and without the need for a mediary. Good day and merry Christmas. (18:03)

Amelia's refusal of help is received by Compeyson first as a shock and then as a challenge, something signalled again by his sinister smile as he stands outside of Satis House, having left at her request. In the scene that follows, Compeyson laughs as he relays to Arthur how his sister 'threw me out' (27:36). Arthur is unclear, though, why this should be funny, to which Compeyson explains, 'Because my dear Havisham, it means the chase is on and I'll wager not an easy one at that. So in the well-honoured tradition of "to the victor the spoils", I intend to take her for everything' (27:51). Compeyson's positioning of Amelia as a lucrative target signals his villainy here, something also gestured to by Arthur's slight shock at the ease with which his conspirator has quickly upped the stakes of their plan. However, not only is Arthur's apparent shock self-centred (he is not sufficiently motivated to protest, for instance), but the positioning of the men's exchange as *the* point of the scene (as well as the episode's final moment overall) effectively overlooks how Jordan constitutes Compeyson's abuse as an overt backlash for her refusal of male assistance and female self-assertion. By focusing on the prowess of Compeyson's violent masculinity and sensationalising the spectacle of the 'chase', *Dickensian* fails to register that Amelia is, unbeknownst to her, being punished for resisting male power. Such imagery is all the more disturbing given that, in 2009, a UK government survey on public attitudes to domestic violence reported that those who refused passivity in abusive exchanges (either marital or non-marital) were seen as 'less warm, and so more blameworthy' for any violence that ensued (Banyard 124). In effect, the critique of victim-blaming in episode one is subverted by episode two.



Worryingly, to underline the sensationalism of abuse here, it is significant that Jordan adds sexual exploitation to Compeyson's list of misdemeanours. Such is Amelia's optimism towards her now-forthcoming marital union with Merriweather that she consents to sex. Her choice undoubtedly speaks to 21st-century sexual politics, whereby women's choice to engage in consensual sexual encounters beyond marital confines is welcomed in Western cultures. In the show, however, Jordan gives Amelia's sexual choice a decidedly pernicious twist in a number of ways, not least because the viewer witnesses the encounter through Arthur's voyeuristic gaze. In episode 17, we follow his search for Amelia at Satis House, only for him to find Compeyson in flagrante with Amelia, something Arthur watches momentarily. The exploitative nature of this moment is underlined in two ways. First, the scene explicitly presents the intimate activity against the backdrop of further manipulation and abuse; it is form of reconciliation after Amelia had challenged Merriweather for kissing another woman (his wife), whom Compeyson subsequently passes off as his sister. In other words, sex, here, derives from lies and is purely exploitative so as not to threaten the men's wider, fraudulent plan. Second – and arguably more troublingly – we see Merriweather's acknowledge Arthur's voyeuristic presence by both smiling and closing the door on him. The smile, again, is not only a sinister signification of sexual exploitation<sup>4</sup> but demonstrates visually Heilmann and Llewellyn's point that, sometimes, neo-Victorian texts fetishise 'the secret and forbidden' (107). While the door closure may appear, on one level, to refuse the viewer access to further scenes of sexual intimacy and therefore reject exploitation, it functions, in fact, to prevent Arthur from interjecting and disrupting Compeyson's sexual seduction. Indeed, the way in which the door's closure fades the screen to black is indicative of the way in which this Dickensian prequel moves suggestively, on an imaginative level, to darker and more taboo spaces.

### The cruelty of optimism

While *Dickensian* dramatises – rather than critiques – physical and sexual violence to women, Frame's novel replicates the same strategies, but does so from a different perspective, namely, by recreating the tale of emotional abuse. Indeed, through a first-person narrative, Frame's rewrites Compeyson's duplicitous courtship of Catherine. To return to the reader's knowing collusion with Dickens's world, the effect of Frame's textual approach reconfigures how the reader experiences Compeyson's duplicity, allowing us to access first-hand the way that romance fraud functions a form of emotional violence. On an analytical level, Lauren Berlant's theoretical conception of 'cruel optimism' offers a valuable mechanism to render visible the narrative politics of Frame's text as representative of emotional violence (1).

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant considers the nature of desire and how individual attachments of any kind lead to an investment in what she calls

‘the good life’, in other words fulfilment and happiness (27). Berlant explains that ‘all attachments are optimistic’ because any form of desire, whether it is attached to ‘an improved way of being’, ‘a political project’, or romantic attraction, is inherently entwined with ‘promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us’ (23). For Berlant, such ‘optimistic relations’ are not inherently cruel, but they ‘become cruel when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially’, thus exposing the desire to be an ‘impossible sheer fantasy’ (1, 94). At that point, then, optimism becomes cruel.

Frame’s portrayal of Catherine’s relationship with Compeyson, particularly her dreams for their future life together and her investments in her fiancé coupled with her later knowledge of his duplicity, reflects Berlant’s conception of ‘cruel optimism’. Indeed, in *Havisham*, Catherine’s extended fantasies of ‘the good life’ (to borrow Berlant’s words) are *the* basis against which her subsequent trauma unfolds (94), but it is also a cruel optimism because the reader is privy to the romance fraud Catherine is a victim of; we know her relationship is toxic. To underline Catherine’s trauma, however, early on Frame amplifies the expression of Catherine’s optimism, most of which centre, of course, on the varied passages recounting Compeyson’s seduction. In one scene, for example, Catherine relays her intimate feelings for Compeyson to her maid-servant and confidante, Sally. Catherine’s disclosure renders her emotionally vulnerable, and Frame emphasises how her feelings are physically and emotionally consuming:

I told Sally things, as soon as they had stumbled out of me, I realised  
I shouldn’t have said.

*(Ah! how sweet it is to love)*

About the jolts of excitement my body received from him; about waking  
up thinking of him.

*(Ah! how gay is young desire)*

About dressing to please him, first and foremost. About finding him  
waiting for me in my dreams ...

*(And what pleasing pain we prove, / When first we feel a lover’s fire)*

*(Pains of love are sweeter far, Than all other pleasures are)*

... ‘my’ Charles Compeyson (115–16)

Here Frame underlines Catherine’s passionate disclosure by juxtaposing her words with selected lines from John Dryden’s epic love poem ‘Ah, How Sweet It Is to Love!’, a short poem that celebrates the power of romance and its all-consuming nature. The inclusion of Dryden’s words animates Catherine’s emotions, thus intensifying her disclosure. They indicate that Catherine’s feelings are overwhelming; she desires Compeyson both physically (‘the jolts of excitement my body received from him’) and emotionally (‘waiting for me in my

dreams') (115–16). But, at the same time, it is important that these are *select* lines from Dryden's poem, and, while his wider piece is a salutation of young love, it is also a commentary on love in relation to tragedy, suffering, age, and death, which, he suggests, is easier than heartbreak.

As such, when *Havisham* elucidates the knowing collusion between the author and the reader of which Heilmann and Llewellyn speak, the words are a cruel optimism; we read between the lines of these words and supply the meta-commentary on Catherine's feelings. And her words, of course, are compromised; not only do 'we' know that her investment in Compeyson is misplaced, but so too we recognise that her hopes are a mere fantasy. As such, Catherine's optimism is doubly cruel. The transformation of such knowledge through author/reader collusion draws attention to the way in which emotional violence underlines the novel, and this becomes (more) apparent a few pages later when Catherine conveys to Sally the vivacity of Compeyson's approach:

The things he knew about me. Trivial, unimportant things. It seemed to me those must be the most difficult fact of all to discover. That I preferred fish to meat, and grayling to mackerel, and sole to grayling. That I slept with my window slightly ajar, and never on two pillows. That I wore away the left inside of my right heel before any other part of either shoe. That I carried a sachet of orange blossom in my portmanteau. That I wrote letters wearing a clip-on cotton frill over my cuff. That I gargled with salt water three – and always three – times a day. And let my hair down and brush it, with fifty strokes – or as near as – every night before bed. That my favourite poet used to be Gray, but now it was Cowper. (Frame 120–21)

Catherine, of course, believes that Charles's intimate knowledge of her is that of a lover at pains to learn the details of their partner's life. Despite enquiring 'how he knew what he did', Compeyson misdirects Catherine interests and, as a result, she is 'bemused', rather than 'alarmed' by his knowledge of intimate details that she herself recognises he should not know (Frame 121). She is inquisitive about the unexplained and recognises that something is remiss, but, nonetheless, she configures the mystery as romantic, seeing it optimistically as evidence that 'his kindred soul' was 'exactly in sympathy – in imagination in conjunction – with my own' (Frame 121). Of course, 'we', the knowing reader, recognise the more dubious nature of events here and, although at this point in the text 'we' are not privy to Compeyson's manipulation, we know how the fated romance will unfold. Later, the sense of collusion is realised narratively, with Catherine's later discovery that Sally was, in fact, disclosing information to Compeyson, who is her husband, supplying him with such intimate details about her mistress so as to enable the deception. As such, Catherine's words here are a reminder that this is a tale of romance fraud, and of course Catherine

comes to fully realise these instances of optimism as cruel long after she learns of Compeyson's duplicity.

Berlant also conceptualises optimism as cruel when one's desire is revealed as – or exposed to be – toxic (for any reason). In *Havisham*, Frame underlines the toxic nature of Catherine's former optimism by situating it in relation to victim-blaming: self-blame, to be more specific. Indeed, throughout her narrative, Catherine occasionally provides a self-blaming metacommentary on her retrospective narrative and, very often, these relate to moments of physical and sexual intimacy. Unlike *Dickensian*, *Havisham* does not include scenes of penetrative intercourse between the pair. However, not only does Frame include an extended scene where Catherine masturbates in relation to fantasies of Compeyson, but Catherine later lambasts herself for a variety of intimate moments that, she remembers, 'he set up':

whenever we accidentally touched at the gate-legged tea table or in the narrow doorway – fingers, back of the hand, wrist – it was like contact with sulphur. I felt that my skin was scorched for a minute or two afterwards. ...

It was cruelty: I should have seen it was that. But I was the very last person who would have.

He had me on a chain. No: on a silken halter. (125)

Catherine's description exemplifies Berlant's conception of 'cruel optimism', as her own use of the word 'cruelty' indicates. As her words imply, she likens herself to horse or other animal who was being trained (or 'broken in', to borrow the appropriate parlance), and her use of the phrase 'silken halter' recognises the eroticism and sexualised nature of Compeyson's 'training' for corrupt means. Likewise, her reference to 'sulphur' holds a self-blaming connotation through invocation of the Bible; 'fire and brimstone' is an archaic term for sulphur and the phrase is used in Biblical imagery to describe divine punishment. As such, Frame implicitly draws attention to Catherine's sense of eternal damnation. Catherine's recrimination and self-blame poignantly relay the way in which Frame's retrospective, first-person narrative is a reminder of the very real effects of emotional violence. Yet, Frame's use of the word 'should' here is disingenuous and clichéd, since it erroneously implies that the romance fraud 'should' have been prevented, something we, the omniscient reader (alongside the knowing author) recognise to be impossible.

### *That day*

Naturally, *Dickensian* and *Havisham* share the same point of crescendo: Miss Havisham's wedding day. Here, not only do both texts quite literally depict the cruelty of Catherine/Amelia's optimism, but participate eagerly in the affective destruction of this young, independent woman. After all, this is the 'death blow'

that 'we' have been waiting for and which the texts have been knowingly building towards (Frame 76). Miss Havisham's neo-Victorian afterlives, it seems, sit counter to reworkings of other Dickensian women, for, as Pete Orford demonstrates in Chapter 5's discussion of reworkings of Dickens's unfinished text, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Rosa Bud's 'ending' is demarcated by plural possibilities and choice.

Frame's novel unfolds the climax through a moment-by-moment breakdown of the wedding day itself that begins with the poignancy of Catherine's excitement: 'I woke early, and it was the first thought in my head. I marry this morning. ... This would be the last time I took my rest like this, as a single woman' (207). 'We' join Catherine as she dresses and is beautified for her joyous day, including her lengthy descriptions of the maids who 'dress her hair' and 'powdered my body from head to foot,' and soften and prepare her skin with make-up, before finally, putting on her dress – *the* dress she will never get out of once it is on (Frame 207). In effect, while Catherine is preparing to 'become' the Miss Havisham of Dickens's novel, she is also, simultaneously, transforming into what criminological and feminist discourse on domestic violence describes as 'the ideal victim,' a troubling and dominant media misconception of what female victims of violence 'look like': young, pretty (for which read 'feminised'), and innocent (for which read 'childlike'), all of which reify troubling gender stereotypes of women as vulnerable (Custers and Van de Bulck 98–9). Soon after dressing, though, the dreaded letter from Compeyson announcing the end of their relationship arrives. Frame intersperses a traumatic internal monologue with extracts from the letter:

I had read only the first few words when I felt my heart leap up into my throat. I couldn't breathe.

'I cannot but expect that the contents of this Letter must greatly aggrieve you ...'

No.

No, no. (209)

The gentle repetition of 'no' here relays Catherine's emotional distress (209). However, Frame takes the expression of Catherine's suffering further, relaying in gruesome detail the physical manifestation of her trauma. As she reads the letter, she feels 'wetness on both legs, a stream of hot liquid starting to soak my stockings' because she 'couldn't control myself; a rivulet of piss flowed out of me' (209). Catherine's cries, we are told, 'brought the others to my room,' where Catherine is on the floor, lying 'in my own urine,' and 'howling' (210). The maidservants attempt to support Catherine, with one woman informing her that 'it would be all right,' but these words – and Catherine's shock – soon drive home the reality of her situation. She lashes out, striking the maid, and flails at her staff, screaming on the floor (210). This moment of violence marks her symbolic death, as she puts it, 'All I knew, the only thing, was this: I had reached

the end of the life I'd had. It was lost to me now' (210). Catherine becomes a 'beast in its lair', her transformation from an expectant, beautiful bride to a urine-covered, violent woman on the floor also demarcates her transition from 'ideal victim' to the macabre figure of Dickens's novel (Frame 210; Custers and Van de Bulck 98).

The events of the wedding day take place approximately two-thirds of the way through Frame's text, thus the remainder of the novel is a detailed insight into the traumatic effects following *that* day. In other words, Frame not only portrays Catherine's trauma but then also indulges her transformation into the Miss Havisham of Dickens's novel, something he relays by interspersing the remaining narrative with extracts from the Victorian text.

*Dickensian* presents much the same, but here Amelia's downfall is more visually restrained and confined to the final episode of the series. Like Frame's novel, Jordan presents Amelia's wedding preparations, with Amelia taking particular happiness in her friend Honoria arriving in time to participate in her bridal preparations. Unlike Frame's text and Dickens's novel, though, Jordan slightly rewrites the unveiling of Compeyson's deceit. Here, much centres on Arthur's reparation, his late change of heart about the duo's plan. But, while his actions may appear altruistic, he is entirely self-motivated: 'I intend to go to Satis House and sob at her feet' (17:30). Moreover, the change of heart is also effected with violence; Arthur employs Bill Sikes (from *Oliver Twist*) as his 'muscle', and Sikes, of course, happily dispenses violence in exchange for payment. Arthur gives Compeyson the option of imprisonment or writing a confession for Miss Havisham and delivering it in person (for which he can depart afterwards with cash from shares in the Havisham brewery). Thus, despite some protest about his choices, he opts for the latter. Such scenes are intercut, of course, with Amelia's wedding preparations.

The disclosure of romance fraud thus becomes a scene in which three men (Arthur, Compeyson, and Mr Jaggers, the family lawyer) traumatise Amelia with the knowledge that they are doing the 'right' thing. But this approach also visualises Amelia's humiliation; 'we', like the men, must bear witness to her trauma. Crying through her words, Amelia recognises quickly that she has been used sexually as well as emotionally for financial gain, and, onscreen, Compeyson supplements the letter with a verbal confession. Amelia gives him a choice: if he is truly sorry, he can leave Satis House without the money. But Compeyson is not truly sorry. Amelia expresses her pain with reference to the female body, drawing on language associated with sexual violence to convey her sense of shame:

You have taken all the secret things about me and tainted them. You have made them dirty and the joy of them has turned to shame. You made me trust you, made me feel safe in your arms, as if nothing bad could happen to me again, and I gave myself to you. I looked on you as my life, and you looked on me as prey. (27:03)

Quite bizarrely, however, Jordan attempts to transform Compeyson's villainy. In a rather clichéd form, Compeyson tells Amelia that, despite his former falsehoods, he now loves her and wishes to be given a chance to repair his wrongdoings. In effect, Jordan's Compeyson transforms from villain to victim; as he stands before Amelia, bloodied and exposed, his broken heart becomes as much the moral centre of *Dickensian's* final moments as Amelia's. Of course, though, because the now-conman with a heart of gold cannot atone for his sins, Amelia thus tries to control her humiliation by asking him to leave: 'I want you to go, so that I can sit here amidst my folly, surrounding by my stupidity for all the world to see' (28:38). These words are a stoic moment of agency, but it is also a knowing meta-moment of how Dickens constructed Miss Havisham as a spectacle in her wedding dress and a gesture to how she remains in popular culture. This moment of trauma (and self-blame) is what the viewer has eagerly anticipated, and it is apt, therefore, that it is the drama's emotional climax (but not before Compeyson picks up the bag and departs with the money). The final scene shows Amelia refusing to change from her dress, opting to wear it instead as a form of self-punishment. In other words, Miss Havisham's wedding dress becomes not only a physical manifestation of her trauma, but in *Dickensian*, a marker of *her* shame. Amelia's choice to wear it forever more denotes perpetual self-punishment, but Compeyson still leaves with the cash.

. . .

To conclude, both *Dickensian* and *Havisham* position themselves as 'tributes', as Frames calls it, 'to one of Dickens's most celebrated and iconic characters' (front cover). Yet, in positioning themselves in relation to Dickens's text, such prequels open their representation to ideological scrutiny and critical appraisal. As I have shown in the course of this chapter, these particular Dickensian prequels rely on violence towards women coupled with a focus on women's shame as methods for entertainment. Clearly, with a story like Miss Havisham's, suffering and torment are part and parcel of the Dickensian plotline. But, as these stories give flesh to a young woman's tale *before* her transformation into the gothic, macabre spinster that Dickens presents, the gender and sexual politics at play here cannot be overlooked. Berlant suggests that very often the cruelty of optimism lies in an individual's recognition of the attachment to a 'problematic object in advance of its loss' (94). In other words, it is heightened by foresight, but in the case of Miss Havisham the foresight belongs to the author and reader/viewer, rather than Catherine or Amelia; 'we' have access to the misogyny and duplicity that Miss Havisham does not and 'we', therefore, partake in her destruction. With this in mind, these neo-Victorian prequels to *Great Expectations* (unlike Duffy's, for instance) articulate a hostile and troubling account of how to destroy a woman. The reader/viewer might have, 'some compassion' and a 'better understanding of me', as Miss Havisham tells Pip in Dickens's novel, but, really, these texts have merely traded on violence against women as entertainment (*GE* 366).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Miriam Margolyes, 'Introduction', *Dickens' Women*. Edited by Miriam Margolyes and Sonia Fraser. Hesperus Press Ltd, 2011, pp. 1–15. Likewise, in *Dickens and Women* (1983), Michael Slater divided Dickens's women into three archetypes, none of which are particularly flattering: the unattainable object, the pre-pubescent idealised girl-woman, and the grotesque, and in *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman* (1993), David Holbrook finds a persistent association of women with death, specifically murder, across Dickens's *oeuvre*. Elsewhere, in *Dickens, Women and Language* (1992), Patricia Ingham argued for a more historically informed and less hostile assessment of his representation of women and, building on this, in *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women* (2008), Jenny Hartley illustrated Dickens's engagement with fallen women in the 19th century, arguing that whatever his motives he was nonetheless keen to help women in need of support.
- <sup>2</sup> Other neo-Victorian texts that have recreated Miss Havisham included Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1993) and Jasper Fforde's *Lost in A Good Book* (2002).
- <sup>3</sup> Letissier only reflects in passing that numerous real-life figures are said to have inspired Dickens's character. He notes both John Ryan's work on Eliza Emily Donnithorne, a young Australian woman who was also abandoned at the alter in 1856, and who died something of a recluse in 1886, and Martin Meisel's speculative piece on the evolution of Miss Havisham in Dickens's writing. See John Ryan's 'Eliza Emily Donnithorne', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/donnithorne-eliza-emily-3426> and 'A Possible Australian Source for Miss Havisham', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol 1, no. 2, 1963, pp 134–6, and Martin Meisel, 'Miss Havisham Bought to Book', *PMLA*, vol. 81, no. 3, 1966, pp. 278–85.
- <sup>4</sup> Of course, reinstated in a 19th-century context, this moment would also mark Miss Havisham as an unrespectable – if not fallen – woman.

## Works cited

- Berlant, Lauren. 'Cruel Optimism', *The Affect Theory Reader*. Edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Duke UP, 2010, pp. 93–117.
- Banyard, Kat, *The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Men and Women Today*. Faber and Faber, 2010.
- Clark, Clare. 'Havisham by Ronald Frame – Review', *The Guardian*, 7 Dec. 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/07/havisham-ronald-frame-review>. Accessed 30 Oct. 2017.



- Cross, Cassandra, Molly Dragiewicz, and Kelly Richards. 'Understanding Romance Fraud: Insights from Domestic Violence Research.' *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 58, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1303–1322.
- Cuklanz, Lisa M., and Sujata Moorti. 'Television's "New" Feminism: Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2006, pp. 302–21.
- Custers, Kathleen, and Jan Van den Bulck, 'The Cultivation of Fear of Sexual Violence in Women: Processes and Moderators of the Relationship Between Television and Fear.' *Communication Research*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 96–124.
- Davies, Helen. *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Edited by Janice Carlisle. Bedford Books, 1996.
- Duffy, Carol Ann. *Mean Time*. Picador, 1993.
- Frame, Ronald. *Havisham*. Faber and Faber, 2012.
- Hartley, Jenny. *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women*. Methuen, 2008.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Holbrook, David. *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman*. New York UP, 1993.
- Home Office, *Guidance: Domestic Abuse and Violence*. Gov.UK, 8 Mar. 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-violence-and-abuse>. Accessed 29 May 2017.
- Jordan, Tony, writer. *Dickensian*. BBC, 2015.
- Kaplan, Cora. 'Neo-Victorian Dickens.' *Charles Dickens in Context*. Edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux. Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 81–7.
- Kirchknopf, Andrea. '(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts,' *Neo-Victorian Studies* vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 53–80.
- Kelly, D.H. 'Dickensian Fails to Meet Great Expectations on Female Characterisation,' *The F Word*, 19 January 2016. <https://www.thefword.org.uk/2016/01/dickensian-fails-to-meet-great-expectations-on-female-characterisation>. Accessed 19 Mar. 2018.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben. 'Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century,' *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben. Rodopi, 2010, pp. 1–34.
- Letissier, Georges, 'The Havisham Affair or the Afterlife of a Memorable Figure,' *Études Anglaises*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2012, pp. 30–42.

- Margolyes, Miriam, and Sonia Fraser, editors. *Dickens' Women*. Hesperus Press Ltd., 2011.
- Regis, Amber, and Deborah Wynne. 'Miss Havisham's Dress: Materialising Dickens in Film Adaptations of *Great Expectations*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 35–8.
- Slater, Michael. *Dickens and Women*. Stanford UP, 1983.
- Stange, G. Robert. 'Expectations Well Lost Dickens' Fable for His Time', *College English*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1954, pp. 9–17.
- Raphael, Linda. 'A Re-Vision of Miss Havisham: Her Expectations and Our Responses', *Great Expectations: New Castbooks*, edited by Roger D. Sell. Macmillan, 1994, pp. 216–32.
- World Health Organization. *Factsheet: Violence against Women*. Nov. 2016. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>. Accessed 22 May 2018.