Women Writers on Film

A REPRESENTATION OF THE WORK AND LIVES OF MARY SHELLEY AND THE BRONTË SISTERS THROUGH LITERARY BIOPICS

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Abstract

Literary biopics about female writers are often criticised for he way they portray the life and work of their protagonist. They are said to impose romantically inclined visualisations on the lives of these writers, thereby surpassing their professional endeavors and achievements. In doing so, some female literary biopics arguably provide an affirmation of the more traditional assumptions that female lives are merely about love interests and victimisation. The current study analyses two literary biopics: *Mary Shelley* (2017) and *To Walk Invisible* (2016). It will explore how these contemporary films represent female writers. This thesis sheds a light on how the biopics convey the often-challenging process of publishing, and the role of the men in the female protagonists' lives. It appears that the men in these films often overshadow or threaten the reputation and representation of the female protagonists. This thesis demonstrates how the protagonists in *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley* are represented and explores whether they have managed to move away from the traditional female biopic.

Keywords: Literary Biopics, Lifewriting, Biographical Films, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, To Walk Invisible, Femininity, Gendered Authorship, Byronic Hero, Byronic Myth

Introduction

The biopic is a genre on the rise, as a large amount of films have brought to screen the lives of prominent persons in recent years.[1] Despite its increasing popularity, the genre has also suffered from heavy criticism. Not only is the biopic 'often received as a throwback to old-fashioned modes of storytelling,'[2] it is also criticised for its representation of prominent female characters. According to Dennis Bingham, the classic female biopic is built on 'madness, hysteria, sexual dependency, the male gaze, and a patriarchal authorship.'[3] Adding to that, Andrew Higson points out in his extensive work on this genre, *The Writer on Film,* that most of recent biopics on women writers are merely 'female-friendly films designed to appeal to feminine sensibilities and to attract female audiences.'[4] He further argues that female biopics are made in the first place to appeal to young women, but do so in a disappointing way. Namely, they focus on 'romantic dramas and costume dramas, genres traditionally associated with female audiences.'[5] Unfortunately, a focus on romantic and costume drama more often than not overshadows the portrayal of strong female characters.

It is this extreme focus on romantic drama that tends to interfere with realistic visualisations of the lives and work of women writers. In another essay included in *The Writer on Film*, Sophia Haiduc demonstrates how this tendency to overdramatise poses a threat to the 'literary and contextual aspects of the female biopic.'[6] It appears filmmakers face a tough choice when making a female biopic. Although a more realistic representation

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[1] Phil Hoad. 2014. "Biopics: Film-Makers Breathe New Life into a Tired Concept – at a Price." *The Guardian*, 9 January.

[2] Tom Brown, and Belen Vidal. 2014. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2.

[3] Dennis Bingham. 2010. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 310.

[4] Andrew Higson. "Brit-lit biopics, 1990-2000." In *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, by Judith Buchanan, 106-120. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 106.

[5] Ibid., 106.

[6] Sonia Haiduc. "'Here is The Story of my Career...': The Woman writer on Film." In *The Writer on Film, screening Literary Authorship*, by Judith Buchanan, 50-64. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 62.

of women writers could inspire and empower generations to come, the safer option is to maintain the focus on romantic drama. According to Tom Brown this is a challenging dilemma, as filmmakers' main goal remains to entertain spectators, and to generate profit from productions.[7]

Brown further explains how the biopic genre is both 'as maligned as it is prolific and durable.'[8] The genre has definitely proven itself to be both prolific and durable. Phil Hoad mentions in the Guardian how 'many principal acting Oscars have gone to actors playing real-life figures.'[9] This proven success makes it undesirable and perhaps even risky for filmmakers to make changes in an existing, profitable genre. Still, to keep female biopics the way they are – focusing on romance and drama – undermines contemporary feminist ideas and does not do justice to literary figures such as Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters. In order to respectfully bring to screen the lives of women writers, it is crucial for biopics to find a balance which does justice to screening their private lives and professional achievements.

This balance in biopics– or the lack thereof - is further explained by Bingham, who uses the term 'tension' to show how it can be challenging for filmmakers to create a biopic on women writers. He implies that this tension comes with the dichotomy between private and public lives: a struggle which, according to him, is characteristic of women's lives.[10] Bingham also acknowledges how it can be challenging for filmmakers to find an interesting way to envision the looming dullness of the art of writing, as most spectators have a tendency 'to see living, discovery, and realization as anticlimactic and undramatic.'[11] This tendency could be a motivation for filmmakers to choose to overdramatise the lives of their

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[7] Brown and Vidal. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, 3.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Hoad. "Biopics: Film-makers Breathe New Life into a Tired Concept – at a Price."
[10] Bingham. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 326.
[11] Ibid, 326.

protagonists. However, if the dullness of the act of writing is indeed the reason why biopics focus more on personal drama, this tendency would also influence the films about male writers. This is not the case, as the extreme focus on romantic lives and suffering remains typical to female biopics, where films on men seem to have a much broader focus. 'Biopics of women,' as Bingham remarks, 'are weighed down by myths of suffering and victimization,'[12] whereas biopics on men have a broad variety of frameworks to choose from.

Overdramatising female lives in biopics could seriously harm the perception of female writers, as the drama in these films is often found in an extreme focus on failure, struggle, or romance. The films focus only on the tension female protagonists encounter in transcending their private lives and more traditional orientations, such as housekeeping and matrimony. These traditional expectations could very well have formed an issue, especially for early nineteenth century women writers such as Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters. Still, an extreme focus on these difficulties - on the struggle that comes with being a woman - would deliberately victimise even the strongest female character. Moreover, it would surpass their success and importance in the literary world.

The literary biopic featuring a female protagonist thus forms a challenge to the filmmaker as there must be a balance found between screening the tension between:

a) the visualisations of the art of writing < > overdramatisation.

b) professional achievements < > traditional gendered expectations: marriage and motherhood.

As more and more literary biopics emerge, research into the genre as done by Higson, Bingham and Haiduc is of significant public interest because they provide relevant information on the relation between contemporary media culture and society. These studies show how filmmakers decide to represent woman writers. More importantly,

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[12] Ibid.

research into specific gender representations in these biopics adds to the scholarly field of feminism and gender studies. The classic female biopic – as Bingham and Buchanan distinguished – differs from the typical male biopic. This is a gendered division, which agrees with the perspective from gender theory, that main differences in representation between men and women are explained by their differences in sex. It strives to explain specific gender roles by exploring what is masculine or feminine, and why.[13] Feminism encompasses the belief in overall equality of the sexes.[14] Studies on biopics in relation to gender theory and feminism show how even nowadays strong female characters are victimised to create drama in order to attract a bigger audience.

To explore whether recent literary biopics have indeed adopted a more feminist stance, and to shed a light on how female writers and their male counterparts are represented in contemporary biopics, I will analyse and compare two recent films: *Mary Shelley* (2017) and *To Walk Invisible* (2016) through a close reading of both biopics. The first chapter of this study explores how the filmmakers represent both Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters as writers and as film heroines, in order to see if their cinematic portrayals move away from traditional gendered assumptions such as matrimony, love interests and extensive drama. This chapter aims to explain how the tension between the public lives and the more traditional expectations and orientations related to female writers, is brought to the screen. The second chapter examines the roles played by men in these biopics. It explains how they are represented and how these representations may affect or influence the roles of the female protagonists, by showing similarities and contrasts to the Byronic myth as described by Harris. In other words, through this research and by a close reading of these biopics I aim to find an answer to the following question: In what ways do contemporary literary biopics

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[13] Amy Sheldon. 1997. *Talking Power: Girls, Gender Enculturation and Discourse.* London: Sage Publications, 225-226.
[14] Laura Brunell and Elinor Burkett. 2019. *www.britannica.com.* Encyclopedia Britannica. 8 February. Accessed June 2019. https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism.

represent the public and personal lives of Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters, and how do these representations affirm and/or subvert traditional gendered assumptions?

The current study further explores whether contemporary representations of nineteenth century female writers on screen agree with modern, postfeminist ideas. The term postfeminism is used in academic discourse 'to mean an epistemological turn from the racial, class and sexual blind spots of white, middle-class and largely heterosexual Anglo-American second-wave feminism towards new (arguably more intersectional) feminisms.'[15] Acknowledging the development of new forms of feminism is important because contemporary female biopics reach an audience of young women in a society which constantly develops its ideas on gender and sexuality. This raises the question whether female biopics adapt their framework similarly.

Postfeminism is often associated with a modern feeling of freedom and individuality. The aspect of choice is key: even traditional gendered expectations such as marriage and motherhood can become empowering when a woman chooses them intentionally.[16] According to Rosalind Gill in *Gender and the Media*, in this new media culture 'key feminist notions of empowerment and choice have been appropriated by the neo-liberal media that seeks to inspire women (especially young women) to perceive their agency as that of active, self-monitoring, heterosexually desiring consumers who are now encouraged to choose traditional gender roles.'[17] In other words: the media seeks to inspire young women and strengthen them in their ideas of freedom and sexuality. This group of young women is reputedly the target audience for biopics on women writers, which means that in order to appeal to them, filmmakers have to make changes in the contemporary female biopic framework. Although the label postfeminism is used since 1980, it gained popularity over the

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[15] Antonija Primorac. 2018. *Neo-Victorianism on Screen Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian Women*. Palgrave Macmillan, 30.
[16] Ibid, 16-17.
[17] Rosalind Gill. 2007. *Gender and the Media.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 254-255.

past years.[18] According to Elana Levine, the media culture and its surrounding feminist

scholarships altered around the year 2000.[19] It is interesting to see the development in recent

biopics, especially since most research on biopics and is based on samples from before 2010,

although since 1990 a 'perceivably postfeminist sensibility started to permeate cultural

production in the West.'[20] Media culture started to adjust under the influence of

postfeminism, which in its turn could bolster postfeminist ideas in contemporary culture.

Gill first introduced the term 'postfeminist sensibility'. According to her, it is essential to

focus on postfeminist media culture and its 'resultant sensibility,'[21] to allow studies and

discussions to move away from focussing on different forms of feminism and their

authenticity, and to enable them to explore 'the effects of what is new in contemporary

representations and definitions of gender in the media.'[22] Following Gill's theory, this study

examines the representation of Mary Shelley and the Brontës and explores how they may

differ from previous representations of women writers in biopics. It also briefly discusses the

possible effects these chosen representations have on contemporary culture.

Ideas of freedom and development of individual sexuality are terms are not commonly

used to describe the nineteenth century, which makes it even more interesting to explore how

filmmakers capture the heritage in both *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley*, in a postfeminist

way. Placing a postfeminist story in the past offers an interesting contrast. Aantje Asscheid

explains in the Journal of Film and Television, that the contradictions associated with a

certain genre are often used by filmmakers to increase eroticism. This trend again causes an

extreme focus on romance and drama in women's lives, while at the same time it creates

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[18] Levine, Elana. 2009. "Review: Feminist Media Studies in a Postfeminist Age." *Cinema Journal* (University of Texas) 48 (4): 137-143. 138.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Primorac. *Neo-Victorianism on Screen*. 4.
[21] Gill. *Gender and the Media.* 254-255.
[22] Ibid.

'postfeminist *her*stories and fantasies of romantic self-discovery (…) rather than encourage a feminist critique that is applicable to contemporary discourse.'[23]

Biopics featuring a Victorian heroine, such as *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley* offer a solution for the 'the vacuum for more or less nostalgic fantasies of the past'[24] as the surroundings of the nineteenth century forms a perfect context for what Ascheid calls 'safe rebellions.'[25] She theorises that these rebellions are 'narratives of (invariably heterosexual, white-, middle- or upper-class) women's struggle for self-fulfilment displaced into a repressive Victorian context.'[26] This struggle for self-fulfilment is prominent in both Mary Shelley's as in the Brontë's lives, and represented in *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley* by screening their roads to publication. The current study examines whether the focus of *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley* remains on this struggle, or develops towards a more realistic and inspiring portrayal of these important women.

To provide a complete image of how women writers are portrayed, it is crucial to also examine the roles played by men in female biopics. In biopics such as *Sylvia* (2003) and *The Edge of Love* (2008) the male characters pose a threat to the female protagonists, both sexually and intellectually.[27] In these films the roles of the male characters shape the female roles to such an extent that the men tend to outshine the women. A female film cannot be a feminist film when the female characters are important only because of the way in which they interact with their male counterpart. In the literary biopics mentioned above, the male characters are – in some ways - threatening and intimidating the female roles, because they show similarities to the Byronic hero.[28]

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[23] Aantje Ascheid. 2006. "Safe Rebellions: Romantic Emancipation in the "Woman's Heritage Film" ." Journal of Film and Television.
[24] Primorac. *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 7.
[25] Ascheid. "Safe Rebellions." Journal of Film and Television.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Siân Harris. "'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know': The Male Poet in Sylvia (2003) and The Edge of Love (2008)." In *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, by Judith Buchanan, 64-76. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 65.
[28] Ibid.

This Byronic inheritance encompasses 'a damaged and damaging anti-hero,' who is 'superior in suffering, sinfulness, subversions, and perversions.'[29] The phenomenon in which the men cause damage and are damaged themselves is important for the current research, because the ways in which the male characters influences the portrayal of the female protagonist is an indication whether contemporary biopics have moved away from its traditional framework of victimisation and romance.

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[29] Sarah Wootton. *Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation.* Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 2.

Chapter 1

Private or Public: Publishing Problems

The lives of women writers form interesting material for biopics. According to Bingham, female biopics are all about screening the tension between professional power, drama and love. The lives of the Brontë sisters and Mary Shelley were very much filled with this tension. In the first place, this was because of the basic fact that they were women who tried to get their voices heard outside their private homes. Secondly, the early nineteenth century world had certain expectations of them[30] - as women were supposed to marry, tend for their families and raise offspring – which limited their time and ability to dedicate themselves to the process of writing. On the other hand, an extreme focus on the hardship of publication would disregard the possibilities nineteenth century women writers already had, as the publication of literary work was definitely a possibility by then. The evaluation of their work was still gendered, yet the possibility for them to write and to be heard outside their homes existed.[31] Gendered evaluation did not end in the nineteenth century. Mary Eagleton emphasised recently how 'the word 'woman' appended to the word 'writer' still carries 'a lot of unfinished business.'[32] Finding a balance in the screening of both hardship and success is important in realistically representing women writers in a modern and feminist way. When this balance is reached, the genre of literary biopic starts to develop positively towards a more feminist approach.

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[30] Katerine Hughes. *Gender Roles in the 19th Century.* British Library. 15 May 2014. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century (accessed April 24, 2019).
[31] Elaine Showalter. 1977. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 74.
[32] Mary Eagleton. 2005. *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 155.

When the focus remains on screening the tension and struggle, and the protagonists are victimised merely because they are female, it can be argued that typical female biopics are – as Bingham states – 'weighed down by myths of suffering, victimization, and failure.'[33] Therefore, contemporary biopics have to find a balance: an equal division in focus between struggle and achievement. It is only when this balance is found and respected that the film becomes inspiring, not only for its romantic drama, but for its accurate representation of the female writer. The current chapter considers whether *Mary Shelley* and *To Walk Invisible* surpass the extreme focus on gendered perspectives, or whether these films are, as the Guardian suggests, simply 'Romance[s] with a capital R'[34], 'teen movie[s]'[35], or if they are 'a bleak and brilliant portrayal.'[36]

The Brontë Sisters had their first work published in 1846. They managed to publish a combined volume of poetry: nineteen poems for Charlotte, twenty-one poems for Emily and Anne.[37] Yet starting this chapter with this brief moment of success is like starting a story in medias res: there is a long and frustrating preceding story to it. Charlotte tried to draw attention to her work much earlier. Although books such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were mostly well-received, there was a marked double standard in criticising literature, as the reception of literary work was still strictly gendered.[38] According to nineteenth century critics there was a clear difference between masculine and feminine literature. For a woman to get her work published meant that the qualities of her work were not reviewed on its own merits. In order to let literary quality surpass gendered expectations, the Brontë sisters opted to write under ambiguous pseudonyms. Their first published work carries the names of Currer, Acton

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[33] Bingham. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 326.

[34] Simran Hans. "Mary Shelley review – Romance with a Capital R." *www.theguardian.com.* 8 July 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/08/mary-shelley-review-elle-fanning (accessed June 6, 2019).

[35] Ibid.

[36] Lucy Mangan. "To Walk Invisible review – a Bleak and Brilliant Portrayal of the Brontë family." *www.theguardian.com.* 30 December 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/dec/30/to-walk-invisible-review-a-bleak-and-brilliant-portrayal-of-the-Brontë-family (accessed June 6, 2019).

[37] Elizabeth Gaskell. 1919. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë.* London: Oxford University Press.

[38] Showalter. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, 27-28.

and Ellis Bell. According to sales numbers the publication was not successful: only a handful of copies were sold.[39] Yet, this was not end for the Brontës' literary careers, as all three of them produced a novel in the following year. In 1847 *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were published, all still under pseudonyms. In other words, the Brontës' have proven how publication was an option for nineteenth century women, even if the road to it proved to be a rocky one, and they could not take credit for their work.

If it was hard for the Brontë sisters to write and publish poetry and prose, how must doing exactly that have been for Mary Shelley. Shelley's novel *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus* appeared 29 years prior in 1818. Her passion for writing started early. It is said that her father – the well-known philosopher, novelist, and journalist William Godwin – distanced himself from his highly intellectual and challenging lifestyle when his wife Mary Wollstonecraft died.[40] Although he supported his daughter, she was mostly left alone in her education. Mary could often be found next to her mother's grave, writing stories. Her stepmother disapproved of Mary's extensive reading habits and kept sending her to the store room to work.[41] Thus, similar to the Brontës, Mary started writing at a very young age and continued to do so despite the difficulties that came with it. The following part of this chapter provides an analysis of both *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley*, to explore how these films incorporate and visualise the tension between the difficulties and successes in the women's writing careers, and to see whether these contemporary literary biopics have moved away from the typical victimisation and romantic drama associated with the genre.

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[39] Miriam Allot. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage.* London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 8.
[40] Helen Moore. 1886. *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.* Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincot Company, 49.
[41] Ibid.

Analysis

'But with no prospect of publication, it's just playing at it, isn't it?'[42]

To Walk Invisible starts at the very beginning: showing the Brontë family as children, and in that way introducing them as already possessing an enormous imagination at a young age. The three sisters and their brother Branwell created their imaginary world of Gondal when they were very young, while playing with Branwell's toy soldiers. These stories later evolved, as their inventors grew up as well, and they started to represent more of the real world.[43] Quickly after the opening scenes [00:08:12] Charlotte and Anne engage in a conversation about story writing. Charlotte explains that despite being sent a discouraging letter in which she was told literature was no business for a woman, she kept on writing and still desires to be published. This is where the tension mentioned by Bingham and Haiduc first shows, as the dichotomy between gendered expectations and Charlotte's wish to transcend them is explicitly brought to the screen. This tension is further explored when Emily and Anne have a stroll through the broad and waving heather of the moors surrounding their village [00:10:02], discussing Branwell and the ways in which he disappoints them and their father. 'I felt sorry for him,' Emily says, 'they always expected so much of him, more probably than he was ever capable of. And I just thought: Thank god I am not you'. With these lines Emily expresses her empathy and likewise her understanding of what it is like to be judged: to be scrutinised and compared to certain standards and expectations. To be who one really is can be – in Branwell's case – to be someone uncapable of meeting these standards.

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[42] *To Walk Invisible.* Directed by Sally Wrainwright. Performed by Charlie Murphy, Adam Nagaitis, Chloe Pirrie, Jonathan Pryce Finn Atkins. 2016.

[43] Allot. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage,* 8.

Emily's comparison to her brother reveals hesitation and fear as the reasons she dreads the publication of her poetry, not the fact that she is a woman. With this scene, the biopic moves away from gender-related problems, and emphasises how publication and success are hard to accomplish for both men and women. As the conversation between Emily and Anne continues on their discussion about Charlotte, the focus on the gendered dichotomy shows again. Emily suggests that her sister's downcast mood is caused not by her struggle to be published, but – according to Emily – because she was turned down by a man. This scene implies that Charlotte's great focus on the publication of her poetry is a result of her frustration with the rejection. At the same time, this turn in conversation juxtaposes Charlotte's professionalism and yearning for public achievement, drawing the emphasis in this biopic towards the traditional elements of love and victimisation.

Throughout *To Walk Invisible*, the tension between private and public lives keeps subtilty shifting, as explored in the scenes abovementioned. This is noticeable especially in the conversation between Charlotte and Emily. At [00:20:08] Charlotte ponders on the reasons why the literary field is disadvantageous to women. Both sisters gaze out the window, as Charlotte asks: 'why is it that a woman's lot is so very different than a man's? I've never felt inferior, have you, intellectually? Why is it that we have so very few opportunities!' Again, Charlotte touches upon the very core of their problems concerning publication in a very straightforward way, simultaneously providing a clever echo of *Jane Eyre*. Emily's curt retort again emphasises the tension Bingham refers to, when she says: 'did he never write back to you then?' With this line Emily emphasises the more traditional female orientations. In *The Writer On Film*, Haiduc points out that female biopics tend to let romantic drama overshadow the protagonist's quest for self-definition.[44] This tendency is reflected in these scenes, as film director Wainwright finds ways to ever so subtly hint at the

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[44] Haiduc. *The Writer on Film.* 2013, 51.

Brontë's romantic lives. Still, the question remains whether she also manages to find a balance which respects the Brontë sister's lives, or whether she focusses too much on the hardships of being a woman.

This balance shows appears more in the film. Emily turns around after Anne convinces her to write novels, and together they start their quest to find a willing publisher. They write three separate novels, all under gender neutral, ambiguous pseudonyms. It is enlightening to see how from this moment on the focus of the film remains on their quest, exploring both hardship and success. There is no overdramatizing, nor over-imposing of romantic drama. In fact, the only thing spectators can guess about romantic endeavours is how mister Nicholls falling teacup and awkwardness around Charlotte might suggest he aspires to be more than just Patrick Brontë 's curate... [00:37:15] By also focusing on Branwell's life, the film illustrates that to have trouble finding a publisher, to struggle with live and the expectations that come with it is not strictly gendered. This provides a more balanced perspective of nineteenth century life and shows that there were possibilities for both men and women, and moreover, how they equally had to work hard for it to succeed. The sisters decide not to let Branwell participate in their road to publication as Emily says [00:39:45] 'He'd drag us down with him.' This scene proves they can succeed on their own.

The film then shows how Charlotte moves off to Manchester with their father, and Emily and Anne stay at home to receive the first rejection of their novels [01:01:00]. They find their manuscripts to be unread by the publisher, yet they both recollect themselves and continue to pursue their goal. Finally, at [01:17:05] they find a publisher who agrees 'on steep terms' to publish *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*, although not *The Professor*, written by Charlotte. A discussion follows, in which Charlotte is represented as remarkably professional and non-dramatic, as she insists Emily and Anne go forth in the publication process without her. A scene which again moves away from the typical deliberate

victimisation of women in literary biopics: Charlotte is portrayed as a strong young woman, even though she encounters a setback. Only after Charlotte writes *Jane Eyre,* all three novels are published. It is with great pride, yet also with some hesitation the three sisters decide to inform their father of their success. He becomes the only one who knows, as they do not want to draw Branwell further down by confronting him with their success. A decision which eloquently screens the sisters' empathy and thoughtfulness, while at the same time again emphasising how they succeeded in literature on their own. As the girls reveal themselves to be the Bells all along, Patrick Brontë exclaims: 'Currer Bell! No... but he is famous!' [01:30:01]. Charlotte explains to him how the money they earned with their literary work is enough to 'furnish us with a comfortable existence.' The biopic thus focusses on how Charlotte surpassed the expected gendered roles of the early nineteenth century, by offering to provide for her family where her father and brother cannot.

The moment in which the Brontës reveal themselves to their publisher is a key scene, as it shows how the publisher's attitude towards the Brontë sisters changes immediately after he finds out about their true identity and gender. When they first step into his store he treats them as unknowing and naïve – because they are women. When he finds out they are indeed the authors behind the pseudonyms he becomes polite, and immediately invites them to meet important people. The biopic screens how the world literally opens up for the Brontë sisters, but only after they have proven themselves anonymously.

<u>'There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand.'[45]</u>

Mary Shelley had a different take on publishing her now well-known novel *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*. In 1818 - almost 30 years before the Brontës - she did not opt for an ambiguous pseudonym, but instead chose to publish her novel anonymously. Before the publication of her first novel, the writer already led a very full and tumultuous life. In the introduction to the 1818 version of *Frankenstein* published in 2008, Marilyn Butler states that the 'emotional stresses' Mary faced during her life must have had 'subtle, powerful effects on the shaping of *Frankenstein*, her first and best novel.'[46] Mary's background provides abundant material for a biopic, considering she was the daughter of two prominent thinkers and writers, her relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley and her own unique character provide interesting material for a biopic. Also, it is interesting to see how filmmakers choose to represent Mary in both her private life and in her public aspirations. In *To Walk Invisible*, the idea of tension explained earlier is presented in a very noticeable way: the film visualises how the Brontë sisters were expected to work, as governesses or teachers, and marry. They had a rather conventional youth, which made the contrast between what they had and what they aspired more pronounced. This was different for Mary, as her youth was already far from conventional: her parents were both known for their deviant lifestyles and choices concerning matrimony. Both William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft were great thinkers and writers, and this was always expected from Mary as well.[47] As Bingham theorised, the dichotomy in a woman's life between private and public spheres forms the basis for a female biopic. The representation of Mary Shelley is crucial in assessing whether this contemporary biopic respects the expectations Mary's private surrounding had of her,

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[45] *Mary Shelley.* Directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour. Performed by Bel Powely, Owen Richards Elle Fanning. 2017.

[46] Marilyn Butler. "Introduction." In *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley, 4-51. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 13.

[47] Ibid.

moving away from the conventional female biopic, or whether it remains more traditional and finds ways to victimise Mary, and overdramatise her life.

As the film begins, the spectator is instantly introduced to Mary's writing: the sound of her pencil on paper is unmistakable. In the opening scene sees Mary retiring at her mother's grave to write a horror story, a well-known habit of hers.[48] This scene [00:01:45] immediately sets the gothic atmosphere that characterizes the rest of the film and offers reminders of the story of *Frankenstein*. The graveside, the eerie classical music and Mary's writing form an intriguing start to the biopic. In contrast to the Brontë sisters – and especially Emily Brontë – the film shows how Mary is open about her writing. The film demonstrates how she shares her stories with her little half-brother William, and with her stepsister Claire Clairmont. The only important person she hides her work from is her father. The film implies he would not approve of her work, because although he supports Mary's aspiration to write, she fears the quality and genre of her work would altogether disappoint him. Tension can be detected in these first scenes, and it has everything to do with how Mary divides her time: she is expected to do her chores like the rest of the children. At [00:04:58] Mary is confronted by her stepmother, who calls in Mary's father to punish her for being out all day. This scene shows how hard it was for women to transcend expectations and to find time and space to pursue their goal, which agrees with the traditional ideas on female biopics pointed out by Haiduc and Bingham.

When Mary hides herself a second time to write her stories [00:07:26], she is again found by her stepmother. The tension Bingham refers to is clear: she is expected (only by her very conventional stepmother) to fulfill her chores at home. Like so many other women in the nineteenth century, she is expected to clean, to work, to contribute to her household. It is –

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[48] Butler. "Introduction." In *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley. 14.

similarly to *To Walk Invisible* – in the disturbed balance between that and her will to transcend these expectations where the focus of this film seems to find its basis. After this confrontation, her father now finally gets to see her work. After reading her material, he sends her off to Scotland: not as punishment, but to help her to find her own voice. He dissolves the tension created earlier by acknowledging her need to write. He releases Mary of her homely tasks, providing her with the space and time she needs to develop her own writing. The film seems to lose some of its earlier set basis from this moment on. For a long time here is no tension for Mary, who - as she says at [00:11:47] loves it in Scotland and indulges herself in poetry and country life. From the moment she meets Percy Bysshe Shelley, the film focusses on her love for him. Being with Percy is not a conventional choice for Mary, as he is a married man and their relationship is therefore even prohibited by law. From this moment onwards, the biopic becomes more of a romanticised love story, deviating much from *To Walk Invisible*. It turns into, as the Guardian headlines: 'Romance with a capital R.'[49]

In order to revisit the screening of publication and its difficulties for women, the film might be fast-forwarded to [01:35:13], where Mary presents the first completed manuscript containing *Frankenstein* to Percy. It is her first step to disclose what was ever so private: her first novel. Percy responds positively, as he tells her at [01:36:00]: 'It is magnificent! It exceeds even what I believed you were capable of!' and offers to bring it to his publisher – an offer which Mary refuses, as she wants to go alone. Percy's lines emphasise the little expectations he had from Mary's work. It is arguable whether this is because of her gender, or because he simply feels superior to all other writing then his own.

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[49] Simran Hans. "Mary Shelley review – Romance with a capital R." *The Guardian*, 8-7-2018.

As Mary tries to find a publisher for *Frankenstein*, the film shows the overwhelming amount of refusals in one scene [01:41:20]. The spectator hears all letter replies in different voices, which is confusing. The scene manages to convey the confusion and overall rejection Mary feels. In the following scene Mary tells Percy how she finally found a publisher – yet only if she would remain anonymous, and let Percy write the introduction, to which he immediately agrees. In the dialogue that follows, the tension – or balance - between public and private spheres becomes eminent again, as Mary says: 'You want me to abandon my claim to it because my gender might spoil its success.'

The film takes an interesting turn when Polidori [01:45:15] shows up at Mary's door. His story *The Vampyre* has been published under the name of Lord Byron. He experiences exactly what Mary meant with 'abandoning her claim,' only Polidori did not have any say in it. Even though Byron publicly announced it was not his work, the people, as Polidori claims 'just have no interest in the truth.' In comparing Mary to Polidori, the film screens how problems in dealing with authenticity and ownership are not strictly gendered. This comparison helps the film to move away from the traditional victimisation of women, as it shows how men can suffer the same fate. To see Polidori's suffering and to hear him give up his claim on *The Vampyre* empowers Mary to pursue her own dream.

As the film reaches its end [01:49:02], Percy finally reveals Mary to be the true author of the work, and the couple is reunited. In an emotional conversation Mary says: 'my choices made me who I am,' with which she takes full responsibility for the misery she endured in her life. While the spectator is urged to see Percy as scapegoat, Mary emphasises that it was her decision to stay all along. The slot scene at [01:52:00] depicts how William Godwin arranged for a second print of the work, which exposes Mary as the author.

Although throughout this biopic there is great focus on Mary's romantic life – especially in the middle section of the film - there is also much screen time dedicated to

Mary's literary success. The same can be said for *To Walk Invisible*. Both films demonstrate

that having problems concerning publication and success are not strictly gender-bound. Both

Percy Shelley and Branwell Brontë experience these kinds of struggles in their lives, a topic

which is further explored and enlightened in the next chapter of this thesis. These two very

recent biopics raise hope concerning the representation of female protagonists. The genre

seems to steer clear from its former tendency of 'trapping them [women] for decades in a

cycle of failure, victimisation and the downward trajectory.'[50]

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[50] Bingham. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 35.

Chapter 2

Gender Roles: Men in Biopics on Women Writers

A film about women writers is a film about women: an obvious point. Yet, to only investigate and analyse the roles played by women would be short-sighted. In order to analyse a film and to explore whether it is empowering and feminist, it is crucial to look at all roles, especially since there is a tendency to objectify men in the debate around feminism. Men often become 'the objects, part of the analysis, agents of the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of patriarchal mode.'[51] This is a tendency which is just as harmful as the trend to overdramatise female lives. Stories told by men and women are assumed to be received and judged equally, and in order to approach feminism and feminist films accordingly, the characters played by men are just as important in evaluating these films as the roles played by women.

There is abundant research on female roles in biopics. But what kind of role is typical for men in biopics? Bingham first made the gender-based distinction in genre, as he said biopics about females focus on their victimisation, while, according to him, biopics about men 'have gone from celebratory to warts- and- all, to investigatory to postmodern and parodic.'[52] In contrast to female characters, the men in these films seem to have many possible means of representation. In other words: there seems to be no specific frame for the portrayal of men in literary biopics. Siân Harris wrote an essay on the role of male poets in literary biopics about women writers, in which she argues how men in these films often pose a threat to their female co-players. Their roles are inspired by the Byronic myth: a myth used to form a standard in visualising the masculine poet. Harris explains how Byron's name

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[51] Stephen Heath. "Male Feminism." In *Men in Feminism*, by Alice Jardin and Paul Smith, 1-33. Oxon: Routledge, 2013, 1.
[52] Bingham. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 10.

stands as 'a byword for brooding charisma and saturnine sexual allure' and she mentions how this myth is 'inextricably bound up with the portrayal of the male poet in popular culture.'[53] She emphasises how the representation of male poets in popular culture frequently has to do more with sexuality and charisma, and less with literary talent or realistic character development. In that way the role of men in literary biopics about women can be assumed to be as stigmatised and as stereotypical and cliché as the characters portrayed by women. Harris demonstrates how the portrayal of men according the Byronic myth brings to screen 'characters that confuse petulance with charisma, promiscuity with prowess and affectation with talent.'[54] This representation could assumingly harm the role of men as convincing and realistic literary figures, because the manifestation of petulance, promiscuity and affectation are characteristics considered negative and morally reprehensible. Nonetheless, the Byronic myth is persistent in popular culture.

Opposite to the Byronic hero stands the more practical man. Irving Babbitt, an influential literary critic in the early twentieth century, already remarked that 'the man who took literature too seriously would be suspected of effeminacy. The really virile thing is to be an electrical engineer.'[55] He claims a man could be a writer or a poet, but was only perceived as masculine when he was not too serious about it. Supposedly a lot has changed since Babbitt made this statement in 1908. Yet according to Harris, this view remains consistent in popular culture, and provides a 'counterpoint to the Byronic fantasy of dangerous potency.'[56] She states that there are two possible representations for men in literary biopics: the Byronic hero, who is a sensual and dangerous poet, and his opposite: a more practical man who proves his virility through straightforwardness. This juxtaposition between stereotypical representations of men creates a framework for the analysis of the roles of Branwell Brontë

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[53] Harris. 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know', 65.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Irving Babbit. *Literature and the American College.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908, 172.
[56] Harris. 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know', 67.

and Percy Bysshe Shelley in both *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley*. This chapter will explore how they are represented, and how those representations influence the female protagonists of these biopics. It will also briefly explore the roles of Patrick Brontë, Byron and Polidori, and their influence on their female co-players.

Much is expected from both Branwell Brontë and Percy Shelley. They are both promising poets and writers, although Branwell never published as much literary work as Percy did.[57] Branwell was the only son in the Brontë family and – according to what is brought to the screen in *To Walk Invisible* - his father Patrick Brontë expected him to improve his life and start providing for his family. Instead, Branwell dedicated his life to alcohol, and never managed to maintain an occupation for very long.[58] The film shows how Patrick Brontë keeps inquiring after his son, and against his own better judgement, he keeps providing him with money. Percy Shelley, on the other hand, is a more celebrated poet, who – especially at the beginning of the film *Mary Shelley* – resembles the standards set out by the Byronic myth: he is portrayed as handsome in a laisez-faire kind of way, and he uses his poetry to win Mary's affection. Percy turns out to be a promiscuous man, as he is already married and fathers a child. All these men play an important role – not only in these films – but also in the Brontë sisters' and Mary Shelley's lives.

[57] J.E Barcus. 2003. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Critical Heritage.* London: Routledge, 3.
[58] Justine Picardie. 2006. "Introduction." In *The Infernal World Of Branwell Brontë*, by Daphne Du Maurier. London: Hachette Digital., 4.

Analysis

'In all my past life I have done nothing either great or good.'[59]

The biopic on the lives of the Brontë sisters is undeniably about the life of their little brother as well. From opening until slot scene, Branwell's fate is inextricably linked to that of his sisters, and there is as much screen time dedicated to his development as to his sisters. According to some spectators, there is even too much focus on Branwell. Reviews about his role in this biopic vary from positive to very negative, to the extent of saying that the focus of this film remains 'very heavily on the brother's drinking problems and how these problems over-shadowed everyone else in their family.'[60] Despite many negative reviews on popular websites, *The New Yorker* explains in a bit more detail how: 'Branwell fails everyone, most of all himself, but his perennial self-pity contrasts sharply with his sisters' preternatural focus and determination.'[61] Although these comments are mere opinions, they illustrate part of the common reception of this biopic. It is interesting to see that opinions on Branwell's character, his importance to the film and his influence on the representation of his sister's characters differ so much. As said in The New Yorker, Branwell's character provides a contrast to his sisters'. It could be argued that his downfall overshadows the uprising of his sisters, although the focus on his downward spiral can also be used as a tool to emphasise the success of the Brontë sisters.

Shortly after the opening scene, from [00:03:20] onward, Branwell's latest misstep is discussed by Anne and Charlotte. In not so many words he is said to have been 'carrying it on' with a married woman. Charlotte emphasises he lost many jobs before this one, but Anne

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[59] Brontë Sisters, The, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Patrick Brontë. 2015. *The Complete Works of The Brontës.* Dephi Classics.
[60] *www.amazon.com.* 13 August 2017. https://www.amazon.com/Walk-Invisible-Brontë-Sisters-Season/dp/B06XTB83V2 (accessed May 3, 2019).
[61] Yiayang Fan. *www.thenewyorker.com/recommends.* 20 February 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/to-walk-invisible (accessed May 3, 2019).

insists this time is different: it is worse. The gravity of the scene is obvious, as it is dark, and the girls whisper with agitated, strained voices. It is a scene from which the audience immediately grasps the seriousness of this situation. Branwell's adultery is seen as inexcusable. The scene also forms a parallel with the Byronic myth introduced earlier: although the viewer has not seen Branwell yet, the image of a sexually threatening, morally reprehensive figure springs to mind due to this very conversation between the sisters. The reason for him losing his job soon becomes known to his father, Patrick Brontë, and despite the weight of this misstep he soon forgives Branwell. He sees him off the next morning, leaving Charlotte -reading to him because of his deteriorating eyesight – mid sentence. The camera zooms in on her face, showing both disappointment and worry, feelings shared by Anne and Emily. They discuss how they fear for their future [00:11:41] as their father slowly turns blind and Branwell is obviously not fit to provide for them. What makes this scene so important is that is convinces Emily to pursue the publication of their poetry.

As illuminated by Bingham, literary biopics on female writers can only become empowering when acts of feminism are intentionally implemented into the film. A scene such as this could give the audience the impression that the Brontë sisters only succeeded in literature because there was a void provided by Branwell, which they needed to fill in order to survive. In other words: the scene could suggest that the female characters rise only because of the downfall of the male characters, instead of them being successful on their own merits. This viewpoint – although it maybe seems reasonable – would do no justice to the Brontës' history, and it would also ignore the choice the Brontë sisters still had. The girls did have other options to make money: as all three of them had been governesses before. They had these possibilities, and the fact that they did not choose another – perhaps easier – way, is in fact empowering and agrees with postfeminist key ideas. It is the choice these women make themselves which is most important.

The focus on Branwell's portrayal of stereotypical Byronic behaviour in this film –
his drinking, seeking pleasure, defying the law, his insisting on acting from his feelings ('She
was lonely!' [00:04:56]) – is actually not a threat to his sisters, but instead forms a contrast
between them in which the women thrive. They prove to be able to transcend the agony and
financial despair their brother brings to his family. Branwell captures 'the reputation of male
poets as delicate, tortured souls, or socially awkward failures, incapable of any physical
labour or practical reasoning,'[62] perfectly, but he does not form a threat such as Harris
describes in both biopics *Sylvia* and *The Edge of Love*. The *Independent* website features an
article called: *'Branwell Brontë: The mad, bad and dangerous brother of Charlotte, Emily
and Anne'*, a title based on Harris' essay, and although the article mentions how it would be
tempting to frame Branwell as Byronesque, 'the reality is he led a rather tragic life littered
with failures, fraught ambitions, and unfulfilled dreams.'[63] *To Walk Invisible* provides
visualisations of Branwell's life that assumingly could make him into a Byronesque figure,
yet he himself is the one who suffers from that image, not his female coplayers. In this
particular film, Branwell's character poses a threat to himself, not to his sisters.

Patrick Brontë differs as much from the Byronic myth as day differs from night, as he
would more resemble – considering the two stereotypical roles set out earlier – Babbitt's
electrician. Patrick is portrayed as a far more practical man, a characteristic brought to the
screen through showing him constantly working and busying himself with the running of his
household. Through scenes such as the dining-table scene at [00:17:18] he is also portrayed
as slightly naïve and unwilling to look truth in the eyes. He deliberately ignores Branwell's
issues. The contrast demonstrated by his relationship with Branwell and that with his
daughters is disappointing: he only really acknowledges and appreciates his daughters after

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[62] Harris. "Mad, bad and dangerous to know.", 65.
[63] David Barnett. 2017. *Branwell Brontë: The mad, bad and dangerous brother of Charlotte, Emily and Anne.* 17
September. Accessed May 4, 2019.

they inform him of their literary success and publication. The film suggests that the attention of a father in the nineteenth century logically goes to his only son, a thought reflected by Charlotte Brontë herself, as she wrote 'my poor father naturally thought more of his *only* son than of his daughters.'[64] It remains unclear whether Patrick Brontë really preferred his son over his daughters. This assumption most definitely echoes through the film and influences the portrayal of the Brontë sisters. However, their representation far from suffers from it. Because of their difficult relationship with their father, the literary success of the girls is due only to themselves: even more so because they did not receive help nor support from their only parent. They remain loyal to him and help him whenever needed, still finding time to write and publish three novels – an achievement which stands on itself and ensures that this film – despite the time divided to Branwell and Patrick – is most of all about the Brontë sisters and their road to literary success.

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[64] F.B Pinion. 1984. *A Brontë Companion: Literary Assessment, Background and Reference.* Houndmills: The Macmillan Press LTD. 23.

<u>'A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds.'[65]</u>

Comparing Branwell and Patrick Brontë to Lord Byron can form somewhat of a challenge, as *To Walk Invisible* is in the first place a rather bleak drama with not much room for Byronesque extravagance. This is very different in *Mary Shelley*, where the characters of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron share scenes together. It is not hard to see the similarities in the portrayal of both literary figures: they are flamboyant characters, drowning themselves in drink and poetry, both handsome and openly sensual towards their company. Still, these very clear similarities are not what makes the role of Percy Shelley so interesting. It is rather the way in which he differs – or at least tries to differ - from the image of the Byronic hero. His scenes with Byron feel like a setback to himself and his character development, because although he seems to have literary quality time with Byron, he looks tired and ill in his company. These scenes form an interesting turning point in the representation of Mary, yet to fully comprehend and explore that development and the influence of the portrayal of Percy on Mary, it is crucial to explore their co-acting relationship from the moment they meet, at [00:12:45].

Percy is introduced as a very handsome young man, immediately catching Mary's eye. Mary's companion Elizabeth mentions how Shelley is a 'radical poet,' which is all Mary knows about him at that point. As the both of them immerse themselves in conversation, the scene focusses much on Mary's flushed cheeks and on the smouldering looks they share. In contrast to *To Walk Invisible*, this part of *Mary Shelley* feels more like an average romantic film, or as the Guardian mentions: 'The tone [of this film] wavers somewhere between Gossip Girl and Jane Eyre,'[66] where this part represents more of the first then the latter. The

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[65] Percy Bysshe Shelley. 1840. "A Defence of Poetry." *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments.*
[66] Hans. 2018. "Mary Shelley review – Romance with a capital R." *The Guardian.*

characterisation of Percy Shelley as a very handsome man and radical poet, and her immediate liking of him influences the representation and reception of Mary herself. The film choses to portray her as an innocent and somewhat naïve girl. The Guardian further explains how there is a 'conservative stiffness to the film' which 'feels at odds with Mary's progressive politics and tempestuous spirit.'[67] The path chosen in this film at this point indeed seems to follow the conservative costume-drama romance, which could underestimate Mary and place more focus on Percy and his Byronesque attractiveness. On the other hand, Mary chooses to be in a relationship with Percy herself. She knowingly stays with him, accepting the hardships. This freedom of choice – even when concerning traditional expectations such as marriage and love – is typical in postfeminist media culture.

As the film continues, the spectator is drawn into the relational drama between Mary and Percy. At their first meeting he conveniently forgets to tell Mary he is already married. This does not make Mary leave him nor love him less. Instead, the film focusses on their running away together, accompanied by Mary's half-sister Claire Clairemont. It can be argued that the portrayal of Percy and his attraction to Mary does overshadow her own character in this part of the film. The focus lies with their relational struggles, most of them caused by Percy's deliberate adultery, his lack of income and his choice of lifestyle. Although his behaviour had a huge influence on Mary's life, the audience does not hear much of Mary's voice or thoughts in this part of the film. She was sent to Scotland to find her own voice and to develop her writing, but she found Percy instead. Although their relation is often described as fiery, the film remains modest: again, not showing much of Mary's so-called progressive politics and tempestuous spirit, and more of Percy's lengthy speeches. 'I merely suggest you don't offer me the same freedoms I offer you,' [00:56:35] he says, which suggest Mary is more of a conventional spirit then he is.

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[67] Ibid.

It is interesting to see how a meeting with the actual Lord Byron changes a lot. Not only in the visualisation of Mary's life, but also in the way Percy and Mary are represented. It is almost as if Percy meets himself: or what he aspired to be. He sees how that fantasy does not quite fit him. When Percy first meets Byron, he looks healthy and happy, a bit surprised as Bryon kisses him on the mouth [01:12:20], yet when they leave Byron, Percy looks defeated. He seems tired and lost [01:26:23] while Byron remains himself and never really changes. Percy's relationship with Mary does start to change: the more he 'remains' like Byron in his deliberate misbehaviour, the more Mary outgrows him. Where Percy refuses to further develop himself, Mary does so and discovers her own voice and strength. At [01:14:51] Percy urges Mary to stay with Polidori and Claire, while he goes away with Byron. By this scene, the film creates a division between the 'Byronesque' figures, and those not resembling Byronic heroes: including Polidori. Where Byron and Percy start drinking and immerse themselves in the very loud declamation of their own poetry, Polidori remembers Mary's interest in science and hands her an article [01:16:23] on reanimation: a scene which suggest the first inspiration for Mary to write *Frankenstein*. While Percy seems to deteriorate more and more, Mary distances herself from him and moves towards Polidori.

This development climaxes at [01:27:25], where Percy and Byron are both drunk and form a sharp contrast to Mary and Polidori. Percy insults Polidori's story called *The Vampyre*, and tries to outsmart him, and as Percy denies the existence of vampires Polidori retorts: 'I thought you would know intimately about the existence of nocturnal beings who exploit the vulnerable.' With this sentence, he clarifies exactly what Percy and Byron are, and puts the influence these men have on Mary and Claire into words. Polidori places himself directly opposing them in this conjunction: where they are the Byronesque poets who exploit women, he is a serious and practical man, gentle and thoughtful. At this point in the film, Mary herself is perfectly able to see through Percy's Byronesque mask as well. According to

her, Percy and Byron are not so much Byronic heroes as 'they are zealous young men who in spite their sense of enlightenment still put women into boxes.'[68]

It is from this moment onwards Mary starts leading her own life, writes her own story and fights to have it published as described in chapter one.

All men in this biopic influence the way in which the character of Mary is portrayed and received by the audience. This influence works both ways: it incorporates and disperses female empowerment into this biopic. It is disappointing to see how Percy's character overshadows Mary's in the first part of the film. At the same time, this contrast between both parts of the film emphasise Mary's growth and the process she had to go through to write her first novel. At the end of the film, Mary's character is still somewhat of a mystery to the spectator, as she is often portrayed as quiet and introvert, yet if there is one thing that is clear, it is her unconditional and overarching love for Percy. The film accurately represents how she developed herself as a literary figure because of him, and despite him. The Byronic heroes in this film seem to have had their peak, and they inspire Mary in their fall. She sees the conjunction between both the Byronic hero and the more practical man come to life through the scenes involving both Percy, Byron and Polidori. The film shows many scenes in which Mary clearly doubts Byron and his behaviour, as he casts away Claire or insults Percy and Polidori. As she says to him at [01:30:45]: 'There is always another way. And when we make these choices, there are inevitably consequences.'

Where Byron and Percy intentionally avoid dealing with the consequences of their choices - such as Percy's first marriage and Claire's pregnancy – Mary proves to be responsible. Although the film represents the males as Byronesque, their behaviour does not threaten Mary's success. In fact, it enables her to show how she transcends their lifestyle and

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[68] Douiglas Booth, and Haiffaa Al-Mansour, interview by David Crow. *Mary Shelley and the Real Suffering Behind a Horror Classic* (25 May 2018).

becomes an important literary figure on her own. Their almost childlike behaviour makes her realise how she wants to swim below the surface of a shallow life: their clear and extreme characterisations visualise how Mary is able to find a balance of her own.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the recently released literary biopics *Mary Shelley* (2017) and *To Walk Invisible* (2016), this thesis explored whether these films have moved away from the typical female biopic, which traditionally encompasses the victimisation of women, and the imposition of romance and drama on female lives. It is important to note that only two examples of contemporary female biopics were examined for the current study, which makes up merely a small sample and leaves much room for further research.

In considering both male and female roles, this research aimed to shed a light on how contemporary biopics have chosen to represent female writers on their own merits, as well as in comparison to the men they share the screen with. The first chapter of this thesis considered both films in terms of their portrayal of the tension between the private and public lives of their protagonists. The second chapter explored male roles and points out how the portrayal of the men in these films influence the portrayal of the female roles. By means of these analyses I aimed to demonstrate in what ways contemporary literary biopics represent the professional achievements and personal developments of Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters, and how these representations affirm or subvert the traditional assumptions associated with females lives, such as overt drama, love interests and matrimony.

After a close reading of both films, it has become clear they succeed in finding a balance between screening both the private and public lives of Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters. The dichotomy mentioned by Bingham appears in different ways. It can be found in *To Walk Invisible* in the emphasis on the gendered rejections from publishers, and in the different relationship Patrick Brontë has with his son, as opposed to the relationship he has with his daughters. Patrick's expectations of Branwell differs significantly from what he expects of his daughters. This gendered expectation contrasts reality, as the girls manage to succeed

professionally while Branwell does not. In *Mary Shelley*, the tension can be found in the dichotomy between the romantic drama concerning Mary and Percy, and Mary's professional aspirations. Mary needs to find a way to transcend her troubled relationship in order to succeed professionally herself. Her relationship with Percy always remains her own choice.

In screening their lives, these films illuminate the struggles that comes with being a woman, but both Shelley and the Brontës are not victimised merely because they are female. These biopics show how their protagonists overcome traditional expectations and do so in an inspiring way. The reputation of all women writers in these films does not suffer from the chosen visualisations - on the contrary: they strengthen it. Looking at these specific films, and taking them as a sample of recent female biopics, it becomes apparent that recent representations of female lives start to move towards subverting traditional gendered assumptions. This a positive development in contemporary postfeminist culture. Both Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters are portrayed as strong and independent women. They face hardships during their journey to publication, but never in an overdramatic way.

A possible explanation for this shift could be the global development in feminism. The internet offers women the possibility and platform to raise their voices against gender inequality and sexual harassment. The global accessibility of information – through internet and social media - increased the awareness about gendered evaluation. New postfeminist ideas on individuality, gender equality and freedom of choice spread easily, and appeal to young women – a significant part of the audience for female biopics. Filmmakers have the power to contribute to the raised awareness and new postfeminist developments by moving away from traditionally gendered frameworks, and towards a more equal representation of both male and female writers. In postfeminist terms, deliberately choosing motherhood or marriage – as Mary Shelley does - is still empowering and therefore deviates from traditional gendered expectations.

For *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley*, the nineteenth century setting offers a contrast in which postfeminist ideas thrive. The expectations of women's lives in that era juxtaposes the professional achievements of the Brontës and Shelley. It is a juxtaposition which enables the films to convey an inspiring feminist image. This Victorian setting presents room for what Ascheid called safe rebellions, as the protagonists rebel against gendered expectations from that era, by following their own rules and ideas concerning what and how to write.

Gill theorised how contemporary postfeminist media has the power to make young women feel active and in control of their own individual sexuality. *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley* support that statement. Their protagonists succeed because they have a choice. Against the odds, they choose writing, and deliberately opt for the lives they are living. This freedom of choice and individuality agrees with the characteristic values of postfeminism. By screening their journey to publication, these women writers are represented as independent, realistic and strong female characters.

The typical male role also seems to be subject to change. Although there never seemed to be a specific portrayal of men in literary biopics, the Byronic hero and his opposite proved to be a popular trope, as pointed out by Sian Harris. Chapter two has illustrated how both the personification of Branwell Brontë and Percy Shelley show similarities to the Byronic hero. Many of their features match the Byronesque, and yet they do not form a threat to the female protagonists of these films: a feature to which the Byronic hero is in fact prone. Whereas the portrayal of men in a sexually threatening way usually overshadows the female roles, these biopics refrain from that trend. The spectator sees the Byronic hero fail, caused by their own behaviour. However, the women writers in these films do not fill voids left by fallen men. Both the Brontë sisters and Mary Shelley create the space they need to be heard on their own.

Even though *To Walk Invisible* and *Mary Shelley* avoided gendered assumptions, it is too soon to announce a trend. There is not enough research into contemporary biopics in relation to feminist and gender theory published yet. Also, ideas on feminism are developing at a fast rate, and more research into the relevance and consequences of postfeminism is necessary in order to fully comprehend its impact on contemporary media culture. Still, the two films used as samples for the current study form a promising start, as they managed to subvert traditional, gendered assumptions and have successfully moved towards a more realistic and postfeminist stance, where these assumptions become active choices made by strong female characters.

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