

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations:
19th Century Transvestism in Contemporary Literature and Culture

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD

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by

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List of Abbreviations

- DL* Ackroyd, Peter (1994) *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson.
- DJB* Racster, Olga and Grove, Jessica (1932) *Dr James Barry: Her Secret Story*, London: Gerald Howe Ltd.
- DHC* Stanley, Liz (1984) *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick: Victorian Maidservant*, London: Virago.
- HV* Holmes, Rachel (2007) 2008 *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman*, London: Bloomsbury.
- HVN* Chase-Riboud, Barbara (2003) 2004 *Hottentot Venus: A Novel*, New York: Anchor Books.
- JMB* Duncker, Patricia (1999) 2000 *James Miranda Barry*, London: Picador.
- LD* Atkinson, Diane (2003) *Love and Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- M* Stace, Wesley (2005) 2006 *Misfortune*, London: Vintage.
- MdeM* Gautier, Théophile (1835) 2005 *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, London: Penguin.
- MV* Rachilde (1888) 2004 *Monsieur Venus: A Materialist Novel*, New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- SP* Holmes, Rachel (2002) *Scanty Particulars: The Life of Dr James Barry*, London: Viking.
- TTVB* Waters, Sarah (1998) *Tipping the Velvet*, London: Virago.
- TTVF* Sax, Geoffrey (dir.) and Davies, Andrew (screenwriter) (2002) *Tipping the Velvet* BBC DVD, Sally Head Production.

Introduction

Although this psychic peculiarity [of transvestism] is so difficult both to name and to define, it is, strange as that may seem, the commonest of all sexual anomalies to attain prominence in the public newspapers. There are several reasons why that should be. There is not only the real frequency of the condition, but the fact that it is so striking and so intriguing a violation of our most conventional rules and regulations of social life.

(Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 1928)¹

The Victorians, we might say, have attracted as much as they have repulsed those that have come afterwards, and each attempt at drawing a definitive line in the sand has subsequently been shown to disguise a more telling continuity.

(Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, 2007)²

As the opening quotation from Havelock Ellis implies, the interest in transvestism has the ability to transcend time due to its continued transgression of the social and cultural mores of normative gender expression: while cross-dressing is both the most common and frequent of ‘sexual anomalies,’ it is also ‘striking’ and ‘intriguing’. One of the reasons why this thesis concentrates on the act of gender masquerade and cross-dressing is because these acts remain, in the twenty-first century, prolific cultural phenomena that are still transgressive. The thesis will focus specifically on examinations and analyses of transvestism in neo-Victorian literature and culture, which involves drawing on, where appropriate, historical evidence of nineteenth-century cross-dressing along with contemporary gender and queer theory. Neo-Victorian literature and the neo-Victorian project as a whole are usually seen as contemporary (‘neo’=‘new’) historical fiction and culture that are set in or, at the very least, influenced by the Victorian era. Marie-Luise Kohlke points out that the term ‘neo-Victorian’ has been used to define the

¹ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Volume VII (1928), in Heike Bauer (ed.), *Women and Cross-Dressing 1800-1939*, 3 volumes (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), I, p.182.

² Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), p.3.

project itself, yet also refers to neo-Victorian as a ‘genre, as [a] “new” discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, [and] as critical interface between the present and past’.³ In this project it is important to refer to Simon Joyce’s notion of the ‘continuity’ between the twenty-first century and the Victorian era, as referenced in the second epigraph. Since the end of Queen Victoria’s reign in 1901, society has desired to either create a distance from, or alternatively, draw closer to an understanding of the nineteenth century, and the Victorian era in particular, and its ideological implications. To that end, it is essential to consider neo-Victorian fiction and its postmodern approach with an awareness of how influential the ‘Victorians’ remain in today’s (post)modern society.

According to Linda Hutcheon, ‘the contradictory nature of postmodernism involves its offering of multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts in full knowledge of (and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts’.⁴ In its attempt to explore the nineteenth century neo-Victorian fiction has a tendency to over-emphasise or distort what is meant by ‘Victorian’, to alter how nineteenth-century history is viewed, to undermine the ideological implications of the period, and occasionally offer a narrative technique that is distinctly postmodern in its endeavour. Christian Gutleben contends that ‘at the same time as it pays homage to its Victorian model, the contemporary novel challenges, warps and undermines it. That neo-Victorian novels both venerate and subvert [their] precursors can best be traced in the copresence of pastiche and parody’.⁵ The idea of parody conceptually links the neo-Victorian aspect of my investigation with my focus on the figure of the transvestite:

³ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (2008), p.1.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.60.

⁵ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.89.

both ‘pretend’ to be something which they are not and both inherently rely on such parody for their success. The thesis attempts to negotiate the current resurgence in popularity of Victoriana through a close examination of the neo-Victorian literary texts which centralise or (re)construct transvestites and cross-dressers as protagonists. Throughout the thesis the terms ‘Victorian’ and ‘nineteenth-century’ are used interchangeably to illustrate that neo-Victorianism as a project incorporates the long nineteenth century as its extended period of enquiry: this usage reflects the common slippage of both terms in neo-Victorian criticism and also addresses the ethnic and national diversity of some of the texts to be discussed. Due to the nineteenth century’s sensational and controversial reception of French literature, and particularly the ‘Yellow’ books, chapter 4 of this thesis includes two texts from the French authors Théophile Gautier and Rachilde. This is due to the influence that such texts had on British literature and also because these texts specifically challenge easy assumptions concerning gender and sexuality. Like the conflation of the terms Victorian and nineteenth century in neo-Victorian criticism, both ‘transvestite’ and ‘cross-dresser’, which are often employed as synonyms, will be utilised to describe protagonists who adopt an alternative style of dress, in terms of gender but also inclusive of class and race. Chapter 2 will demonstrate that race and class are likewise culturally constructed categories which can be performed and, just as gender, can be subverted. Cross-dressing can be adopted for a variety of reasons: political, social, economic, or sexual, which ultimately dictates the level of verisimilitude that is required. To ‘pass’, that is to become a convincing and undetected persona, necessitates a deeper and lengthier assumption of a certain role, whereas a purely performative character (in the sense of a staged act), merely entails a part-time adoption of gender, race or class.

Each of these assumptions, be they gendered, racial, or class-related, automatically carry specific historical and cultural relevancies and influences. While

discussing the existence of transvestism in the early modern period, Rudolf Dekker and Lotte C. Van de Pol claim that the ‘tradition of female cross-dressing... was lost in the nineteenth century’.⁶ This thesis, contrary to Dekker and Pol, will emphasise that in fact gender disguise not only existed in the nineteenth century but actually flourished at that time, when it was also pseudo-scientifically categorised by the sexologists of the period and discussed widely in the periodical press. Despite Dekker and Pol’s argument that cross-dressing does not have a clear historical lineage, transvestites have existed and their gender transgression has been debated throughout recorded history. Whilst this thesis specifically focuses upon transvestism as represented in neo-Victorian literature and culture, it is not a phenomenon that stands abstracted from time; there were gender masqueraders in ancient Greece, and in the medieval and early modern periods, along with those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Transvestites in History

Throughout history and in all genres of literature historical persons and fictional characters have adopted the clothing of the opposite sex for political, social, sexual, or economic purposes. In Greek mythology Achilles was dressed as a woman by his mother Thetis in order to hide him from the conscription officers of the Trojan War and Athena disguised herself as a man in order to give aid to the people. C.J.S. Thompson notes further that gender disguise could also serve a purely aesthetic purpose when Assurbanipal (668 - 626 B.C.) would occasionally wear make-up and feminine clothing like the later Caesars of Rome who often donned ‘female robes’.⁷ Likewise, Ovid’s notion of transformation as it occurs in his *Metamorphoses* (completed in AD 8), and

⁶ Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. Van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.2.

⁷ C.J.S. Thompson, *The Mysteries of Sex: Women Who Posed as Men and Men Who Impersonated Women* (New York: Causeway Books, 1974), p.12.

particularly his use of the Pygmalion and Hermaphroditus myths, is utilised, by Ovid and subsequent generations, in order to explore and challenge the continuing concepts of transgression, change, and fluidity. As Leo Curran notes, ‘Ovid forces us to recognize fluidity, the breaking down of boundaries, lack of restraint, the imminent potentiality of reversion to chaos, the uncontrollable variety of nature, the unruliness of human passion, sexual and personal freedom, and hedonism’.⁸ Such instances of Ovidian sexual freedom and hedonism will be explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis which examines Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) and Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and emphasises the connections between Ovidian myths of transformation and the French nineteenth-century challenge to sexual and gender categorisation. From these early Greek and Roman instances interest in the act of cross-dressing continued through history and became a subject of heated debate in the medieval era.

The medieval period in Europe was particularly profuse with cross-dressed men and women. There are numerous tales of female saints who thought themselves directed by God to adopt the clothing of the opposite sex. Indeed, the execution of Joan of Arc (Jeanne d’Arc) was largely attributed to her gender boundary subversion when, believing herself instructed by God, she wore male clothing and commanded the French army in battle against the English. Certainly, as Sarah Roche-Mahdi explains, ‘the chaste female in male dress who does not reveal her sex recalls many popular accounts of holy virgins, saints and martyrs’.⁹ Occasionally the transvestite had to reveal his/her biological sex in order to prevent a miscarriage of justice. The thirteenth-century French romance *Silence*, believed to be written by Heldris of Cornwall, features an eponymous

⁸ Leo C. Curran ‘Transformation and Anti-Augustanism in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*’, *Arethusa*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1972), p.88.

⁹ Sarah Roche-Mahdi (Introduction and ed.), ‘Introduction’, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 2007), p.xvi.

heroine who is dressed as a boy in childhood and remains clothed as a man in later life as a method of gaining the right of inheritance. During the various machinations of the other characters in the romance, Silence has to disrobe to prove her innocence when charged with rape. However, the most interesting aspect of the tale centres on the competition between the characters of Nature and Nurture who debate the site of contested gender which Silence represents. Similar to twenty-first century research into the debate of biological essentialism versus socially constructed gender, the romance pits Nature against Nurture in a war of gender attrition. As Roche-Madhi argues, ‘Nature, as *procreatrix*, abhors the transvestite: misuse of the organs of generation threatens the survival of the species’.¹⁰ Ultimately, though, Nurture wins by demonstrating ‘that no one in their right mind would choose to live as a woman. Masculinity means freedom of movement, having a voice, being on top’.¹¹ Many women in transvestite narratives adopt a male disguise as a means of circumventing the oppression they face when dressed in stereotypically female clothing.

Early modern Europe saw a similar prevalence of cross-dressing narratives of both sexes. William Shakespeare, in particular, drew on the idea of gender subversion and disguise as a trope with which to highlight and explore the gendered meaning of dress. Yet, when Shakespeare’s plays were actually performed on stage, the layers of gendered dress began to multiply as the prohibition of female actors produced the effect of young males dressed for female roles, who then adopted a gender disguise as part of the plot development. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598), Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1602), and Rosalind in *As You Like It* (1599-1600) all masquerade in male dress and were originally performed by male actors. The gender and transvestite discussion

¹⁰ Ibid., p.xvii.

¹¹ Ibid., p.xix.

was not limited to the stage. Early modern society was inundated with tracts and pamphlets which contained vehement protests and adamant defences of cross-dressing. The most notorious of these circulated pamphlets were the anonymously written *Hic Mulier* (1620) and *Haec-Vir* (1620). *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman: being a medicine to cure the coltish disease of the staggers in the masculine-feminines of our time. Exprest in a briefe declamation* is a lengthy rhetorical indictment of the apparent trend for women to wear male clothing. According to Diane Dugaw, “‘Hic Mulier,’ the title of the character in the pamphlet, is a gender-confounding Latin pun: the masculine demonstrative “hic” (this-masculine) is yoked, with solecistic wit, to the feminine “mulier” (woman).¹² *Hic Mulier* has its riposte in *Haec-Vir*, which critiques *Hic Mulier*, albeit from a position of weakened authority. As Marjorie Garber explains, ‘the author of *Hic Mulier* saw the fashion for men’s clothes as a sign not of homosexuality but of a general sexual availability...In *Haec-Vir* the “mannish woman” gets to speak her piece, and offers a strong assertion of women’s rights – an assertion which is complicated rather than clarified by the fact that she offers this opinion when cross-dressed as a man’.¹³ That the defence of cross-dressing is undertaken by a transvestite reduces the impact of the subversive potential of the tract due to the fact that the cross-dresser was deemed a figure of ridicule and mockery. Such debates and arguments over gender confusion and its consequences raged throughout the early modern period and well into the eighteenth century.

So far we have seen transvestism employed variously as a method of disguise to escape capture or for a pleasurable aesthetic diversion in ancient Greek mythology; as a way of assuming an inheritance in the medieval era; and as subject for polemical and

¹² Diane Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.163.

¹³ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.31.

rhetorical debate on gender roles and for entertainment or literary purposes during the early modern period. As gender negotiations and conceptualisations differ over time and culture, the fact that these debates continued unabated suggests that transvestism provoked serious concern, yet simultaneously allowed for gender, and its possible subversion, to become a topic for open discussion rather than simply being ignored as a current, or ‘passing’, trend.¹⁴ Likewise, the appearance of a cross-dresser in literature enabled readers to gain a deeper understanding of sexual difference. Elizabeth Krimmer contends that, ‘in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, stories about cross-dressers were employed to work through competing concepts of the body and to imagine different models of gender identity’.¹⁵ The transvestite figure also offered an opportunity to explore other concerns. By inhabiting the liminal space between genders, the cross-dresser opened up further categories that had previously been thought stable and concrete: ‘a transvestite in a literary text’, Krimmer notes, ‘may function as a sign of an epistemic crisis elsewhere; that is, questions of social class, ethnicity, language, or morality may be displaced onto the axis of gender’.¹⁶ The transvestite thus signifies a cultural shift or crisis in thinking and understanding and represents the possibility of change and mobility. Such a challenge to traditional concepts has often been viewed as a subversive act which can destabilise societal expectations. However, when women dress in male clothing the emphasis of subversion can be displaced to reveal a form of flattery by imitation and ‘while some scholars assume that every instance of cross-dressing is inherently subversive, others claim that cross-dressing reinforces existing structures of patriarchal power’.¹⁷ When a man dresses as a woman he becomes a figure

¹⁴ In the contemporary transvestite/transsexual community to ‘Pass’ is to adopt another gender so completely that other members of society would not suspect any gender subversion was occurring.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Krimmer, *In the Company of Men: Cross-dressed Women Around 1800* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.13.

of entertainment and mockery, yet when a woman adopts male clothing her status in society is raised, which ultimately suggests that the pinnacle of acceptability and success resides in maleness. Thus, social, political and economic power only exists in masculine and male appearance, which is achieved through dress and behaviour rather than in biological difference.

During the nineteenth century gender roles (masculine and feminine) became more clearly defined than in previous historical epochs and were associated with male supremacy and female subjugation. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that such clearly demarcated boundaries were often subverted, transgressed, or even elided. The 1871 trial of Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park, infamous cross-dressers who even adopted alternative personas while in their transvestite role, sparked debate and outrage in the law courts and periodical press, and is discussed further in chapter 3 of this thesis. Likewise, various instances of female transvestites in the nineteenth century were regularly reported in newspapers, such as was the case with James Barry MD (1795-1865), the subject of chapter 1, who created a periodical press frenzy concerning opposite sex impersonation when it was discovered upon her death that she was biologically female. The level of polemical opinion concerning the transvestism of either sex tends to suggest that the further apart the gender roles, expectations, and dress of masculine and feminine grew, the more the discussion about cross-dressing became inflamed. As Garber declares, ‘gender roles and categories are most vulnerable to critique when they are most valorized, when their rules, codes, and expectations are most ardently coveted and admired’.¹⁸ However, such coveting of specific gendered meanings became the site of parody in the Victorian music hall, whose male and female impersonators are examined in detail in chapter 3. Madame Vestris, Hetty King and

¹⁸ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.51.

Vesta Tilley all enjoyed enormous success due to their impersonations of men on stage. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century experienced a veritable explosion of sexological debate with transvestism literally taking centre stage. This period saw ideas concerning biological gender difference becoming a subject of pseudo-scientific enquiry, theory and investigation by sexologists.

19th -21st Century Sexological/Gender Theory

The *fin de siècle* was suffused with ideas and notions of sexual/ity differences. The prominent sexologists of the period such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld sought to classify of what were thought at the time to be sexual anomalies and perversions. Various alternatives to the perceived norm of heterosexuality and the binary system of masculine and feminine were diagnosed, labelled, and pathologised through the use of case studies and the employment of embryonic gender and queer theories. As Lucy Bland and Laura Doan note, sexology, as a discipline dedicated to ‘the study and classification of sexual behaviours, identities and relations....emerged in Western modernity as part of a wider concern with the classification of bodies and populations alongside other new sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and criminology’.¹⁹

The use of case studies made this revolutionary ‘science’ of sexology a composite of theoretical debate and practical application. For example, in his diagnosis of an apparent case of sexual inversion, Krafft-Ebing relied largely upon the outward appearance, dress, and behaviour as well as the family history of the patient, due to the belief that hereditary and congenital ailments were causally linked to sexual anomaly.

Thus,

¹⁹ Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, ‘General Introduction’ to Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Eds.), *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.1.

even at the first meeting, the patient produced a remarkable impression by reason of her attire, features, and conduct. She wore a gentleman's hat, her hair closely cut, eye-glasses, a gentleman's cravat, a coat-like outer garment of masculine cut that reached well down over her gown, and boots with high heels. She had, of course, somewhat masculine features; a harsh deep voice; and made rather the impression of a man in female attire than that of a lady, if one but overlooked the bosom and the decidedly feminine form of the pelvis.²⁰

Whilst today we distinguish between dress, sex, gender, and sexuality, during the nineteenth century such distinctions were not conceptualised until sexology began to unravel the supposed intertwining of these categories. Havelock Ellis purported that 'many years ago, when exploring the phenomena of sexual inversion, I was puzzled by occasional cases I met with of people who took pleasure in behaving and dressing like the opposite sex and yet were not sexually inverted; that is, their own sexual feelings were not directed towards persons of their own sex'.²¹ Here Ellis makes a clear differentiation between dress, gender and sexuality. His analysis shows that sexuality was/is not always a determining factor when it comes to dress and gender expression. The transvestite or cross-dresser, whether biologically male or female, may be heterosexual and yet still identify with the dress and behaviour of the opposite sex. Ellis conceptualised this phenomenon as Eonism, a term derived from the eighteenth-century aristocrat Chevalier d'Eon (1728-1810). It was Magnus Hirschfeld who defined cross-dressing as transvestism and the person exhibiting these traits as a transvestite. The term derived from the Latin words "trans", "across" and "vestitus", "clothed," and Krafft-Ebing, as Hirschfeld points out, 'readily admit[ted] that this name indicates only the most obvious aspect of this phenomenon, less so its inner, purely psychological kernel'.²² Not only does Hirschfeld identify a difference between dress and sexuality,

²⁰ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892), in Bauer, *Women and Cross-Dressing*, p.141.

²¹ Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, VII, in Bauer, *Women and Cross-Dressing*, p.154.

²² Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexual Anomalies and Perversions: Physical and Psychological Development and Treatment* (1936), in Bauer, *Women and Cross-Dressing*, p.286.

but he also suggests that the outward appearance may not always be synonymous with the psychological configuration of gender identification in a person. Indeed, when diagnosing patients who appeared to suffer from a sexual ‘perversion’, he utilised his own distinct categorisations of various ‘anomalies’. His classifications were separated into four particular groups comprising: ‘1) Sexual organs, 2) Other physical characteristics, 3) Sex drive, 4) Other emotional characteristics’.²³ Here we see that Hirschfeld separates biological sex represented by groups 1 and 2, sexuality in group 3, and gender in group 4. In this respect a heterosexual transvestite would fall in the fourth category. Although these classifications may seem vague and could encompass a whole host of combinations of sex, gender, and sexuality, Hirschfeld himself was aware of this, defined his classifications further, and suggested that in total there are possibly ‘43,046,721’²⁴ different kinds of sexual anomaly. The pioneering work of the early sexologists laid the groundwork for how we view, classify, conceptualise, and occasionally pathologise, sex, gender and sexuality in the (post)modern twenty-first century.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries saw the emergence of disciplinary fields such as gender studies and queer theory which built upon the foundations of these sexologists. Gender studies and queer theory have utilised some of the classifications, terminology and theory that were developed in the turn-of-the-century period. Indeed, the labels ‘transgender’, ‘transvestite’, and ‘transsexual’ all stem from Hirschfeld’s use of the prefix ‘trans’, meaning ‘to cross’. In some respects such classifications and definitions allowed contemporary gender and queer theorists to identify the differences between biological determinism and the social construction of gender. As Rachel Alsop,

²³ Magnus Hirschfeld, ‘Transvestites’ (1910), in Bland and Doan (Eds.), *Sexology Uncensored*, p.97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.103.

Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon declare, ‘trans people became viewed as the vanguard in the war against a binary/heterosexist construction of gendered identity’.²⁵ The terms transgender, transvestite, and transsexual, however, all have different meanings. Patricia Gherovici states that ‘*transgenderism* is a contested umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender expression and behaviour do not match the usual expectations associated with the male-female binary system’.²⁶ Transvestism has come to be associated with any person who adopts the clothing of the opposite sex and is *still* included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, published by the American Psychiatric Association, as a diagnostic tool employed by medical professionals who designate it as sexual fetishism denoting a person who becomes sexually aroused when wearing opposite-gender attire. Gherovici goes on to note that ‘unlike homosexuality (which under pressure of gay activists was eliminated as a disease category by the APA), medical professionals see transgenderism as a medical and mental health condition that requires treatment’.²⁷ Yet there are cases when people choose a transvestite persona and are not sexually aroused by the act of cross-dressing, so the notion of a fetishised and pathologised act loses validity.²⁸

There are, though, some theorists, such as Robert Stoller, who deny the existence of female transvestites at all. Stoller argues that ‘these women are transsexuals, quite comparable to male transsexuals. They wish to be males, that is to have a body in every way male, and to live in all ways as a man does. They cannot stomach sexual relations with men; they are aroused only by women. Men’s clothes

²⁵ Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2002, [2008]), p.204.

²⁶ Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.xiii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.27.

²⁸ The historical examples of Dr James Barry and the music hall performer Vesta Tilley, along with the fictional characters of Elizabeth Cree (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*) and Kitty Butler (*Tipping the Velvet*), suggest that when women cross-dress it may be for primarily economic or political purposes as opposed to a fetishised act of sexual arousal.

have no erotic value whatsoever; these people have no clothing fetish'.²⁹ Stoller here is relying upon the view that clothing choice depends on sexual preference, thereby conflating cross-dressing with homosexuality; but significantly, he only applies this theory to female, not male, transvestites. Indeed, he goes on to declare that 'there are male transvestites and male transsexuals; among women there are female transsexuals but no female transvestites'.³⁰ This thesis, however, will show that both female and male transvestites have existed in the Victorian era both factually and in literature and are a prominent feature in contemporary neo-Victorian fiction. These transvestites are not to be confused with contemporary conceptualisations of transsexuals.

Transsexuals, according to Gherovici, 'are those who surgically change the sex they were assigned at birth...and those who express their gender in ways that do not correspond to their anatomical sex'.³¹ Unfortunately, Gherovici includes in her definition of transsexuals the transvestite act by combining both those who undergo surgery and people who merely adopt alternatively gendered clothing. Transvestites and cross-dressers assume an alternative identity which is expressed through clothing and behaviour only, as opposed to transsexuals who often undergo surgical procedures. Some transsexuals may utilise the transvestite act whilst they are in a transitioning period as they are often unhappy or uncomfortable with the biological sex they were born with, and therefore undergo a lengthy process of hormone therapy and possibly surgical procedures in order to change their biological sex characteristics. The transvestite, however, has no desire to change biologically; the transvestite seeks only a surface change in order to express his/her gender or to achieve social, political, or economic success. The diagnosis and treatment of GID (Gender Identity Dysphoria)

²⁹ Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: Volume 1, The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (London: H. Karnac Ltd., 1968 [1984]), p.195.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.205.

³¹ Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, p.25.

owes much to the earlier work by the sexologists and their theory of sexual inversion. The term ‘sexual invert’, coined by these sexologists, is largely understood to apply to a person who believes to have been born into the wrong body. As Jay Prosser notes, ‘the transgendered³² paradigm of sexual inversion – the profound degree to which sexual inversion was a cross-gendered category – set up the conditions under which transgender could emerge as identity’.³³ It is due to the fact that biological sex and socially constructed gender can be separate embodiments of an expression of self that the transsexual can envisage an alternative to his/her sex role. This (post)modern choice of sex role is the result of the revolutionary work of sexology which proposed that if someone is born into a body that s/he feels does not reflect his/her personality, s/he can seek professional help to be diagnosed and then take steps to alter it. As Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon make clear, ‘the sense of being born into the wrong body is a recurrent motif within transsexual narratives. Indeed it is the articulation of their experience in this way which is used by psychiatrists as the basis for diagnosis of “gender dysphoria”’.³⁴ However, the fact that we still rely on a binary system of choice between male and female is a matter of contention, as illustrated by Stephen Whittle. He purports that ‘the trans person, whether transsexual, transgender or transvestite, is not seeking to change his or her gender identity at all. What trans people are trying to do is find a way of presenting their gender identity in such a way that the rest of the world will understand who they are’.³⁵ Thus, the problem lies with the fact that many (but not all) societies understand gender as a binary model of distinctly heterosexual

³² ‘Transgender’, as discussed above, has often been used as an all-inclusive term to describe any sexual and/or gender change, therefore including both transsexuals and transvestites.

³³ Jay Prosser and Merl Storr, ‘Introduction to Transsexuality and Bisexuality’ in Bland and Doan (Eds.), *Sexology Uncensored*, p.75.

³⁴ Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, p.206.

³⁵ Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading: Garnett Publishing, 2000), p.3.

masculine/male and feminine/female categories and view transsexualism and transvestism as abnormalities that are linked to sexual desire.

Despite some theorists' best efforts, much of society still views a gender-subversive act such as cross-dressing as an indicator of homosexuality. Yet the two are not synonymous. There are heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual people who do not dress in the clothing of the opposite sex, and there are cross-dressers who may well be heterosexual, and others that are homosexual or bisexual; but it is not a matter of simple 'cause and effect' with regard to sex, gender and sexuality; dress (and the body) do not signify sexuality and vice versa. Havelock Ellis made this distinction when he noted that it was

undesirable to use the word 'inversion' in this connection as it is too apt to arouse suggestions of homosexuality, which may be quite absent, though it remains true that the phenomenon we are concerned with is one of erotic empathy, of a usually heterosexual inner imitation, which frequently tends to manifest itself in the assumption of the habits and garments of the desired sex.³⁶

Ellis was referring to the fact that the sexual invert in the late nineteenth century was understood as the soul of a man or a woman trapped in the wrong body, therefore a person who cross-dressed was merely expressing an 'innate' sense of gender through the adoption of opposite-sex attire.

The logic behind the 'soul trapped in the wrong body' theory is dependent in part on the fact that sexologists believed in the idea of a core gender identity that in most cases of sexual inversion was at odds with the biological reality of the person. Thus, transvestites were often thought to be 'acting' the role of their 'inner' gender. As Ellis asserts, 'a man who "plays a part" during the greater part of his active life and

³⁶ Ellis, 'Studies in the Psychology of Sex', Volume VII, in Bauer, *Women and Cross-Dressing*, p.181.

continues to play it long after the active phase of his life is over, plays, moreover, with such ability and success that no one suspects the “masquerade,” is, we may be sure, fulfilling a deep demand of his own nature’.³⁷ Here we see the important juncture at which point dress, or rather cross-dressing, is viewed as an ‘act’, a ‘masquerade’ which is meant to represent the ‘natural’ soul within the person. Even as late as 1968 we still see this belief of ‘acting’ a particular gender ‘role’ in Stoller’s analysis of a transvestite case. Stoller relates the conversation between medical professional and patient:

Patient: ‘When I was a girl, I had to change. All my life I have always acted like a boy.’

Dr S.: ‘You had to “act” like a girl?’

Patient: ‘*That* was the act and *that* was the hard part.’³⁸

The patient is clearly undermining the notion that s/he is ‘acting’ or performing her ‘inner’ core gender identity; s/he had to pretend to be the gender which corresponded to her sex, in this case, female. The whole idea of acting a particular gender brings us then to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and its implications in her seminal 1990 work *Gender Trouble*.

Judith Butler, Performativity, and Drag

Judith Butler’s influential theory of gender performativity is crucial for any discussion concerning cross-dressing. Butler asserts that

what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., p.156.

³⁸ Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, p.202.

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2007; London: Routledge, 1990), pp.xv-xvi.

Butler here views gender as layer upon layer of discursive (and witnessed) influence and societal expectation that is unconsciously displayed on the surface, but she denies any notion of an innate or internal ‘core’ of gender. Many people have misinterpreted and misunderstood Butler’s theory by conflating performativity with performance, almost as if a person is an actor on-stage and is consciously performing an ‘inner’ gender through external dress and behaviour. Yet, Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon make clear that ‘talking about gender as a performance can suggest an agent or subject who is formed prior to the acts and who then engages in them, may be choosing which acts to perform. Butler is at pains to resist such a construal. There is, she argues, no doer behind the deed. The doer becomes formed from the doing’.⁴⁰ Butler insists that there is no central, internal core of gender, and that only the layers of how society understands and recognises gender are visible; these ‘stylized acts’ actually produce a gender, rather than a conscious agent performing his/her gender. Indeed, Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon go further to elucidate that ‘there is no inner realm of experience prior to the social, providing us with desires and moulding our identities. Our “inner” life becomes constituted from the way we mould our bodies to social norms’.⁴¹ It is society which, over time and in various cultures, creates ever-changing definitions and interpretations of gender. Even before a baby is born, we have the technology to discover the biological sex of the foetus, and then decorate the nursery in the appropriate colour (in the twenty-first century, blue for boys and pink for girls, which in the Victorian era was the reverse⁴²), with corresponding clothes, toys and other paraphernalia which advertise that sex to the world. However, it is during infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood that the various layers of societal norms of gender are compounded. Yet what happens,

⁴⁰ Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, p.99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁴² Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.1.

particularly in Western society, when a person refuses to conform to expectations of what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine'? As Butler ponders, 'is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?'⁴³

The act of cross-dressing, and particularly the performance of drag, has the ability to undermine the idea of gender as a binary system and indeed explode the concept of gender as a static reality. The drag artist (king or queen) effectively, and consciously, performs and exaggerates gender appearance and behaviour to the point where it reaches its logical extreme. Depending on the environment, the audience, and the cultural context in which it is performed, drag can result in varying interpretations and connotations being produced. Thus, as Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon declare, 'if we repeat performances in different contexts then different meanings can emerge which can undermine and subvert dominant ones'.⁴⁴ The drag artist can show how slippery our concepts of binary genders actually are. By parodying the opposite gender, the drag king or drag queen emphasises the changeability of gender roles; s/he can in fact become an 'act', but only in the exaggerated, satirical, unreal sense. It relies upon the audience to be aware that drag is in fact being produced, otherwise it loses its subversive potential and merely becomes a person on a stage. But to understand that it is a drag 'act' the viewers have to have bought into the idea of gender as a binary system in the first place; they need to know that what they are seeing is parody. As Dugaw notes, 'gender is like language – a cultural code, signifying systems of appearance, behaviour, and context whose separateness from biological identity makes the transvestite intrigue possible'.⁴⁵ In this respect, the viewer of the drag performance

⁴³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp.viii-ix.

⁴⁴ Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, p.104.

⁴⁵ Dugaw, *Warrior Women*, p.148.

must speak the language of gender binarity in order to comprehend that gender norms are being overstressed, parodied and subverted.

However, Butler raises an important issue regarding the idea of gender parody. She poses the question, 'is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?'⁴⁶ In other words, does drag, and for that matter cross-dressing, impersonate and mimic a specific gender or does it in fact reinforce and highlight the gender norms and expectations it is seeking satirically to undermine? I would argue that drag achieves both an imitation and an emphasising of gendered dress and behaviour. The 'act' of drag collapses in on itself as the imitation becomes the reinforcement. The audience views and acknowledges the impersonation 'performance' yet simultaneously, and often unconsciously, sees the very distinguishing features of gender which enable the concept of drag to exist in the first place. Drag does have the ability, though, to create an opportunity where the binarity of gender, biological essentialism, and notions of object-derived sexuality are effectively dissolved. It is 'in the performance of drag,' Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon argue, that 'the apparent coherence of a unified package of gender/sex/sexuality is pulled apart'.⁴⁷ Through drag, the body, dress, behaviour, and sexuality become separated. The biological anatomy is no longer displayed by a gendered style of dress, behaviour can be at odds with societal expectations, and sexuality becomes a polymorphous phenomenon which is destabilised by the very 'act' of gender impersonation. The body beneath the performance does not necessarily correspond to outward appearance and actions and in this way 'drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion

⁴⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.xxxi.

⁴⁷ Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, p.104.

of a true gender identity'.⁴⁸ The idea of 'inner and outer psychic space' relates directly to the concept of the dissolution of gender as an innate sense of self. Instead, gender becomes a mutable reality that can be altered, performed, and even obliterated altogether. So what is the relationship between the performance of drag and the 'act' of cross-dressing?

In some respects drag and transvestism have much in common; both succeed in denying the assumption that biology determines gender, and both emphasise the difference between appearance and reality. Cross-dressing has the ability to transgress not just the gender boundary but the whole idea of gender 'truth' and 'authenticity'. Transvestism effectively demonstrates what Krimmer terms as the 'contest between two different models of the body: one that defines the body as a neutral surface whose gendered meaning derives from its clothing and an authentic body whose gender truth shines forth through its apparel'.⁴⁹ Therefore we come to an impasse; does gender 'make' the body or does the body 'create' gender? I would argue that neither proposition really explains gender and its relation, or not, to the body on which it is inscribed. As it is a constantly evolving and ever-changing phenomenon, gender cannot be 'pinned down' to a particular definition, which makes discussing the idea of a 'cross-dresser' a difficult task indeed. As Butler contends,

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the 'reality' of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks 'reality,' and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. But what is the sense of 'gender reality' that founds this perception in this way?⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.186.

⁴⁹ Krimmer, *In the Company of Men*, p.35.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.xxiii.

What Butler is arguing is that if there is no ‘inner’ core of authentic gender, then how can someone possibly cross a boundary of a gender that is unreal in itself? Yet gender and its definitions are a lived reality, they dictate which ‘box’ we tick on legal forms, which bathroom facilities we are assigned, and how other people treat us. With regard to the multiplicity of meaning in Butler’s theories concerning performativity, though, I would suggest that the cross-dresser produces three layers of gender. The first layer is the performative, the unconscious appropriation of societal norms, the second layer is the conscious exaggeration of that appropriation, and the third layer is the opposite gender masquerade. Therefore, the performative consists of a person unconsciously absorbing and inhabiting the societal associations of gender; the performance is then the exaggeration of that gender by means of hairstyle, feminine or masculine dress, and associated behaviour. Then the third layer is the adoption of an opposite gender through over-conscious choices of masculine or feminine clothing and manners.⁵¹ Thus, the transvestite or the cross-dresser is able to destabilise the very notions of masculine male and feminine female. In fact, as Garber asserts, ‘*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself’.⁵² The act of adopting the clothing of another gender implodes the myth of stable gender reality and allows the wearer to become gender variant in multiple and fluid ways that avoid classification.

⁵¹ Whilst it may appear that the second and third layers of the performative must be mutually exclusive, and in some cases, such as James Barry’s masquerade, prove to be a necessity in order to remain undiscovered, there are instances of where these layers effectively coincide. The male impersonation act on the Victorian music hall stage, as perfected by Vesta Tilley and examined in chapter 3 of this thesis, depended upon the audience viewing simultaneously her femininity beneath the male clothing.

⁵² Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.16, emphasis in original.

If gender can be as variable as Garber is suggesting, then the categories we assign to people become useless aphorisms that convey no meaning. But then perhaps that should be the ultimate goal. The labels and classifications of gender, class, race, age, physical ability, sexuality, and religious persuasion all tend to enclose people within particular repressive groupings. If these taxonomies were obliterated then we might witness the dissolution of persecution on the grounds of both physical appearance and psychological configuration. The transvestite represents such a refusal of categorisation and is in the avant-garde of the destruction of the masculine and feminine labels. S/he embraces an alternative to the binarity of gender by opening up a third space in which gender can be expressed. In this respect, we see that gender can in fact offer not just three options, but a whole host of variables which defy definition. As Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon note, ‘masculinity and femininity are not endpoints of a continuum but categories which are being continually constituted, contested and negotiated in the subjectivities of us all’.⁵³ Gender and its subsequent expectations are constantly being redefined according to cultural, historical, political, and social norms. Yet the cross-dresser is able to renegotiate these definitions even as s/he is ever-changing. Like the performance of drag this, surely, is the most disruptive feature of transvestism: its ability to eschew classification, whilst simultaneously emphasising the unreality of an ‘inner’ gender. Indeed, as Butler declares, cross-dressing ‘can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were’.⁵⁴ In this sense, the transvestite subsumes the naturalised gender underneath the privileged gender of the masquerade. If the performative gender and the exaggeration of the performative are just as much *ersatz* as the impersonation then

⁵³ Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, p.210.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.200.

surely we are again at an impasse as the whole idea of gender collapses in on itself. We are left with nothing more than a copy of a copy. As Gherovici asserts,

we may be entering a postsexual era. In the time of digital connection, of Photoshop and airbrushing, we are all becoming copies of a copy. Or at least our ideals are. Take a look at various global celebrities. Women who look like lanky boys with oversized breasts, remade men who appear so made up that they come across as feminine: clones of clones.⁵⁵

The idea of gender and transvestism being a copy of a copy leads directly to Jean Baudrillard's theory regarding simulacra and simulation.

According to Baudrillard 'it is simulation that is effective, never the real'.⁵⁶

When applied to gender and gender masquerade, the simulation, or the act of transvestism, becomes the effective component of expression and realisation rather than any biological deterministic notion of a 'real' gender. Baudrillard theorises the concept that there is no such thing as an original, only ever a copy or clone of an ideal that in itself is merely a facsimile. He draws on contemporary notions and applications of history as an example to illustrate that we desire the past to be composed and viewed as a collective continuum in order to understand our own present culture and its appropriations. He writes that 'we require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end. Because finally we have never believed in them'.⁵⁷ In other words, contemporary society relies upon a visible past in the form of documents, artifacts, and historical evidence as a gauge with which we can measure our own achievements and developments, but this is ultimately only a myth which we believe can give us answers to our modern questions. We constantly return to the past as a method of understanding the present and possibly predicting future

⁵⁵ Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, p.245.

⁵⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1994; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), p.56.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10.

progress. However, such reliance on the past is merely an exercise in nostalgia: history, Baudrillard argues, is just another myth and our relationship with it bears similarities to how we understand gender; it can be polymorphous and in a state of continual alteration. He asserts that ‘when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity’.⁵⁸ Just as there is a plethora of ways of understanding and classifying gender, so too do we find that the past, and how it has shaped our current thinking, can be viewed as a multiply complex and effusive category of analysis. Neo-Victorian fiction in particular employs the Victorian past as a method of assimilating and unravelling the tangled web of both history and gender.

Neo-Victorian Impersonation

The neo-Victorian project in literary criticism is an expanding and diverse field of analysis which has previously involved investigations of intertextuality, authenticity, nostalgia, adaptation, gender and women’s writing, metafiction, Victorian culture, ‘sexsation’, postcolonialism, and spectrality.⁵⁹ My investigation, however, addresses the previously neglected area of cross-dressing (in terms of an in-depth and full-length

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp.6-7.

⁵⁹ For criticism engaging with Neo-Victorian intertextuality, authenticity, nostalgia and adaptation see Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (New York: Rodopi, 2001); Mark Llewellyn, ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2008) pp. 164-185. For explorations into Neo-Victorian gender, women’s writing and metafiction see Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and Jeanette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Other investigations concerning Victorian culture include criticism by Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), and Christine Krueger, *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002). Marie-Luise Kohlke has approached the genre through the lens of sexsation and postcolonialism in her article, ‘The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic’, *Probing the Problematics: Sex and Sexuality*, Vol.44 (2008), pp. 345-356. Others, such as Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, have examined the concept of spectrality in Neo-Victorianism: *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

engagement) as it appears in, and is key to much, neo-Victorian fiction. In this endeavour I aim to explore the connections between neo-Victorianism and transvestism. Therefore, just as gender can be said to be a copy of a copy, so too can the literary genre of neo-Victorian fiction be classified as an adaptation, a rewriting, or a palimpsestic faux-‘copy’ of Victorian mores, characteristics, and narrative techniques: in fact, it becomes a drag act. As Sarah Gamble maintains, it is through ‘neo-Victorianism as a self-conscious exercise in looking backwards, [that] the performative potential...emerges’.⁶⁰ Neo-Victorian texts and twenty-first century gender perceptions become concepts that emphasize the ‘unreal’ quality of the ‘core’, or the idea of an ‘origin’. Neo-Victorian fiction, in its quest for the pretence of the authentic, is synonymous with the transvestite act. Both assume an alternative disguise and covering for their performative expression and in doing so highlight that the performative itself is merely another performance. To employ a cross-dresser or transvestite as a character or theme in a text allows the reader a dual perspective on both history and its adaptations and gender and its variations. Indeed, the idea that neo-Victorian literature in particular can be said to adopt a disguise or masquerade is further supported by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, who state that ‘neo-Victorianism, like other historical fiction, might prove right the historian Eric Hobsbawm’s comment that “all history is contemporary history in fancy dress,” and perhaps neo-Victorian texts are contemporary fiction in funny costumes’.⁶¹ Although neo-Victorian literature may not essentially ‘pretend’ to be Victorian literature, the fact that the themes, settings, and language of the nineteenth century are often mimicked does tend to suggest that the texts are indeed wearing ‘funny costumes’. Thus, we can see that the entire neo-Victorian endeavour and

⁶⁰ Sarah Gamble, “‘You cannot impersonate what you are’: Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2009), p.128.

⁶¹ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.27, quoting Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1998), p.302.

the transvestite act have a symbiotic relationship. When examining both neo-Victorian fiction and cross-dressing phenomena, Gamble maintains, ‘we either approach them as rather hopeless replicas of an original they can never hope to properly be, or welcome the possibilities for experimentation, play, and reconfiguration they might represent’.⁶² For the purposes of this thesis, both categories are investigated as a means of (re)presenting contemporary views through Gamble’s idea of experimentation and play.

It is through its various and multiple employments of intertextual references that neo-Victorian fiction most prevalently displays the parodic and experimental imperative. Michael Worton and Judith Still declare, ‘the writer is a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind’.⁶³ Many works of literature employ intertextual references to various degrees, but neo-Victorian fiction is an example of intertextuality *par excellence*. Within the contemporary neo-Victorian literature and culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century intertextual references abound and each subsequent exploration and (re)presentation of the nineteenth century has the benefit of recent investigations into the same era. But what is the first draw of the literary consumer to these neo-Victorian texts? Is it a complimentary book review in the media? A recommendation from a friend or colleague? A core text on a university module? Or perhaps it is the attention-grabbing cover design that seems to attract one’s sight-line in a book shop?

These covers and dust-jacket designs have been created, edited and employed to great effect by publishing houses in order to dramatically, and graphically, demonstrate the contents or theme of a novel to the purchasing public. The ‘outside’ of the text is

⁶² Gamble, ““You cannot impersonate what you are”, p.131.

⁶³ Michael Worton and Judith Still ‘Introduction’ to Michael Worton and Judith Still (Eds.) *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p.1.

often referred to as the paratext; it is of the novel, but not a part of the actual body of text and is often altered and redesigned to suit a particular generation of bibliophiles. J. Hillis Miller states that ““Para” as a prefix in English (sometimes “par”) indicates alongside, near or beside, beyond, incorrectly, resembling or similar to, subsidiary to, isometric or polymetric to. In borrowed Greek compounds “para” indicates beside, to the side of, alongside, beyond, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavourably, and among’.⁶⁴ Therefore, the notion of something ‘para’ being either ‘beyond’ or ‘similar’ can apply to the transvestite act of going ‘beyond’ expectations, or ‘similar’ in the expression of a gender ideal and simultaneously neo-Victorian fiction is ‘similar’ to Victorian literature but ultimately goes ‘beyond’ in order to examine contemporary society. The paratexts of neo-Victorian literature are emblematic of our deep yearning to return, often nostalgically, to the past⁶⁵. ‘There is’, note Heilmann and Llewellyn, ‘an aesthetic question to be asked about what lies beneath our almost parasitic fascination with the continued return to the Victorian narrative – historical and literary – even as that period’s story grows increasingly distant from our own’.⁶⁶ In this respect, the ‘aesthetic question’ I am posing is: what value does the paratext hold? Is it purely a marketing ploy by the publisher/editor? Or does it portray a more complex and profound meaning?

⁶⁴ J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Critic as Host’, *Critical Inquiry* (1977) Vol. 3, No. 3, p.441.

⁶⁵ For the purposes of this thesis I have restricted my analysis of paratexts to the particular book covers of the neo-Victorian texts I have utilised in this investigation. Many other neo-Victorian paratexts, though, can function in a similar way. For example, Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002) has two different covers; one depicts a pair of Victorian ladies gloves on the cover to portray the importance of delicate (or thieving) hands, while the other shows two women, one undressing the other. Some neo-Victorian paratexts, on first inspection, appear to bear absolutely no relation to the contents within. A.S Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) also has alternative covers, one of which shows William Holman Hunt’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (c.1886-1905), while the other cover image depicts some butterflies, such as those which would have been collected by a Victorian lepidopterist. The key to decoding the neo-Victorian paratext lies in Roland Barthes’s theory that ‘the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.’ (Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, from *Image-Music-Text* (1968) in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds), *Modern Literary Theory* (1989; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.189). In other words, each purchaser and reader of the text in question will unconsciously inscribe meaning onto the text and, I would argue, the paratext as well.

⁶⁶ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.18.

Miller's exploration into the meaning of the prefix 'para' extends further to incorporate multiple definitions and deserves quoting at length. He declares that

'Para' is an 'uncanny' double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para' is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between the one and the other.⁶⁷

Miller's concept that anything 'para' is both inside and outside, is an 'uncanny double' and can also disrupt any stable boundary is relevant to both the crossing of the gender categories, as illustrated by the transvestite, and also the slippage between past and present. In many ways the 'trans', meaning 'to cross', could well be substituted by the prefix 'para' resulting in the possibility of the paravestite, or the parasexual, as the cross-dresser embodies this 'uncanny double', just as neo-Victorian fiction provides the 'uncanny double' of Victorian literature thus suggesting that such contemporary fiction, with its ability to simultaneously 'pretend' both 'proximity and distance', could also be classified as parafiction. And this parafiction demonstrates its most essential 'para-ness' in the form of the paratextual cover or dust-jacket.

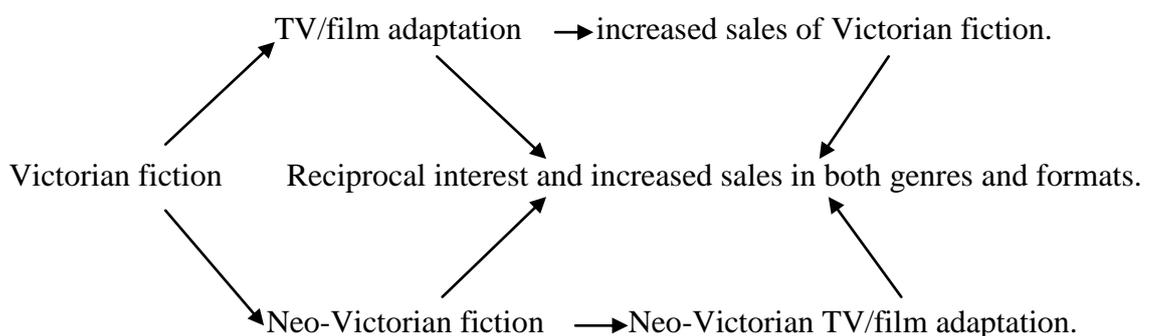
Named as the 'jacket' of a novel, it immediately creates the idea of dress and clothing with regards to literature and in fact the paratext is an act of cross-dressing in itself and therefore demonstrates the performative component of neo-Victorian fiction; the jacket, then, maketh the text. Each novel 'advertises' its contents through its covering, just as the transvestite expresses their gender through his/her clothing. However, when the cover(ing) is removed or opened, the biological body or the body of

⁶⁷ Miller, 'The Critic as Host', p.441.

the text can reveal something unexpected, subversive, transgressive and delightfully disruptive. Expounding on the purpose of the paratext, or what he refers to as the ‘peritext’, Gerard Genette notes that ‘the most obvious function of the jacket is to attract attention, using means even more dramatic than those a cover can or should be permitted: a garish illustration, a reminder of a film or television adaptation, or simply a graphic representation more flattering or more personalised than the cover standards of a series allow’.⁶⁸ In certain respects there is the obvious market advertising that a paratext is employed for. It must stand out on the shelves of a bookshop or the pages of an online purchasing site and to do so it is imperative that the illustration carries with it the message; buy me and/or read me! People may, however, have been drawn to seek out a particular text after a recent televisual or filmic adaptation release. As Heilmann and Llewellyn have noted,

from a cynical point of view there is of course the unavoidable fact that there is a neo-Victorian market sales corollary: just as the adaptation of a classic Victorian novel for the TV ensures increased sales, especially of the TV-tie-in, so sales for contemporary novels feed into the purchase of rights for the adaptation which in turn, when broadcast, leads to increase sales for the contemporary novel.⁶⁹

Undoubtedly, there is a perpetual, and sometimes reciprocal, relationship between texts and adaptations, consisting of:



⁶⁸ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.28.

⁶⁹ Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.27.

Yet, the cover or jacket provides far much more meaning to the reader/purchaser of literature than merely an enticement to buy. Each paratext exhibits the inherent malleability of itself, much like the transvestite and the genre of neo-Victorian fiction. 'Being immutable', Genette further points out, 'the text in itself is incapable of adapting to changes in its public in space and over time. The paratext – more flexible, more versatile, always transitory because transitive – is, as it were, an instrument of adaptation'.⁷⁰ While the inside, consisting of the corpus text, the physical body (excepting surgical procedures), and Victorian fiction, remain static and unchangeable, the outside, including the paratext, the clothing, and the neo-Victorian project are in a constant state of instability, flux and adaptation.

Neo-Victorian fiction, which in my conceptualisation starts with post-1901 literature and culture, self-consciously revisits and revises the long nineteenth century, but in so doing, a refracted copy is produced which reflects, not the actual Victorian era, but its cultural appropriations, its social and moral issues and political debates. The nineteenth century, as an historical epoch, is brought to us already neatly wrapped in literary texts, newspapers, photographs, letters, diaries, and parliamentary reports. These little packages of historical evidence are not the 'real' nineteenth century; they were produced by someone with a specific agenda in the nineteenth century. Thus when we examine, research and investigate the sources, we are already in receipt of a modified piece of history. When referring to historical research and narrativity Hayden White explains that

where the aim in view is the telling of a story, the problem of narrativity turns on the issue of whether historical events can be truthfully represented as manifesting the structures and processes of those met with more commonly in certain kinds of "imaginative" discourses, that is, such fictions as the epic, the folk tale, myth, romance, tragedy, comedy, farce, and the like. This means that

⁷⁰ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.408.

what distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their contents, rather than their form. The content of his-torical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator. This implies that the form in which his-torical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is found rather than constructed.⁷¹

In other words, the disciplines of history and fiction are not necessarily distant, or even separate, but that meaning, reality and narrativity are effectively 'found' in the sources. However, Gamble contends that, 'the nineteenth century lives on in the twentieth only as an artifact or relic, which can be viewed curiously, critically or nostalgically, but never "known" in any authentic sense'.⁷² Similarly, the directors of neo-Victorian filmic adaptations and the authors of neo-Victorian fiction are approaching the task of writing about the nineteenth century from an already influenced place. As Mark Llewellyn notes, 'neo-Victorian texts are, in the main, processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions'.⁷³ The neo-Victorian text is a rewriting of, or may imitate, an actual nineteenth-century literary text, a newspaper, or even a photograph. It could also be a revision of an event, a person, or an issue. Yet all of these nineteenth-century (arti)facts which are appropriated by the postmodern drive for neo-Victorianism are in themselves influenced by previous historical events, figures, and ideologies. Thus, the neo-Victorian text carries with it the weight of influence extending back to pre-Victorian history, but with the benefit of modern analysis, theory and debate. Neo-Victorian literature and film are born out of the focused and self-aware investigations into the Victorians, their literature, and their era. Therefore, as Gamble argues, 'in a sense, the contemporary Victorian text embodies a double act of recollection—that is, the recollection of the historical past within a narrative framework

⁷¹ Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1984), p.2.

⁷² Gamble, "'You cannot impersonate what you are'", p.126.

⁷³ Mark Llewellyn, 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2008), p.168.

that itself reconstitutes traces of a specifically literary past'.⁷⁴ This 'double act of recollection' does not constitute a 'failed copy' as such, but rather a reworking of the nineteenth century which incorporates contemporary issues and debates that transcend the historical gap of over a century, but are heavily influenced by our own (re)readings of the Victorian era. The intention of neo-Victorian literature and film is to play with the concept of historiography through the deliberate adaptation of the past but with (post)modern concerns and ideologies. This is also synonymous with the act of drag, in the sense that the reader must be aware that the text is in fact 'pretending' to be Victorian in style, language, narrative technique, or setting, otherwise the neo-Victorian experiment is bound to fail.

Neo-Victorian fiction is not simply fiction set in the Victorian era or the nineteenth century. It is an experimentation which requires historical and literary influences, but then uses that knowledge in order to (re)present the present through the Victorian past. As Heilmann and Llewellyn assert, "neo-Victorianism" is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century...texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*'.⁷⁵ The entire neo-Victorian project is an attempt to interpret and explore twenty-first century social mores, codes and norms through a nineteenth-century lens. Neo-Victorian fiction and film often (re)produce and (re)present current social dilemmas, ethical debates and political concepts which, whilst seeming 'Victorian' in setting, character, and language, are actually more of a conscious negotiation of the present through the past. Indeed, many neo-Victorian texts attempt to appropriate essentially nineteenth-century voices to speak of modern ideological and social concerns such as class, race, and gender issues and

⁷⁴ Gamble, "You cannot impersonate what you are", p.128.

⁷⁵ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.4, emphasis in original.

their implications, which were also just as much of a concern in the nineteenth century. According to Llewellyn neo-Victorian texts are a ‘desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally “different” versions of the Victorian’.⁷⁶ Such ‘marginalised voices’, which were often ignored in the nineteenth century, are largely those of the supposedly oppressed and are, in neo-Victorian fiction, proclaiming loudly the social injustices and moral indifferences that in the twenty-first century should now be obsolete, but are not necessarily so. However, such ‘protagonists of historiographic metafiction’, Hutcheon asserts, ‘are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, [and] the peripheral figures of fictional history’.⁷⁷ In the postmodern approach of much neo-Victorian fiction the margins become centred and voiced, speaking of the concerns which have continued to concern us for over a century. The apparently ‘modern’ issues that neo-Victorian texts (re)present were also concerns in the Victorian era itself. Class, race, and gender appear to be the three main fields of political debate that transcend time. They were widely discussed and debated in the nineteenth century just as they are today. In many respects contemporary society is still haunted by the historical past, and particularly by the ‘Age of Empire’ and the ‘glorious’ days of the Victorian period. The institutions we use, the medicines we take, and the social and political issues that we assume are thoroughly ‘modern’ are in fact the products of the nineteenth century.

A similar criticism of being ‘thoroughly modern’ has been levelled at the entire neo-Victorian project. In its endeavour to recreate, re-evaluate, and re-voice the nineteenth century, neo-Victorian fiction, as mentioned above, re-centres the margins in an attempt to vocalise a perceived moment of history from an alternative angle. Whilst

⁷⁶ Llewellyn, ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’, p.165.

⁷⁷ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp.113-14.

this can be viewed as dissident or subversive, Gutleben argues that ‘the perspective of the West Indian, the servant or the homosexual is not subversive anymore today, on the contrary it is in vogue’.⁷⁸ In other words, it has become commonplace in twenty-first century society openly to discuss matters pertaining to race, class and sexual preference. Such subjects, which may well have easily offended the ‘Victorian’, are no longer taboo and have, in fact, become the norm. ‘Yesterday’s scandals’, Gutleben elucidates, ‘are today’s conventions’.⁷⁹ In this respect, the neo-Victorian project is not as transgressive of social mores as first assumed; indeed, when viewed in this conservative light, it appears rather mundane. Contemporary readers are simply being offered plots and storylines which revolve around age-old questions of race, class and gender, and in this way neo-Victorian fiction ‘appears inevitably less progressive’.⁸⁰ However, I believe that in its approach, methodology and technique neo-Victorian fiction is indeed innovative and if such topics of race, class and gender are still being debated, then surely, in applying the Victorian to the contemporary, we are utilising history in order to negotiate today’s concerns, which in itself is a thoroughly modern and progressive endeavour.

What neo-Victorian appropriations and adaptations attempt to do is engage in a complex discussion between past and present, between literature and culture, and between ‘truth’ and fiction. Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox note that

while adaptation(s) can be thought of as inhabited by literary and cultural ‘ghosts’, this echoing of voices and ideas performs an intertextual weaving with the present moment and exhibits a simultaneous recognition of and departure from that past, allowing us the space in which to grapple with the renewed crises we face in negotiating our (post)modern identities.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p.37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.158.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.121.

⁸¹ Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox, ‘Introduction: Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past’, *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2009/10), p.3.

The Victorian past and the contemporary present become intertwined in a hybrid of historical sources and literary creativity, allowing the academic reader an opportunity to engage with an issue with the benefit of a perceived distance from the era in question. In this way, many authors of neo-Victorian texts and filmic adaptations attempt to (re)create the nineteenth century through the use of Victorian literary devices and influences. Yet the texts and films which they actually produce tend to overwrite the nineteenth century with consciously contemporary ideologies. As Andrea Kirchknopf acknowledges, ‘by creating a dialogue between narratives of the present day and the nineteenth century, strongly based on the concept of intertextuality, contemporary rewrites manage to supply different perspectives from the canonized Victorian ones’.⁸² This concept of ‘rewriting’ is crucially important to this thesis in the sense that both gender and genre are effectively overwritten with new ways of exploring old issues.

The cultural proliferation of all things ‘Victorian’, from furniture and architectural style to political values and literary texts, has grown exponentially over the past few decades. The seemingly perpetual need to turn back to the ‘golden days’ of the Victorian era in search of an apparently more assured and comfortable past speaks of a modern tendency to seek out the known rather than face the unknown future. Llewellyn purports that this is ‘a fact of our contemporary culture; that in bookstores and TV guides all around us what we see is the “nostalgic tug” that the (quasi-) Victorian exerts on the mainstream identification of our own time as a period in search of its past’.⁸³ The twenty-first century reader is looking towards the Victorians for explanations concerning who we are and where we come from as a way of understanding ourselves. For some, the Victorian period functions as an easy scapegoat; a place where blame for

⁸² Andrea Kirchknopf, ‘(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts’, *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2008), p.54.

⁸³ Llewellyn, ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’ p.168.

all social injustices can be sited and therefore dismissed, but for others revisiting the nineteenth century allows for a view of contemporary society through a Victorian prism. Neo-Victorian fiction, as Bowler and Cox maintain, is ‘a means of interrogating and critiquing our own society and of facilitating a new understanding of our relationship with and perception of a cultural past in such close proximity with our own’.⁸⁴ For Bowler and Cox, neo-Victorianism is not simply a matter of standing at a comfortable distance and criticising Victorian assumptions and ideologies, it is a way of gaining a better insight into contemporary concerns by employing the past as a multi-faceted looking-glass. The Victorians are reflected in and by us, just as we are reflected back through neo-Victorian engagements with that past. It is important for contemporary society to understand that we do not exist in a timeless vacuum which appeared from nowhere; we have history and we will be history in both a temporal and a corporeal sense. Thus, neo-Victorian fiction emphasizes to us that we are part of that historical progression. As Dana Schiller notes, ‘recycling past lives and past texts serves as a constant reminder that we are not alone, that we are always accompanied by the ghosts of bygone days’.⁸⁵ Whether those ‘ghosts’ represent ideological assumptions, political viewpoints, social inequalities, or even literary tastes, they are still ever-present influences in our lives.

The extent to which we acknowledge these influential ‘ghosts,’ though, is largely down to individual taste. Readers or academics may be interested in the stylistic qualities and tastes such as the nineteenth century’s obsession with taxonomy and classification, almost like collectors of collectors. Others, however, may be more concerned with specific issues which affected lives in the Victorian era as much as they

⁸⁴ Bowler and Cox, ‘Introduction’, p.2.

⁸⁵ Dana Schiller, ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 29, No. 4, (1997), p.555.

do today. This thesis concentrates upon the act of cross-dressing as it appears in neo-Victorian literature and culture and to that end will investigate the conceptual links between neo-Victorianism and gender and their (re)constructions along with literary genre and authorial agenda. The focus of this investigation lies firmly in neo-Victorian literature and its adaptations of the nineteenth century. Given that ideas and concepts of gender began to be consolidated and crystallized in the Victorian period, and that the neo-Victorian project often emphasises issues of gender, it seems particularly pertinent to concentrate upon the nineteenth century and its modern drag act, neo-Victorianism, in this endeavour. The lack of critical attention towards the figure of the transvestite in both Victorian and neo-Victorian texts is representative of the way in which gender is often presumed to be a 'natural' given. However, the texts employed and analysed in this thesis all deal, in their various ways, with the 'act' of crossing a dress boundary, whether that be of gender, of race, or of class. In investigating neo-Victorian texts I intend to highlight the relationships between the present and the past, but also how these relationships impact on our perceptions of a raced/classed/gendered identity in the twenty-first century. This will be achieved by drawing on appropriate theories such as Butler's theory of gender performativity. As Gamble asserts, 'novels that place the theme of gender performativity at the center of the narrative expose the neo-Victorian project in its entirety as a form of masquerade'.⁸⁶ The fact that neo-Victorian fiction is a re-writing of a previous historical period directly relates to the notion of performativity and cross-dressing as a reworking of gendered expression.

Indeed, the interest in gender studies and queer theory relating to identity is synonymous with the drive to seek out a moment in time when our concepts of race, class and gender identity were defined and categorised. Thus, as Krimmer declares,

⁸⁶ Gamble, 'You cannot impersonate what you are', p.128.

‘stories about cross-dressing are stories about bodies in history, bodies in culture. They depict and re-negotiate the uneasy relationship between body and gender, body and identity, and body and truth’.⁸⁷ Similarly, neo-Victorian fiction and criticism which focuses on the cross-dresser attempts to understand the body and gender, but with the added parameter of history as a lens through which such re-negotiations can be examined and possibly (de)constructed. The interest in transvestism and cross-dressing, whatever the period of history, is derived from our own curiosity into gender. As Llewellyn states,

The Victorian and the neo-Victorian offer the simultaneous possibilities of proximity and distance. This is particularly true in relation to choices about individual identity, specifically in relation to sexuality and gender. In this sense, the Victorians, particularly in their status as multiply ‘Othered’ subjects, offer the potential space for working through ideas and concerns that still dominate social discourses today.⁸⁸

Because the integral issues of gender, sexuality, race and class seem to shape our concepts of identity, we can utilise this ‘space’ offered by the neo-Victorian paradigm to analyse where our ideologies stem from, what implications they carry, and how we can redefine perceptions of gender in the future. The transvestite in neo-Victorian literature and culture affords us the opportunity to negotiate a space between gender and genre that serves to elucidate our gendered expressions and in which the influences, or ‘ghosts’, of the past can be exorcised, or at the very least, acknowledged and accepted.

Thesis structure

This thesis begins with the pre-Victorian period of the early nineteenth century. The first chapter, entitled ‘James Barry in Biography and Biofiction’, investigates and

⁸⁷ Krimmer, *In the Company of Men*, p.207.

⁸⁸ Llewellyn, ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’, p.175.

analyses the differing appropriations of Dr James Barry, a nineteenth-century doctor who rose through the ranks of the medical and military establishments and who was discovered on his death to have been a woman passing as a man. This chapter compares twentieth and twenty-first century representations of Barry by Olga Racster and Jessica Grove (*Dr James Barry: Her Secret Story*, 1932),⁸⁹ Patricia Duncker (*James Miranda Barry*, 1999),⁹⁰ Rachel Holmes (*Scanty Particulars: The Life of Dr James Barry* 2002),⁹¹ and periodical press responses to Barry's imposture. It is important to examine the portrayal and depiction of Barry as an historical figure and a character, as such an investigation will clarify how and why s/he has been appropriated by authors since his/her death. S/he is (re)constructed variously as the hero/ine of a very feminine love story (Racster and Grove), an anatomical hermaphrodite, or intersexed person, who identifies with the masculine gender (Holmes), and as a transsexual persona (Duncker). The various configurations of Barry are dependent upon the selection and employment of historical sources, but also the agenda of the particular author and the context in which the text was written. Due to the fact that the texts employed in this chapter consist of fictional works and historical biography, a discussion of the similarities between fictional biography and biographical fiction is also included along with a discussion on the intertextual and paratextual elements which emphasise the neo-Victorian penchant for parody and pastiche. The research questions I explore include: what is the relationship between history and fiction and how is it crucial to understanding the neo-Victorian project? How does each author adapt previous explorations and how does this relate to the author's specific location in time? This

⁸⁹ Olga Racster and Jessica Grove, *Dr. James Barry: Her Secret Story* (London: Gerald Howe, 1932).

⁹⁰ Patricia Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* (2000; London: Picador, 1999).

⁹¹ Rachel Holmes, *Scanty Particulars: The Life of Dr. James Barry* (London: Penguin, 2002).

question of adapting previous historical and literary texts is also one of the issues addressed in the second chapter.

The various (re)presentations and negotiations of historical personas which have been produced with the benefit of previous research are apparent in the configurations of Hannah Cullwick (1833-1909) and Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), the focus of the second chapter. Entitled 'Class and Race Acts: Dichotomies and Complexities', it analyses the fictional and critical construction of those who transgress the boundaries of class and race through cross-dressing. This chapter examines critical and biographical depictions of Cullwick by Diane Atkinson in *Love and Dirt* (2003)⁹² and Liz Stanley's *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick* (1984),⁹³ and compares these to (bio)fictional portrayals of Baartman by Barbara Chase-Riboud in *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003)⁹⁴ and Rachel Holmes in *The Hottentot Venus* (2007).⁹⁵ The time period of the early to mid-nineteenth century, in which both Cullwick and Baartman lived, follows on chronologically from the first chapter. Both of these historical personas are not only linked by the era which they inhabited, but also through their self-presentation. It is important to clarify, at this point, that cross-dressing does not necessarily denote a cross-gendered form of dress but can also include cross-race and cross-class dressing. This will be the focus of an investigation into the various configurations and depictions of Cullwick as 'feminine' maid, lower-class lover to Munby, diary author, her self-representation in the diaries, and how she was able to gain control in a potentially oppressive relationship and environment. In a similar vein, I will examine Baartman's creation of herself as a marketable commodity along with her own self-promotion, and

⁹² Diane Atkinson, *Love and Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003).

⁹³ Liz Stanley, *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick: Victorian Maidservant* (London: Virago, 1984).

⁹⁴ Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

⁹⁵ Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman* (2007; London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

her battles with various historical patriarchal authority figures such as Hendrik Cesars, Alexander Dunlop, and Georges Cuvier. Both Cullwick and Baartman appear to self-consciously perform their status as ‘Maid’ and ‘Spectacle’ respectively, which then raises the issue of the power relations, including sadomasochistic practices, between ‘master’ and ‘slave’ as well as the reader or viewer and the writer or performer. Similarly, the intertextual blending of source material and the paratextual usage of photographic images (with regard to Cullwick) and caricatured cartoons (in the case of Baartman) will demonstrate the performative aspect of neo-Victorian explorations into these fascinating personas. The research questions addressed in this chapter include: How have these historical personages presented and (re)presented themselves and to what extent have authors in the twentieth and twenty-first century (re)commodified such masquerades for a modern readership? The concept of commodification and the ‘selling of one’s self’ relates directly to the topic of the third chapter which focuses on gender performance, particularly in the Victorian music hall, as a form of entertainment for financial gain.

The third chapter, ‘Performing the Performance of Gender’, chronologically moves to the Victorian and late-Victorian period and explores the double-layered performance of gender by Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park in relation to music hall culture and the success of male impersonator Vesta Tilley. This will be compared to neo-Victorian reconceptualisations and (trans)formations of female transvestites in Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994)⁹⁶ and Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998)⁹⁷ along with Andrew Davies’s subsequent BBC filmic adaptation of

⁹⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

⁹⁷ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998; London: Virago, 2008).

the same title.⁹⁸ Examining the performance of gender which is exaggerated or even elided when on stage in a music hall or theatre will highlight the difference between gender performativity in the Butlerian sense and the performance of gender. To what extent do periodical press and court reports of the Boulton and Park affair give contextual evidence of the ramifications of cross-dressing? And how does this reaction compare with the popularity and success of Tilley as a music hall performer? An examination of Vesta Tilley's career and status will bring attention to the potentially subversive sexual connotations of gender masquerade. This concept of subversion is also relevant to a discussion of the actual staging of a gender act; the music hall provided a relatively safe space in which to play with gender; however, when such masquerade is taken to the streets, it appears that dangers ensue, to either the cross-dresser or the audience. The contemporary novel and filmic adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* provide neo-Victorian representations of cross-dressing, music hall performance, and a sexual underworld, which can clarify how such performances are received in today's commercial literary and televisual marketplace. These examples all depict the subversive aspects of transvestism in that the boundaries of gender, sexuality, and identity are transgressed, elided, or conflated. And it is in this chapter, perhaps more than any other in the thesis, that intertextuality and paratextuality are employed in their most obvious form to illustrate the subversive potential of neo-Victorian fiction. This chapter will also debate the questions of how the artistes and authors have negotiated and delivered the double and triple layered performance of gender when it appears on stage. Why does the music hall offer such freedom of gender expression? How has the transvestite 'act', in both senses of the word, been exploited for a modern television audience? And does neo-Victorian fiction really offer a subversive potential regarding

⁹⁸ Sally Head (Executive Producer), Andrew Davies (Screenwriter) and Geoffrey Sax (Director), *Tipping the Velvet* (BBC DVD, 2002).

sexuality and desire? The act of cross-dressing, no matter how much it *should* be separated from sexual preference, still seems to create uncertainty, or even a crisis, with regard to sexual object-choice: the subject of the fourth chapter.

In a diachronic approach, the fourth chapter, entitled ‘Cross-dressing and the Crisis of Sexuality’, covers the time period spanned by the thesis from the early nineteenth century, through the Victorian era, to culminate in the contemporary. This chapter purposefully focuses attention on the many confusions, consequences, and crises that arise from the act of cross-dressing. Utilising Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835),⁹⁹ Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus* (1884),¹⁰⁰ and Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune* (2005),¹⁰¹ I scrutinise the link between gender (re)presentations, transvestism, and sexuality across the time period. The cross-dressed performances in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* lead to an unconventional ‘ménage à trois’ which is brought about by a multi-layered performance by Madeleine/Théodore who dresses as Rosalind/Ganymede and re-enacts scenes from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. So clearly a debate on the intertextual references alluded to or employed in these texts is necessary. Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus* offers an extreme depiction of not only cross-dressing and the crisis of sexuality which ensues from such a masquerade, but also raises the issue of the body as work of art and of necrophilic desire. *Misfortune*, as a neo-Regency/Victorian novel in which the protagonist is raised as a girl, portrays the uncertainty of sexuality which often surrounds transvestism. The paratextual discussion, as in the previous chapters, will also emphasise how the cover images of these particular texts directly relate to the very specific contexts in which they were produced. This chapter seeks to explore as research questions: if and why cross-dressing is conflated

⁹⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835; London: Penguin, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: A Materialist Novel* (1884; New York: MLA, 2004).

¹⁰¹ Wesley Stace, *Misfortune* (London: Vintage, 2005).

with sexuality and whether these texts portray sexuality as borne from biological sex, the socially constructed gender we assume, or as being derived from the object choice of sexual desire. More general research questions I want to probe concern the reasons why the authors of neo-Victorian fiction and biography concentrate their investigations or (re)presentations on a transvestite? Is transvestism a trope which allows modern experimentations of gender to be elucidated more clearly? Or is neo-Victorian cross-dressing merely a titillating but unique selling point for a contemporary capitalist society: what Gutleben would claim as ‘an opportunistic aetiology’?¹⁰² Such ‘opportunistic aetiology’, or scientific search for causes, can also be attributed to Dr James Barry. As the subject of the first chapter Barry was a trained physician who sought out the origin of diseases, yet the explorations into the life of such a preeminent medical officer also offer an opportunity for contemporary authors to seek out the cause of Barry’s gender masquerade.

¹⁰² Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p.37.

Chapter 1: James Barry in Biography and Biofiction



Fig.1, Image of James Barry.

In the same year that saw the graduation of the ‘first’ woman doctor in Great Britain, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Dr James Barry died.¹ On 25 July 1865, he was laid out in his London residence by the housemaid Sophia Bishop, who exclaimed ‘It’s a woman’.² From that moment on the story of James Barry became a topic of public and academic debate.³ Historical documents show that Barry enrolled at Edinburgh University, took classes in dissection and surgery and produced a thesis which concentrated on the hernia in male, and particularly female, patients. Barry then went on to serve as an Army medical officer instigating radical medical reforms wherever she went and swiftly rose through the ranks to the esteemed position of Inspector General in the British colonies of the Cape of Good Hope, Jamaica, Corfu and eventually Canada, where he or she,

¹ The first openly female doctor to establish herself within the medical profession was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, who after numerous attempts to study medicine at the universities of London, St Andrews, and Edinburgh, eventually gained a licence in 1865 (the year of Barry’s death) from the Society of Apothecaries which allowed her onto the medical register. For a biographical note of Garrett Anderson see M.A. Elston ‘Anderson, Elizabeth Garrett (1836-1917)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (available at www.oxforddnb.com, [accessed 2 April 2010]).

² June Rose, *The Perfect Gentleman: The Remarkable Life of Dr. James Miranda Barry, the woman who served as an officer in the British Army from 1813 to 1859* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1977), p.12.

³ A contemporary film entitled *Heaven and Earth* which explores the James Barry story has been planned for production since 2010, but at the time of writing it still has not been released. See www.imdb.com/title/tt0377458 for further details.

depending on one's perspective, had to retire from active service due to ill health. Barry returned to London in 1859, under financial constraints and in solitude, to live for a further six years on a meagre Army pension before she died. Over the past 145 years writers, historians, scientists, academics and the periodical press have all attempted to explain the enigma of James Barry and her gender masquerade. Around the time of Barry's death the Victorian periodical press abounds with speculation and supposition concerning her apparent gender imposture. In *All The Year Round* a fictionalised short story described Barry as an 'eccentric being, who was even more mysterious in death than in life'.⁴ Indeed, more than a century of speculation and investigation into Barry have proven such a remark as correct. The various methodologies of historical, literary, scientific, and sociological research that have been employed to analyse Barry since her death all tend to examine her life and work, yet all pivot around the same fulcrum, that of gender.

Due to the fact that Barry is configured variously as a cross-dressed female (by Racster and Grove), a possible intersexed person (by Holmes), and a transsexual (by Duncker), the use of a masculine or feminine pronoun proves problematic.⁵ As Racster and Grove depict Barry as definitively female, the feminine pronoun seems to be the most appropriate for the first section of the chapter. Holmes, though, problematises the matter by portraying Barry as what we would term today an intersexed person, in which case the male pronoun is utilised to show the 'chosen' gender identification in the second section. However, Duncker further complicates the issue by constructing Barry as a transsexual character and, therefore, the use of s/he and his/her, etc. in the third section emphasises the unstable nature of gender and the lack of language with which

⁴ 'A Mystery Still', *All The Year Round*, Vol. 17, No. 421, (18 May 1867), p.495.

⁵ It was attempted by the author of the thesis to create a new non-gendered pronoun of 'JMB' for use in this chapter, as it elegantly encompasses the initials of Barry and clearly illustrates the combination of masculine, feminine, and transsexual, however, it proved impossible and nonsensical in the process of writing and reading. For clarity, the author believes that Barry was indeed a cross-dressed female and will use the feminine pronoun for the introduction and conclusion to this chapter.

we can comfortably refer to the transvestite. Although this may produce a disruptive reading experience, it deliberately acknowledges the destabilising effect of cross-dressing and therefore can be seen as representative of the gender transgression between the masculine/feminine divide; the question of the ‘right’ pronoun literally slashes the binary apart whilst simultaneously joining the terms together.

James Barry enrolled to study Medicine at Edinburgh University in 1809 and from this moment onwards and until her death she ‘had exchanged her skirts for breeches’.⁶ The conjecture surrounding the purported cross-dressing of Barry sparked interest and debate as to her real sex and/or gender to the point where there was ‘quite enough to stimulate curiosity and provoke astonishment in this bare fact without any artificial dressing’.⁷ In an inventive pun, the periodical press succinctly alluded to the fact that such ‘artificial dressing’ by Barry would clearly lead to further ‘artificial dressing’ by historians and authors alike in their treatment of Barry and her life. The *Glasgow Herald* even went so far as to draw comparisons with sensation fiction, stating that ‘I doubt whether even Miss Braddon would have ventured to make use of it in fiction’.⁸ Barry has continued to captivate the public imagination.

This chapter will examine various twentieth and twenty-first century representations and reconstructions of Barry in dress, behaviour, and mentality. The investigation will focus specifically on the texts by Olga Racster and Jessica Grove, whose collaboration produced a fictionalised journal of Barry’s entitled *Dr James Barry: Her Secret Story* (1932), then turn to Rachel Holmes’ historical biography *Scanty Particulars: The Life of Dr James Barry* (2002), and finally Patricia Duncker’s biofictional novel *James Miranda Barry* (1999). The research questions I intend to address include: How has James Barry, as a transvestite historical persona, been

⁶ Rose, *The Perfect Gentleman*, p.21.

⁷ ‘A Female Medical Combatant’, *Timaru Herald*, Vol. 2, No. 80 (25 November 1865), p.7.

⁸ ‘A Strange Story’, *Glasgow Herald*, 2 August 1865, Issue 7994).

constructed? To what extent does the historical and cultural context in which each text was written impact upon the portrayal of Barry? Are biography and biofiction⁹ mutually exclusives genres? And what role do the intertextual and paratextual elements of the Barry story play in the complex, and occasionally contradictory, depictions of the character?

The first section of the chapter, entitled 'I shall have to invent a love affair', refers to the fact that Racster and Grove portray Barry as a feminine cross-dresser who embarks upon a love affair with a male character. Racster and Grove, were not the first investigators into the Barry phenomenon, nor were they the first to write a fictionalised novel about Barry's gender disguise.¹⁰ They were, though, the first to construct a complex depiction of Barry and her imposture in a sentimental fictionalised journal which communicates Barry's supposed 'femininity' through descriptions of his/her dress, behaviour and psychology, resulting in a gender disguise that is romanticised and essentialised.

The second section of the chapter, 'Betwixt and Between', examines Rachel Holmes's biography of Barry in which Barry is rendered an anatomical hermaphrodite, or in contemporary terminology an intersexed individual who identifies with the masculine gender.¹¹ Once again Barry is constructed through descriptions of his/her attire, actions, and mentality. Given that it is a biography, one would assume that it would be devoid of fictional devices and narrative, as the historian's methodology insists upon empiricism and factual historical evidence. In fact, biography, as I will

⁹ Biofiction refers to fictionalised texts and stories that have been written about historical personas. They differ from strict 'biographical' works by their fictional elements of language, narrative, and a degree of artistic licence with regard to historical 'fact'.

¹⁰ There is an earlier novel, which includes veiled references to James Barry as the character Dr. Fitz-James, written by Colonel Ebenezer Rogers and entitled *A Modern Sphinx: A Novel* (London: J. & R. Maxwell, 1881).

¹¹ For detailed analysis and explorations of the figure of the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite see Michel Foucault, 'Introduction', *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), pp.vii-xvii. and Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995).

show in the course of this chapter, has more in common with literary fiction than with mere fact-finding. Cora Kaplan declares that ‘writing and reading biography [can be] a form of scopophilia – the desire to know forbidden secrets as instanced in the desire to look – an illicit intrusion on the living subject and a somewhat macabre activity in relation to the dead’.¹² Neo-Victorian authors have produced two intersecting, but still distinct genres of life writing. There are those who write fictional biographies, where the entire contents of a text are ‘created’ around a fictional character, and there are those who pen biographical fictions, where the life of a real historical persona is (re)created for a contemporary readership. Kaplan further explains that ‘biofiction, the term coined to describe [a] hybrid genre, can be interpreted in various ways, as highlighting the tension between biography and fiction, as well as marking the overlap between them’.¹³ These biofictions engage with recent scholarship and research into their chosen subject, and do so in a self-conscious and self-aware manner.

It is the self-awareness of Patricia Duncker’s rewriting of James Barry that is the subject of the third section in the chapter. ‘Swaying in limbo between the safe worlds of either sweet ribbons or breeches’ explores Duncker’s depiction of Barry in a biofictional novel. Indeed, Duncker investigates and represents nineteenth-century history almost as if it is a palimpsest that can be creatively overwritten with contemporary debates and issues. As Christian Gutleben points out, ‘the past then is not a motif of “imprisonment,” as the critics of postmodernism like to claim, it is the subject of a recreative assessment, in the sense that it is both an entertaining enterprise (offering the pleasures of disguise) and a new creation which operates a synthesis between codes of different eras’.¹⁴ Duncker attempts such ‘recreative assessment’ by drawing on Judith

¹² Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007), p.47.

¹³ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p.65.

¹⁴ Christian Gutleben, ‘An Aesthetics of Performativity: Patricia Duncker’s Art of Simulation in James Miranda Barry’, *Études Anglaises*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2007), p.218.

Butler's theory of gender performativity, through which she is able to negotiate the complex subject of gender expression and produce a fictional text that engages with the story of Barry's life. Duncker's novel is a self-conscious representation of Barry as a transsexual who negotiates his/her gender identity in a fluid fashion during a period of history when gender was clearly demarcated into the strict binary categories of masculine and feminine.

Holmes and Duncker both construct Barry as possessing an alternative gender to the binary options of purely masculine or feminine. They complicate and destabilise gender categories and, by extension, undermine rigid concepts of sexual difference. In (re)presenting Barry as an anatomical hermaphrodite (Holmes) or as a transsexual (Duncker), these authors are attempting to negotiate a historical persona through the prism of intermediate gender. Their interest in sexological, queer, and gender theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries looks back to the past in order to understand how gender was constructed, delineated, and represented, but also to engage with contemporary notions of sexual difference and classification. As Anne Fausto-Sterling declares,

whereas in previous centuries, unusual bodies were treated as unnatural and freakish, the new field of teratology offered a natural explanation for the birth of people with extraordinary bodies. At the same time, however, it redefined such bodies as pathological, as unhealthy conditions to be cured using increased medical knowledge.¹⁵

In this respect we can see that Holmes, Duncker, and to some extent Racster and Grove, are utilising Barry's gender imposture to investigate whether gender and gender-crossing are still pathologised or essentialised.

¹⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: BasicBooks, 2000), p.37.

'I shall have to invent a love affair' (DJB:136): Olga Racster and Jessica Grove's *Dr.*

James Barry: Her Secret Story

Dr James Barry: Her Secret Story (1932) claims to be the fictitious journal of the Army surgeon James Barry. The journal begins in January 1812 at Edinburgh University, where Barry is studying and training as a surgeon along with her fellow student Johnson, and concludes in 1865 with an extract from the journal of Captain Cloete, one of Barry's acquaintances. Throughout the fictional story Racster and Grove depict Barry as a female cross-dresser who adopts masculine attire in order to escape from an abusive relationship with her husband. In just a small narrative reference to Barry being terrified of her husband the reader is made aware early in the proceedings that Barry is a woman who is dressed as a man, in fact a medical officer, and that this constitutes a carefully crafted disguise to avoid recognition. Such figuring of Barry and her reasons for cross-dressing by the authors therefore deny Barry any professional ambition associated with her later promotion through the military ranks. Barry becomes merely a woman trapped in a restrictive marriage which can only be circumvented through a transvestite act. Even though they construct Barry as a cross-dresser, Racster and Grove insist on portraying her in essentialist terms as a feminine character through the use of the female pronoun. They depict Barry as a caring female, who is often infantilised and therefore requires protection, and through descriptions of Barry's physiology, small stature, and tiny hands, which compound and biologise her psychological configuration. As A.K. Kubba points out, Racster and Grove's text is representative of 'the vast majority of

some 200 items written regarding the doctor', in that Barry is unproblematically configured and constructed as female.¹⁶

Though written in 1932, *Dr James Barry* remains firmly entrenched in the Victorian and Edwardian ideologies of clearly demarcated and essentialised gender categories of masculine male and feminine female. Racster and Grove seem intent on constructing Barry as a very feminine woman who has no other option but to dress as a man and then 'naturally' form a romantic attachment to a heroic male, Charles Somerset, whom she accompanies to the colonies, but not for any professional ambitions of her own. Their portrayal of Barry as feminine rests not solely on the use of the female pronoun; they also consistently depict Barry in terms of traditionally feminine endeavours. Their representation of the Barry character is couched in terms synonymous with the stereotypically feminine virtues of nurturing and caring; a person whose 'womanly' sympathy is evoked by 'the screams and shouts of the poor suffering things' (*DJB*:104) who are her patients. Barry becomes the epitome of the sensitive, Nightingale-like 'lady with the lamp' figure such as when her 'woman's instinct to alleviate a man's suffering caused [Barry] to jump out of [her] chair with alacrity and busy [her]self with dressing his wound' (*DJB*:107). Depicting Barry as caring nurse rather than irascible army doctor shows a slippage between historical evidence and fictionalised account which results in the subversive potential of transvestism becoming undermined by the privileging of the heterosexual romance plot between Barry and Somerset.

Many accounts of her life also connect Barry to Florence Nightingale by emphasising the meeting between them in Scutari in 1855. As Brian Hurwitz and Ruth Richardson note, 'the careers of two extraordinary nineteenth century women intersect

¹⁶ A.K Kubba, 'The Life, Work and Gender of Doctor James Barry MD (1795-1865)', *Proc R Coll Physicians Edinb*, Vol. 31 (2001), p.352.

at this point. Each had chosen a different path by which to transcend the limitations imposed upon her sex. Both had rejected traditional female social and familial roles'.¹⁷ Whilst Barry may have met many doctors and nurses throughout his/her career, it is always the meeting with Nightingale which receives attention. This is probably due to the fact that it is easier to compare two women who, in very different ways, forged inroads into a male-dominated profession, rather than comparing Barry to other male army doctors and surgeons as she was during her lifetime. Racster and Grove, although they do not mention the meeting with Nightingale, do emphasise Barry's 'feminine' sympathy with other women by repeatedly creating situations in which Barry is able to console women who have suffered an emotional upset. Whilst at Edinburgh Barry chaperones a friend's sister, Mary, home at night initiating an attraction between them. However, the attachment is shortlived as Mary elopes with the married Captain L. (presumably based upon the historical Captain Loughlin). After Mary's elopement her mother, Mrs S., is distraught and turns to Barry 'for comfort as to a man. She did not know, as I knew, that it was my woman's sympathy that comforted her' (*DJB*:126). Similarly, when Mary is supposedly maltreated by Captain L, Barry provides a distinctly feminine type of emotional connection to Mary: 'woman to woman, I was drawn into a feeling of sympathy' (*DJB*:298). By configuring Barry in female-centred contexts, Racster and Grove, rather than differentiating Barry's position from that of women, actually accentuate the similarities Barry shares with other women. Her transvestism becomes merely a superficial performance, which is ultimately unable to conceal an inherently innate sense of femininity, womanly camaraderie, and romantic sentimentality.

¹⁷ Brian Hurwitz and Ruth Richardson, 'Inspector General James Barry MD: putting the woman in her place', *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 298, (4 February 1989), p.302.

The character of Barry is also endowed with other supposedly 'feminine' traits by Racster and Grove. She antagonises many of the corrupt officials at the Cape, including Mr Crozier, with whom Barry engages in combat over a drunken social faux pas made by the boorish Crozier. When an argument erupts during a dinner party, Barry is goaded into a fencing duel with Crozier. In the midst of her comically bombastic display of machismo, Barry admits to a peculiarly feminine irrationality by stating that, 'though I fought, I wished to be merciful – it is the foolish instinct of women' (*DJB:276*). It is almost with reluctance that Barry must fight, as duelling and masculine displays of bravado are apparently anathema to her, even though she has ample opportunity to decline the invitation to fight in the first place. Barry also believes that being merciful is merely a 'foolish instinct of women', thus denying that any man can be a compassionate person and restricting such sensitivity and concern to a purely feminine realm of experience. After the duel is over and both combatants are safely ensconced in separate rooms, the Governor of the Cape and Barry's secret lover, Charles Somerset, actively admonishes Barry for her rash behaviour branding it 'a woman's hysteria...unmistakable' (*DJB:278*). Once again we see that even in the masculine realm of duelling and honourable defence Barry's behaviour is depicted as stereotypically and apparently 'unmistakably' feminine. The fact that Somerset also views Barry's behaviour as hysterical reinforces perceived gendered differences in modes of behaviour. What in a man would be proclaimed as the honourable and heroic action of a gentleman, in a cross-dressed woman is classified as an act of foolish hysteria. It seems that, from Racster and Grove's perspective, however much a woman may cross-dress, her 'authentic', instinctual gender will always surface.

The character of Barry is systematically infantilised in the novel and Racster and Grove configure her as a woman who is completely dependent on men and in much need of their protection, even though, with the exception of Somerset, they are all

unaware of her transvestite masquerade. Whilst at Edinburgh University it is her fellow student Johnson who provides the paternal role to the overly femininised Barry. After an evening brawl on the Edinburgh streets involving Barry, Johnson, and a gang of ruffians, Johnson declares Barry a 'puir creature' (*DJB*:106) who requires him to 'help the babe to bed' (*DJB*:106). Like a helpless child Barry is carried home and helped into bed by Johnson. Later on in the novel, after the fight with Crozier, Barry is helped to bed by yet another man, this time Charles Somerset. As Barry states, 'Charles picked me up in his arms and distractedly carried me through another door to his own bedroom, where he laid me hastily on his bed' (*DJB*:278). In both instances the reader is offered a complex sexual innuendo concerning the appearance of a homosexual liaison, which is actually subsumed under heteronormative titillation since the reader knows that a cross-dressed heroine is carried to bed by her male protectors.¹⁸ Such privileging of heteronormativity thus allows for and emphasises the romanticised sentiments inherent in the novel. Ultimately, Racster and Grove consistently portray Barry as a weak and feeble female who is unable to compete with men and requires rescuing by 'real' men. Even when walking Mary home through a darkened street Barry is terrified of being accosted and declares that she 'shivered at every turn of the street, and inwardly sent up prayers to God for protection' (*DJB*:117). Clearly the outside domain and public sphere of men is no place for the timid and frightened woman that Racster and Grove have created in the transvestite figure of Barry.

Whilst apparently living and working as a radical and progressive physician in the Cape, Barry is often patronised by her lover-cum-father figure Charles Somerset, who very condescendingly equates femaleness to infantilism and regards her as being in

¹⁸ As will be discussed in Chapter 4, a similar complexity and confusion of sexual desire is also apparent in Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) where the male protagonist d'Albert questions his own sexuality due to his attraction towards the cross-dressed eponymous hero/ine Théodore/Madeleine.

need of constant discipline, admonishment, and reprobation. Indeed, Barry becomes frustrated by Charles' demeaning attitude towards her:

Charles cannot forget I am a woman. He cannot separate me from my sex. He persists in the idea that all my motives come from an ill-governed impetuosity. He patted me on the shoulder and said soothingly: 'Don't distress yourself, my dear. I shall see that no harm comes to you, but you must not take a distorted view of things. Some cruelty is necessary with wicked, unruly criminals'. (*DJB*:151)

The decided superiority shown by Charles towards Barry with a pat on the shoulder, the possessive 'my dear', and the promise of protection are followed by the fatherly advice that she is obviously in need of guidance when it comes to the understanding of political situations and the machinations in the male public sphere. By configuring Barry as an 'unruly' (*DJB*:163) and 'naughty child' (*DJB*:314), with Charles acting 'like an adult reproving' (*DJB*:152) an infant, Racster and Grove are emphasising not only the stereotypically feminine aspects of Barry, but are actively reinforcing the Victorian ideology of male dominance and paternal care of the weak woman who requires constant supervision and discipline like a child. Charles' lecturing tirade goes on further to reprimand Barry when 'he addressed me at length, telling me I was "too self-confident", always regarding myself as a "superior being". My manners were those of a "peevish woman". I was too much given to "complaining" and "finding fault with others"' (*DJB*:314-15). Whilst self-confidence is often regarded a masculine virtue, when Barry exhibits such traits they are seen by Somerset as feminine faults. In fact all of the imperfections traditionally thought to be particularly 'feminine' in nature are levelled at Barry, who accepts such criticisms with silence because 'I dared not trust myself to speak' (*DJB*:315). Racster and Grove create a James Barry who is contradictory in dress and nature: whilst she may be dressed as a man, when in the company of Somerset, she assumes none of the benefits that come with such a masquerade. It seems that in knowing she is actually a woman, Somerset refuses to

'read' her disguise and only ever sees the woman beneath the uniform. Barry, here, displays an innate 'womanly' and 'feminine' attitude to Somerset in her submissiveness, and also toward herself through the internalisation of such constant disciplining, which eventually undermines her self-confidence and sense of autonomous self. Her masquerade as a man can only succeed when read as such by others around her. When near Somerset, Barry becomes what she is told she is: a 'peevisish woman'. This episode highlights the crux of the matter for the cross-dresser; the ability to 'pass' relies on dress and personal behaviour but crucially it also requires other people's perception of the 'pass' as genuine and acceptable, otherwise conflict arises and the mask can slip.

Barry appears to internalise the discipline and punishment she receives at the hands of her lover. For all the fact that she dresses as a man and, in her working life at the Cape at least, acts as an authoritative physician, she fails to remain in masculine persona whilst in the presence of her lover. While Barry effectively fails in her charade when Somerset is present, she is left utterly bereft of support and guidance when he has to sail back to England, and bemoans her 'state of timidity' (*DJB*:300). Without a lover and paternal authority figure to admonish her, protect her, and act as a male to emulate, Barry doubts her ability to cope with life and begins to withdraw into herself to the point where even the smallest upset can destabilise her. She is particularly unsettled by the re-emergence of her husband and is terrified of 'encountering [him] alone' (*DJB*:342). This anxiety is understandable, but she is similarly frightened of Mary, who might betray her gender disguise. Instead of undertaking active steps to protect herself, all she can do is lament the absence of her lover. In their portrayal of a female cross-dresser who is terrified of any individual, male or female, who poses any kind of threat, Racster and Grove present a Barry who clearly cannot step beyond an 'innate' need to be 'feminine' in her behaviour, speech, and dependency on men.

The perception of gender expectation, such as Barry's lack of masculine self-assertion when in the presence of Somerset and her abundance of 'feminine' behaviour when she feels threatened, is reflected in Racster and Grove's descriptions of her physiology and stature. Whilst at Edinburgh University Johnson notes that Barry's 'body's as soft as a wean's' (*DJB*:106) and comments on 'its lack of muscle' (*DJB*:107). Barry's small stature is prototypically connected to female physical and mental weakness. Her submissive nature and dependence on men is exaggerated through her inability to intimidate anybody in a corporeal sense, such as when s/he is forced into a duel with the drunken and irascible Mr. Crozier and inevitably fails. Likewise, Barry's small hands are a focus of attention in the novel. Barry is dismayed, but also secretly pleased, when 'they laugh at my "woman's hands", as they call them, but they envy them too' (*DJB*:108). Whilst Barry's hands may appear small and dainty they are not necessarily tantamount to feminine physiology. As Ruth Green notes about the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, 'small hands and feet were considered as great beauties in a man as in woman; so those who had them showed them off'.¹⁹ Indeed, the historical James Barry's 'womanly' hands, a supposedly feminine indicator, came to be admired throughout her career as a surgeon for their dexterity and agility, which according to Sir Astley Cooper were an advantage, as every surgeon should possess 'an eagle's eye, a lady's hand, and a lion's heart' (*SP*:35).

Racster and Grove's Barry, however, is portrayed as having feminine hands that are a disadvantage. When Somerset brings to the residence an unruly mare, Barry proclaims that it requires a light hand to control such a creature. A Cape citizen and witness to this event named Thomas Munnik exclaims it would take a hand 'like yours, doctor. A small, light hand like a woman's' (*DJB*:321). In this instance a light hand, 'a woman's' hand, is meant in a derogatory sense. Munnik is teasing Barry for her small

¹⁹ Ruth Green, *The Wearing of Costume* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1966), p.121.

hands which ultimately are unable to control the mare. Barry rides the horse commanding the creature deftly until she is distracted by the sight of her erstwhile husband approaching with Somerset. With Barry's attention focused on her husband and Somerset, the horse then bolts, eventually trips and falls, breaking both of its legs, resulting in the need to euthanize the animal. The horse, and Barry's handling of it, are representative of her dysfunctional grasp of masculinity. Barry's lack of control of the horse and her own misplaced ideological assumptions regarding masculinity are forever doomed to failure. Her attempt at masculine bravado and egotistic display with the horse is an opportunity to show a woman's capabilities: that women are more than able to compete with men in physical and mental endeavours. However, Barry's superficial arrogance couched in male clothing proves too much for her to bear when she spies her husband. It appears that her husband's presence represents the institution of marriage which restricts and oppresses women, and disables Barry to the point of recklessness and stupidity.

In the novel, Barry's hands are not the only physical attribute which emphasise her femininity. Racster and Grove depict her shape as distinctly feminine rather than masculine even in her military uniform. Barry bemoans her 'figure, which was willowy in the long sweep of satin gowns, [but now] looks scraggy in my surtout' (*DJB*:115). The superficial covering of Barry's body becomes a marker for her lack of physical strength. While dressed as a woman Barry is the epitome of feminine delicacy, but when dressed in male clothing, she views her figure as 'scraggy'. Her utter dismay at her appearance suggests that she previously took pleasure in feminine dress and the erotic potential of her body but now resents having to dress as a man in order to escape her abusive past and forge a new life as a medical officer. However, Barry's thinly veiled masculine disguise is so transparent that even other characters can see through its surface trickery and spy the woman beneath. Sophie, a female acquaintance of Barry's

from her university days, who is also at the Cape, exclaims, ‘what a vain young man! What with your high instep and your wheedling airs, you have all the frailties of a woman’ (*DJB*:293). Racster and Grove’s Barry fails in her gender masquerade as Sophie obviously glimpses the inherent ‘frailty’ of Barry, regardless of her masculine dress and performance. Her ‘high instep’ and ‘wheedling airs’ represent the attempt at impersonating masculine behaviour, but her body and physiology belie her feminine appearance. This uncertainty regarding Barry’s physical form and superficial dress is founded on the historical James Barry, who in adulthood was of small stature, no more than ‘five feet in height, pale, delicate...[and] destitute of all characteristics of manhood and his voice was that of an aged woman’.²⁰ Although Racster and Grove do not fabricate an entirely ‘false’ Barry as their protagonist, they do, however, seem to emphasise and privilege the feminine aspects of Barry in their depiction of her physiology and lack of physical presence to the point where her disguise appears to highlight her femininity rather than accentuate the masculine impersonation she is attempting to achieve.

Barry’s deficiency of physical strength and lack of confidence in her masculine clothing is also apparent in her psychological profile. Barry realises that she cannot harmonise her dress and mentality, stating ‘I continually find myself frightened to break through conventions of reserve. I must always take up the remote standpoint considered inseparable from female decorum’ (*DJB*:114). By not being able to ‘break through conventions’ and imagine herself as a man, she fails fully to embrace a masculine attitude, thus regressing back into a feminine position of weakness. Indeed, her masculine dress is just that: a superficial covering that does not imbue her with the male authority, power, or strength. She discovers that her female sex is an essential determinant when her ‘fear strik[es] cold into a body which was outwardly clad in the

²⁰ Kubba, ‘The Life, Work and Gender of Doctor James Barry MD (1795-1865)’, p.354.

bravery of beautiful clothes' (*DJB*:210-11). Racster and Grove create a Barry who cannot relinquish her 'feminine' attributes, qualities, and frame of mind. In her enforced and artificial hybridity (essentially a 'woman' wearing masculine dress) Barry feels that she is 'an anguished creature' (*DJB*:346). A conflict occurs between the inherent need to be feminine and the gender masquerade and the only clear solution for Barry is in the adoption of the role of a dandified man.²¹

The assumption of the dandy figure in the early nineteenth century is indicative of a regency man's exterior aesthetic and effete appearance,²² which Barry attempts to emulate in order that it does not jar with her 'interior' femininity. In their configuration of Barry as a dandy Racster and Grove are combining an essentialised femininity with an aesthetic dress style which was closely associated with an 'effeminate' male. Yet they do not construct Barry as a 'full' dandy complete with the male dandy's mentality and confidence, but merely emphasise Barry's superficial covering and outward appearance of one. However, the dandy figure perfectly balances the feminine masculinity which enables Barry to conceal her biological sex. The dandy himself can in some respects be said to embrace a transvestite role with his emphasis on frills, careful tailoring, and focus on aesthetics. Indeed, for Barry the dandy's over-performance of femininity is the perfect disguise and concealment of the femaleness which lies beneath the clothing. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century feminised dandy can be associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century

²¹ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries dandyism and the figure of the dandy, most closely associated with men such as Beau Brummell, attempted to create a perfection of style and clothing which, while appearing to be effortless, in actual fact took an army of tailors and dressers, and hours of preening. The dress coat with padded shoulders, which became synonymous with the dandified look, was 'designed to fit a body trained in the rules of deportment, a wearer well-used to framing his identity as public spectacle.' Christopher Brewer, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), p.23.

²² According to Bernard Howells 'the dandy appears simultaneously as a universal passion – the pure protest of the aesthetic against the natural – and as a relative historical phenomenon, characteristic of unhappy periods of transition', Bernard Howells, *Baudelaire: Individualism, Dandyism and the Philosophy of History* (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre of the University of Oxford, 1996), p.116. It is significant then that Barry only feels comfortable expressing her masculine persona in the guise of the dandy as s/he him/herself is in a constant state of unhappy transition.

figure of the female 'invert' and the later categorisation of the lesbian or transgendered butch-femme. Given that Racster and Grove are promoting a heterosexual love affair in their story of Barry, the figure of the female invert would disrupt the heteronormative imperative. Instead the reader is offered a simplified romantic love story, in which the transvestite act merely becomes a gender and relationship disguise rather than a destabilising and transgressive subversion of gender norms and modes of articulation.

The main reason why Racster and Grove insist on conveying a depiction of Barry essentially as a very feminine character embroiled in a romantic love affair is the context within which they were writing. Their first attempt to capture the Barry story was produced from initial research in historical documents at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. As Racster and Grove note in the Appendix to their novel, 'the results were first assembled in our play, *Dr James Barry*, which was staged at the St James's Theatre at a special matinee performance in 1919' (*DJB*:366).²³ In 1919, just after the First World War, the world was in turmoil and still coming to terms with the chaos and confusion of war. Many women during the war had ventured into paid work, much of which was previously male-dominated. After Armistice was declared in 1918, these women were encouraged to resume domestic and female-associated work in order that the returning servicemen had jobs and professions to come home to. Alongside the obvious gender transgression of women doing 'men's work', men were increasingly threatened by adventurous, independent, and professionally capable women. It is in this context that the romantic fiction of Mills and Boon was gaining in popularity.²⁴ The horror and turmoil of war was alleviated for a few hours for readers by being immersed in an escapist, yet thrilling, love story. It was in this post-war period that two distinct

²³ The thesis author attempted to source the play itself by contacting the National Library of South Africa and was informed that unfortunately there is no copy of the play held in the library or its archives.

²⁴ Jay Dixon points out that in the 1930s 'Mills and Boon prospered. Charles Boon noticed the rapid proliferation of the commercial libraries and the rise in sales of medical, historical and contemporary romances'. Jay Dixon, *The Romance Fiction of Mills and Boon 1909–1990s* (London: University College London Press, 1999), p.17.

streams of literature carved out separate paths. On the one hand was the challenging and thought-provoking Modernist genre,²⁵ and on the other, the genre of romance fiction developed and afforded a cheap and popular form of fantasy literature. Indeed, as Joseph McAleer notes, ‘since the First World War the [Mills and Boon’s] publication lists had become increasingly dominated by fiction, especially by women authors, and usually of a “popular” vein, namely romance and adventure novels’.²⁶

Racster and Grove’s fictionalised account of James Barry is part of the desire to present an idealised and romantic version of a life that reflected this popular vein of fiction. Very much formulaic in its approach, romance literature was invariably set in an exotic landscape and involved a chaste young woman seeking the affections of an older man. The post-war generation of women, with easier access to lending libraries and the cheaper paperback versions of brightly coloured romance novels found the escape from real life they had been seeking since the war. ‘From prim and proper tales of refined ladies and gentlemen to daring and bold stories of love and longing’, asserts Jennifer McNight Trontz, these ‘women lost themselves in the pulp-paper pages of their romance novels...In an era before sexual liberation and the Pill, romances offered female readers a taste of illicit freedom’.²⁷ Like Barry in Racster and Grove’s novel, many of the distinctly feminine heroines of these novels are often portrayed in an infantile manner, however, Tania Modleski points out that ‘no one has noted the large amount of anger expressed by the child/woman, almost to the very end of the story. The heroines rebel against the male authority figure and at times wish to be able to compete with him’.²⁸ Racster and Grove stop short of a more radical subversion regarding gender

²⁵ Modernist fiction during this era was most clearly typified by the work of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka.

²⁶ Joseph McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon*, available at Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford University Press, 1999) www.oxfordscholarship.com [accessed 21/12/12]

²⁷ Jennifer McKnight-Trontz, *The Look of Love: The Art of the Romance Novel* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), p.9.

²⁸ Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982; New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p.36.

roles in which Barry would compete with her lover Somerset, and ultimately present a character who is firmly placed in a heterosexual, feminine role synonymous with the romance genre, thus undermining any possible destabilising effect of transvestism. Their depiction of Barry slots neatly into the post-war nostalgia for firmly established gender roles which conform to the heteronormative and romantic imperative. It is significant, then, that in her discussion of the Romance genre Modleski goes on to argue that ‘romances help readers, if only temporarily, to believe in the possibility of transcending the divided self’.²⁹ The fact that Barry can be viewed as a ‘divided self’ who cross-dresses and embarks on a heterosexual love affair tends to suggest that ‘in romance ideology love solves all problems’.³⁰

In their depiction of Barry as a heterosexual, feminine and female cross-dresser, Racster and Grove raise some important issues regarding female emancipation and independence, particularly in the 1930s. They portray Barry as an astute woman who uses her intelligence and employs a gender disguise in order to escape from an abusive husband. Likewise, Barry’s university education and ability to progress in the male-dominated realms of the military and medical professions relate to first-wave feminist sentiments concerning female equality and capability – a first wave of feminism from which Barry could not yet benefit but from which Racster and Grove’s contemporaries drew strength. Racster and Grove also depict a figure who initially is not interested in romantic ideals. However, they then turn Barry’s story into a love affair, full of romantic sentimentality. Racster and Grove’s attempt at gender subversion through depicting an act of female cross-dressing is devalued and undermined by their desire to depict heteronormative sexuality and essentialised femininity. Transvestism then becomes the site not of contested gender construction, but a way of supporting

²⁹ Tania Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982; New York: Routledge, 1994), p.37.

³⁰ Dixon, *The Romance Fiction of Mills and Boon 1909–1990s*, p.3.

patriarchal hegemony through the failure of successful imitation. Racster and Grove note in the Appendix to their novel that their fictionalised version of James Barry is borne out of historical evidence. They declare that ‘it is fiction founded on fact, fiction emulating the style of the period, [and that] the main intention has been to analyse and lay bare the mind of a woman who could keep up such a lifelong deception’ (*DJB*:367). Although Racster and Grove endeavour to explore the psychology and behaviour of a woman who decides to cross-dress, they only read the implications of gender transgression in an essentialist way. They simply portray Barry as requiring protection and ultimately rely on an amorous diversion to explain Barry’s transvestite act. This may be in part due to the fact that they used the historical sources concerning Barry rather selectively and also the fact that the genre they chose to employ is very much that of the new 1930s romance novel crossed with neo-Victorian fiction.

Racster and Grove freely admit to using a certain amount of latitude with regard to the historical evidence they possessed about Barry and include a caveat in their novel which notes that the lack of information and documentary support only increases the intrigue surrounding the life of Barry. They declare that such gaps in verification ‘make the history of Dr James Barry a mystery lit by fitful rays revealing a highly unusual personality. And this being so, [they] risk the danger which lies in turning scanty fact into fiction’ (*DJB*:367). Their use of sentimental language even when describing their use of historical sources emphasises their adherence to the romance genre. The ‘mystery’ of James Barry which is idealistically ‘lit by fitful rays’ suggests that Racster and Grove are couching their own historical research in romantic, rather than empirical, terms. Unfortunately, the risk of fictionalising their sources to the point of sentimentality is indeed made abundantly evident in their fictional account of Barry. Although no evidence exists as to whether Barry enjoyed any physical or emotional relationship with anyone, by inventing a heterosexual affair based upon an unequal

power relationship of ruling governor and employed physician, Racster and Grove are effectively undermining the feminist idea of female independence and equality. They are simply presenting a Barry who, whatever dress style she adopts, always ultimately conforms to normative ideas of female submission and subservience. This was probably the most palatable form of transgression for a readership coming to terms with the upheaval of war. Certainly they appear to be appealing to an audience which required the stable boundaries of gender and sexuality to be shaken but then ultimately reaffirmed. Writing a work of fiction based on historical fact, Racster and Grove present a novel which had the opportunity to ‘confirm, modify or deepen the knowledge derived from other, non-literary sources, [and in which] they [could] also “translate” this knowledge into a shape that is often more appealing and even touching, in the sense that the feeling of authenticity surrounding the subject is heightened’.³¹ Yet, Racster and Grove deny their transvestite protagonist any authenticity when in the masculine role and they insist on constructing Barry as a romantic heroine in order to heighten the novel’s appeal in an era of post war trauma and popular romance, but which ultimately reveals and promotes an essentialised understanding of clothing and sartorial style.

‘Betwixt and Between’ (SP:18): Rachel Holmes’s *Scanty Particulars: The Life of Dr*

James Barry

Contrary to Racster and Grove’s fictionalised journal of Barry, Rachel Holmes’ historical biography, *Scanty Particulars: The Life of Dr James Barry* (2002), portrays James Barry as an intersexed subject who ultimately self-identified with a masculine gender. Throughout *Scanty Particulars* Holmes persistently renders Barry in masculine terms regarding his dress, mentality, and behaviour, even after the disclosure of Barry’s

³¹ Jürgen Pieters, *Speaking With the Dead: Explorations in Literature and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.4.

masquerade as a female cross-dresser. Although Holmes briefly refers to the fact that Barry was born female, she complicates the issue and argues that he may in fact have been intersexed with ambiguous sexual organs that had been carefully concealed from other people. All this certainly suggests that Holmes views Barry as intersexed subject³² who simply exaggerated and performed early nineteenth-century ideals of masculinity in order to orientate him/herself more distinctly within a masculine realm, where he felt most comfortable.

Holmes argues that Barry was in fact a young girl named Margaret Bulkley, born to middle-class, but destitute, parents and points out that ‘it does not follow that because Margaret Bulkley was apparently born a girl that she was unproblematically female. Since Barry’s death there have been those who have speculated that the doctor might have been something other than a woman or a man plain and simple’ (*SP*:297). In the late eighteenth and all of the nineteenth century, an anatomical hermaphrodite (or intersexed subject), such as Holmes proposes Barry to be, would have been classified as a freak of nature, unmarriageable and therefore of no (financial) benefit to the rest of the family. It is for this reason, Holmes argues, that Barry was dressed as a young man and sent off to Edinburgh University, because as a female with ambiguous genitalia it would have been impossible for him to secure a decent marriage. Having no other recourse for income and protection, he was forced to make his way in the world as a male-identified hermaphrodite. Holmes suggests, in support of her theory, that Barry had an unusual interest in the human form and had ‘a particular fascination with the study of anatomy, with the folds and secrets of the flesh’ (*SP*:8). It is this preoccupation with human anatomy and the secrets that the body hides that indicate Barry’s unease with regard to

³² A.K. Kubba defines a hermaphrodite as ‘an individual where both ovarian and testicular tissue is present. Male genitalia, feminine breasts, testicular feminisation syndrome, absence of body hair and considerable variations between individuals exist among hermaphrodites’. Kubba, ‘The Life, Work and Gender of Doctor James Barry MD (1795-1865)’, p.355. However, in twenty-first century sexology such an individual would be categorised as intersexed.

his own body and biology. Holmes centres her argument (that Barry was a hermaphrodite) on the fact that Barry's thesis for his MD was concerned with hernias and, specifically, the pelvic area in male and particularly female patients. Barry was 'unerringly preoccupied with distinguishing and naming body parts. In particular, he scrutinizes, contemplates and obsesses over the significance of the size, dimensions and peculiarities of that ubiquitous signifier of sexual difference, the female pelvis' (*SP*:309). Such concentration on the pelvic area may indeed suggest that Barry was a hermaphrodite seeking to understand himself, as well as others with a similar condition, but it does not take into account that many other (non-hermaphroditic) doctors would have similar expertise in the very same specialisation.

Barry similarly took a deep interest in midwifery and became one of the first people successfully to perform a Caesarean section on Wilhelmina Munnik in 1826 (*SP*:165). It is this incident, according to Holmes, which highlights Barry's position as a hermaphrodite, a person of both sexes, whose interest lies in both the dissection and midwifery fields of medical practice. She states that

anatomy and midwifery were the apotheoses of difference between masculine and feminine pursuits. Dissection: a masculine practice claimed by clinical, confident men eager to assert the professional authority of modern medicine. Midwifery: a traditionally feminine art, circumscribed by the tenderness and fear of female secrets and mysteries of the woman's body. (*SP*:17)

Here Holmes is constructing both the ambiguity of James Barry and a mystery regarding a stereotypically female profession such as midwifery, which she describes as an art form that relies upon the 'feminine' qualities of 'tenderness' and nurturing. Holmes, while slipping into an assumption concerning masculine and feminine professions, also creates a juxtaposition between the primarily female and feminine sphere of confinement and childbirth, surrounded by 'tenderness and fear', and the masculine arena of bloody surgery performed by self-assured medical professionals on a

public stage. By portraying Barry as interested and capable in both the female realm of childbirth and the masculine theatre of surgery, Holmes links his dual professional interests back to his ambiguous sex/body. Like Racster and Grove, she thus essentialises Barry's 'condition' as one that determined his career trajectory.

However, when we examine why Barry decided to study medicine in the first place, Holmes' argument begins to unravel. Holmes states that for fear of his 'secret' hermaphroditic genitalia being diagnosed and treated by medical authorities, it was 'safer by far to become a medic himself and hide behind the guise and growing professional authority of the gentleman surgeon than run the risk of becoming a specimen himself, exposed to the curiosity of medical science. It was the perfect disguise' (*SP*:312). This statement suggests that Mary Ann or Barry knew that he would become a medical specimen before he had even trained to be a doctor. Yet how could such a reasoning be possible, as 'he would have had little notion of how very different his own body was until he had the unique opportunity to study others' (*SP*:316). Contradicting her own argument, Holmes attempts to posit Barry as aware of his difference and thus desiring to examine such an anomaly in detail, and at the same time is stating that he would have been completely unaware of this difference. Regardless of such a contradiction, Holmes insists that Barry was a hermaphrodite who identified himself as masculine and she portrays this through her descriptions of Barry's dress and appearance.

Throughout *Scanty Particulars*, Holmes configures Barry in masculine terms with regard to his attire and the context in which he was dressing. She states that 'Barry was born on the cusp of modern masculinity in transition, betwixt and between a now-forgotten time when real men were effeminate, and women, inspired by thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Lord Buchan, aspired to be gentlemen of learning' (*SP*:18).

Holmes becomes trapped within her own gender stereotypes of ‘effeminate’ or feminised dandies and ‘real’ men by essentialising the masculine dress of the dandy and associating ‘real’ manhood with sartorial choice. In a cross-over of gender expectations in modes and style of dress, she draws on, and in fact collapses the distance between, the figure of the dandy and the aspiring feminist. Indeed, Barry is explicitly connected to the dandy by Holmes, who notes that ‘by a strange quirk of history, James Barry and dandyism arrived in London simultaneously’ (*SP*:50). That an ‘effeminate’ or feminised form of male dress, appearance, and manner was reaching a peak at the same time that Barry was finding his feet in the great metropolis does indeed seem coincidental. However, as an aspiring young medical man in the city Barry was bound to be influenced in his choice of clothing if he wanted to remain undiscovered, follow the fashion trend, and blend in with the other young ambitious males. In view of Holmes’s persistence of portraying Barry as a male-identified hermaphrodite, it is significant that she notes with regard to dandies that they ‘called their tailors “man-makers” and in their eclectic view, clothes entirely made the man’ (*SP*:50). In this sense we see that Holmes is making the dandies’ requirements to re-invent themselves through sartorial artifice synonymous with Barry’s attempt to define himself with male clothing as literally a ‘self-made man’.

By linking Barry to the dandy movement, with its implications of elegance, Holmes is effectively conflating clothing and fashion trends with sexual ambiguity. That is not to say that there is no connection, though, for as she declares,

dandyism, above all its off-shoots, played with conventions of gender. This self-conscious reshaping of the body inverted the conventions dividing masculine from feminine dress....Arrayed in wasp-waisted, padded frock coats reinforced with built-in stays, dandies increasingly resembled ‘featherbrained women’. (*SP*:56)

Although dandyism and Barry do both ‘play with gender’, for Holmes, Barry becomes the site of gender confusion and his clothing choice, rather than simply a fashionable statement, is essentialised to represent the hermaphrodite underneath the attire. It is also important to note that Holmes elides the differences between ‘featherbrained women’ and dandyism. Such a disintegration of boundaries between feminine intelligence and the aesthetics of the dandy further confuses the matter, as the dandy movement sought to prove that a man, and only a *real* gentleman, could possibly parade his masculinity through the superficial layers of corsets, stays, wigs, make-up and flowing garments. Holmes does in fact acknowledge that Barry’s dress was ‘typical of the very apotheosis of male fashion of the time’ (*SP*:53), yet she still insists on linking Barry to femininity by claiming that ‘he was an unusual, feminized “monstrosity”’ (*SP*:53). In this statement she is once again collapsing Barry’s clothing, dandyism, femininity and monstrosity into one confused site of essentialised gender meaning. By configuring Barry as ‘unusual’ and by making femininity synonymous with monstrosity, Holmes is effectually reinforcing the pathologisation and essentialisation of femininity by devaluing feminine behaviour and dress.

Holmes also essentialises Barry’s gender in terms of his masculine behaviour as well as his dress. In the role as medical officer Barry was required to demonstrate confident authority and intellectual ability in a forthright and precise manner. Holmes writes that ‘assertiveness, authoritativeness, speaking in contradiction to those who assumed power were all improper in a nineteenth-century woman. But they were expected of an intellectual, scientific, colonial gentleman’ (*SP*:322). As she depicts Barry as a male-identified hermaphrodite, it is crucial that she also portrays him as someone who assumes an air of confidence and aggression in his dealings with colonial institutions and their male overseers, otherwise he would not have been taken seriously. Indeed, according to the *Glasgow Herald* of August 1865, which released details of

Barry's gender ambiguity after his death, Barry 'was clever and agreeable, save for the drawbacks of a most quarrelsome temper, and an inordinate addiction to argument'.³³ Barry's short temper was certainly renowned amongst those who knew or met him. As biographer June Rose points out, 'everyone in the Colony noticed that Barry reacted with wild fury to any disparaging remark... There were stories of her flinging wine into fellow officers' faces, slicing off a finger with a sword, lashing out with a whip – or, more credibly, crushing her opponent with her venomous wit'.³⁴ Holmes and the *Glasgow Herald* are associating Barry's self-assured, if not aggressive, conduct with different genders. Holmes purports that Barry's confident dealings as a colonial official are demonstrably masculine, yet the *Glasgow Herald* couches its description of Barry in terms of feminised behaviour. This disparity in meaning can only be understood as a result of context and authorial agenda. What is significant is the fact that both parties assign a particular gender identity to behavioural traits both of which are culturally and historically specific to themselves. The *Glasgow Herald* associates Barry with Victorian assumptions of female behaviour, yet Holmes is postulating that the exact same behaviour is associated with twenty-first-century expectations of male behaviour.

A consummate professional with regard to his work, Barry sought to root out corruption and disease in the colonies where he was stationed and always championed oppressed and marginalised people in his endeavours. His intense surgical and medical training at Edinburgh University gave him the knowledge and expertise with which to alleviate suffering and, as Howard Phillips writes, he 'truly...represented the Edinburgh ideal of the omnicompetent general practitioner whose extensive clinical skills were sufficiently rooted in an understanding of the theory behind them to allow him to adapt

³³ 'A Strange Story', *Glasgow Herald*, Issue 7994 (2 August 1865), no pagination.

³⁴ Rose, *The Perfect Gentleman*, p.44.

them successfully to new circumstances'.³⁵ Barry became the paradigmatically authoritative masculine medical officer that the Edinburgh school and the British Imperial machine desired and expected. Yet he also gained social and interpersonal skills from his training and overseas postings. He flourished in the public arena, flirting with men and women alike and 'revelled in the social expectations that accompanied his role as a high-ranking military officer' (*SP*:196). According to Robert Stoller, the female transvestite is often not known to be a cross-dresser amongst her peers and does not shy away from social interaction. Stoller notes that 'their jobs are quiet, steady, and unspectacular; their work records as men are excellent. They are sociable, not recluses, and have friendships with both men and women. Neither their friends nor their colleagues at work know they are biologically female'.³⁶ Whether Barry was concealing a biologically female body, or an intersexed anatomy, he soon discovered that masquerade and disguise were commonplace amongst the society in which he lived and 'found himself a frequent guest of a high society whose primary concern was the frenetic keeping up of appearances' (*SP*:197). In this respect, whatever Barry had to hide, he was not greatly different from every other colonial society member. What is significant, though, is the fact that Barry never acknowledged his disguise in any written evidence. As Holmes states, 'Dr Barry wrote and wrote, but when he wrote about himself it was only from the position of the professional surgeon and scientist' (*SP*:115). In taking an objective and scientific viewpoint in his writings, it seems as though Barry was attempting to distance his physical being from any psychological bearing. After all, if Barry was either a female transvestite or a hermaphrodite physically, then in order successfully to pass as a gentleman medic, he had no other choice but to adopt a masculine frame of mind and outlook.

³⁵ Howard Phillips, 'Home Taught and Abroad: The Training of the Cape Doctor, 1807-1910', in Deacon, Harriet, Phillips, Howard and Van Heyningen, Elizabeth (Eds.) *The Cape Doctor in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), p.114.

³⁶ Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968; London: H. Karnac Ltd., 1984), p.196.

Whilst at Edinburgh University Barry found that ‘it was a place where someone reticent about their true origins might reinvent themselves’ (SP:11). Men from various backgrounds could, and did, find the freedom to assume an alternative lifestyle to the one into which they were born. Just like Barry they were seeking better career opportunities, financial security and recognition as gentleman scholars. However, Barry was different from the rest of his peers and cohort, as his ambiguous gender placed him ‘betwixt and between, belonging nowhere, [so he...] faced the problem of self-orientation alone’ (SP:206). Whilst most young men looked to their fathers for an example of how to behave and how to think, Barry was left bereft of such paternal guidance and had to resort to copying his fellow pupils and teachers. As Holmes declares, ‘a young man must have models upon which to mould his masculinity. In the self-conscious fashioning of his gentlemanly persona, James Barry was not so very different from any young man emulating his romantic, heretical heroes’ (SP:23). In emulating his medical idol, Sir Astley Cooper, Barry found that the dash and flair of eminent surgeons, such as Cooper, matched his own views of ideal masculinity. By exaggerating those psychological and behavioural traits that Barry assumed to be masculine, and through the concealment of any so-called ‘feminine’ or female attributes, Barry attempted to align himself with the gentleman persona he so keenly admired. As Holmes states, ‘woman-manly and man-womanly in his physical make-up, he accentuated his characteristics that suited a masculine role’ (SP:322). In the liminal space of the transvestite and the hermaphrodite, the manly woman or womanly man such as Barry found that to be accepted as a social being, the adoption of masculine dress, manly behaviour, and male psychology were essential. As Julie Wheelwright argues, ‘women who entered male occupations, passing as men or known to their workmates, often coped with the contradiction of their position by developing a strong

male-identification'.³⁷ This 'strong male-identification' is exactly what Barry emulated. His choice of dress, his actions, and his outlook all amount to the performance of masculinity that enabled him, not only to live as a man but to succeed as a gentleman surgeon in the British colonies.

In studying to be a surgeon at Edinburgh University Barry produced a thesis on the hernia which had an epigraph that read: 'consider not my youth, but whether I show a man's wisdom' (*SP*:39). In this gendered sleight-of-hand, Holmes refers to the fact that the examiners thought Barry too young to be submitting his thesis, yet, as Holmes asserts, Barry was also clearly commenting on the fact that his wisdom was carried in a hermaphroditic or female body, rather than in a male anatomy. Barry's masculine performance thus began at university and was cemented by the defence of his thesis in a *viva voce* during which 'he had to give a performance that proved he was every inch the young gentleman, worthy to become a graduate of the Edinburgh school and embark upon what was a skilled and highly privileged profession' (*SP*:38). Barry's masculine performance as the British medical officer and gentleman par excellence succeeded in regard to his education and thesis, but to really be a man in a man's world Barry had to gain recognition and approval from his fellow students. As John Tosh argues,

full masculine status is the gift of one's peers; it builds on the foundation of boy-life outside the family, and is accomplished by economic or military achievements in the public sphere, often marked by a rite of collective, men-only initiation. A fine balance is struck between competition and comradeship as young men learn how to become part of the collective (male) voice of the community.³⁸

It is through his friends, associates, teachers, and student cohort, Holmes argues, that Barry was able to achieve 'authentic' masculinity. Such acceptance of Barry at

³⁷ Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (1989; London: Pandora, 1990), pp.11-12.

³⁸ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p.3.

university was compounded and underpinned further by colleagues in his subsequent life in the British colonies. Every male whom Barry met, who automatically and silently confirmed that he was male, authenticated his performance and status as such. Instead of masculinity becoming 'second nature' to him, it actually became his first nature and helped consolidate a masculine sense of self. The way in which Holmes portrays Barry suggests that his impersonation became what Judith Butler would term the performativity of his gender. As Butler asserts, 'performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration'.³⁹ In other words, it is through unconscious and persistent gender performativities that culturally created gender is *assumed* to be an 'innate' and 'natural' concept that relates to, and impacts upon, the body. With regard to transvestism Stoller argues,

this is not a description of a brilliant masquerade, a trick briefly maintained under circumstances very carefully selected to insure safety from unmasking. Instead, we are looking at a way of life, as unremarkable in its manifestations as is that of a man with a normal gender identity.⁴⁰

Stoller, here, and Butler previously, are both referring to the fact that when an alternative gender is adopted, that gender then becomes the naturalised performance. It no longer carries the often subversive potential that a drag act exaggerates and over-performs.

Barry's performance as a male is synonymous with the performance of Holmes as author/biographer. Both are attempting to render themselves as something which they are not. Holmes presents her research as empirical and factually based while in actual fact it is driven by narrative and fiction. Likewise, Barry assumes an alternative gender identity while the reality of his/her biology is female or intersexed. Holmes' biography

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2007), p.xv.

⁴⁰ Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, p.197.

persistently portrays Barry as a radical figure of reform, in both gendered and socio-political terms. Her numerous descriptions of Barry's medical knowledge, expertise and progressive attitude to prevention rather than cure construct Barry as a radical reformer. She situates Barry at the forefront of surgical experimentation, but more important is her positing of Barry as the ultimate defender of the under-privileged and outcasts of nineteenth-century society. As Holmes states, he 'made himself the vehement champion of everyone like him – the marginalised, dispossessed and disempowered....a hero to women, children, slaves, prostitutes, prisoners, the insane and the poverty stricken' (*SP*:318). Although Barry appears as the supporter of the oppressed, Holmes configures him as a reformist, yet tragic, hero. For all the medicinal and social ills he alleviated with his medical expertise and far-reaching reforms, he was ultimately left destitute of family and friends in later life, eventually dying alone and penniless. In Holmes's neo-Victorian construction of Barry we see her need to promote a historical figure as both an outcast and a radical reformer of his own time and society yet also as a progressive being with regard to gendered categories. Holmes attempts to create reader sympathy for Barry by depicting him as an outsider who champions the causes of the oppressed. In this respect Holmes becomes the champion of the oppressed hermaphroditic outsider by promoting such a historical persona to a contemporary audience.

Holmes's interest in such a radical figure as Barry is borne out of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century academic debates and discourses concerning gender definitions and categories of sexual difference. She states in the 'Acknowledgments' section of her biography that her 'interest in Barry emerged in the context of an explosion of interest in the history and politics of sexuality and gender in the academy in the 1990s' (*SP*:xi). This 'explosion' of enquiry and discussion concerning gendered meanings and classifications, however, is not a new phenomenon. Investigations and analyses of what we now term sexological issues and debates have

been a concern for centuries; as Jo Littler notes, discourses ‘range from the classical Greek attitude to hermaphrodites as the natural illustration of a plurality of sexes, to the 19th-century fascination with a “third sex” as dangerous perversity incarnate to today’s campaigns for the rights of intersexual people to be able to determine their own sex’.⁴¹ It is startling that Barry’s sexual ambiguity, specifically as a hermaphrodite, was not commented upon more in the nineteenth century, as was the case with the previously mentioned Chevalier d’Eon and Hercule Barbin. Holmes explains this dearth of discussion in the Victorian media as simply a lack in understanding or interest by society towards hermaphrodites or ambiguous persons. As she states, ‘it seemed that from the point of view of the press, the story of Barry as a woman was the sexier version and, crucially, easier to understand, there being a long tradition of women cross-dressing to join the military’ (*SP*:269). Although there was a flurry of reportage in the periodical press concerning Barry as a transvestite woman, there is no evidence of a serious in-depth discussion as to whether he was actually a hermaphrodite.⁴² It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that sexological enquiry really came to the forefront of scientific investigation.⁴³ It was at this time of reinvigorated debate about sexual ‘otherness’ and perversion that the case of Barry’s ambiguity once more came to light, as is shown in a ‘Letter to the Editor’ of the *Lancet* by a person named only as ‘Captain’. The Captain explains that ‘the impression and general belief were that he was a hermaphrodite, and as such he escaped much comment or observation in places where everyone was used to him. But I was under the belief that there had never

⁴¹ Jo Littler, ‘Review: The Secret Life of Dr James Barry’, *The Guardian* (28 April 2007) available at www.guardian.co.uk [accessed 4 February 2010].

⁴² See ‘A Female Medical Combatant’, *Timaru Herald*, Vol.2 No. 80 (25 November 1865), p.7; ‘A Mystery Still’, *All The Year Round*, Vol. 17, No. 421 (18 May 1865), pp.492-495; ‘A Strange Story’, *Glasgow Herald* (2 August 1865), Issue 7994.

⁴³ See Heike Bauer (ed.), *Women and Cross-dressing 1800-1939*, Volume 1 (Oxford: Routledge, 2006) for extracts of Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892), pp.131-152; Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1928), pp.153-283; J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), pp.39-58 and *Sex Difference in Dress* (1930), pp.59-66; Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexual Anomalies and Perversions* (1936), pp.285-322. Also see Lucy Bland and Laura Doan Eds., *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

existed a true hermaphrodite'.⁴⁴ The Captain's response that he believed there was no such thing as a hermaphrodite suggests that sexological theory and discourse, which was in its formative stages at the end of the nineteenth century, had not filtered through to common parlance and discussion. Alternatively, it could be possible that many perceived the hermaphrodite as a mythical figure drawn from ancient Greek history, as noted by Littler earlier, who could not exist in any corporeal sense in the real world. Although the scientific analysis of biology and the classification of body types in the late twentieth and twenty-first century allow us a deeper understanding of gendered and sexual difference and ambiguous biological traits, it is clear that Holmes feels that, in light of the recent 'explosion' of sexological debate, the story and her hypothesis of Barry is of relevance and, more importantly, on trend at the millennium.

Similarly, the genre of biography has boomed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, as Kaplan observes, 'the ongoing enthusiasm for biography satisfies a more bookish desire, perhaps equally subversive in its way, to revisit the nineteenth century's realist forms through a modern genre that borrows from them'.⁴⁵ In her analysis Kaplan draws attention to the elision of the boundary in recent years between clear-cut biography and a fictionalised interpretation of historical sources. Holmes's construction of James Barry does exactly that; *Scanty Particulars* is 'betwixt and between' (*SP*:18) the genres of biography and biofiction. Just as Barry's hermaphroditic gender bridges the gap of masculine and feminine, so Holmes's biography collapses the distance between historical evidence and fictionalised narrative. From the very start of the biography Holmes creates a fictionalised scene: 'in the frozen heart of winter a slight figure veers along the pavements of Edinburgh Old Town.... The night is cold and still as a corpse. Street lamps light his way between the grand monumental portals and

⁴⁴ Captain, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Lancet* (26 October 1865), p.1087.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p.7.

pillars of Edinburgh University' (*SP*:7). Although historical evidence shows that Barry attended university in Edinburgh, the scene, setting, and romanticised language which create the 'story' around the empirical sources are purely fictional. Rather than just providing hard and detailed facts about Barry throughout the biography, Holmes delves into the realm of the novelist to imbue her historical research with a sense of continuity and narrative, possibly in order to appeal to a wider public readership rather than just academic and scholarly circles.

Indeed, many postmodern biographies employ such strategies in order to create a more comprehensive and accessible depiction of history. Kaplan argues that

fictional devices which loosen up chronologies and allow for more speculative thinking on causes and events that lie beyond the strict evidence provided; authorial reflections, on the genre itself and on the biographer's own relationship to the project and his subject, have found their way into recent biography.⁴⁶

Scanty Particulars utilises many of the tactics which Kaplan describes. Holmes persistently descends into romantic fictionalised narrative. For example, she describes Barry's sea voyage to Jamaica on the Sargasso Sea and notes that 'the long trailing masses of yellowish weed that floated on its surface [were] like streams of golden hair' (*SP*:181). This, whilst creating atmosphere for the reader and orientalising an 'exotic' subject which is reflected in the landscape, ignores the empirical imperative of historical research. Likewise, Holmes inserts authorial reflections into her biographical account when declaring that 'it is easy to imagine the extreme degree of inner turmoil and fear of exposure' (*SP*:132) that Barry supposedly underwent during stressful moments in his life and declares that 'one wonders how Barry felt' (*SP*:170). Holmes's speculations about Barry's emotions and feelings through the biography again increase the reader's involvement in the story of Barry's life and inveigh a more narrative and conversational

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.39.

account of Barry. Holmes also reveals her relationship to her biographical project in the Preface, the final chapter, the Epilogue and in the earlier quotation from the ‘Acknowledgements’ section of her biography. She describes what her curiosity was based upon, how she accidentally stumbled across the life of Barry, and why it is relevant today. She goes on to note that ‘historical biography is the disinterment of the dead. It is a quest for the resurrection of lost lives. It dissects, and where it can, exposes the truths of the bodies and souls whose influence shaped our modern world. But in death, as in life, there are often no reassuring final truths which close the tale with a comfortable full stop’ (SP:3). In this statement Holmes fully declares that there is no such thing as ‘truth’ in historical evidence; there can only ever be subjective reactions to experiences and differing interpretations of documentary sources. In this way history and biography as a by-product of historical research have much more in common with the genre of literary biofiction than many historians are willing to admit. Indeed, as Kaplan argues, ‘as the genre of choice for the common reader, life writing in all its forms is having its day. So much has encroached on fiction that it has become a commonplace to say that biography has become the new novel’.⁴⁷ Viewed in this way we see that Holmes’s biography has a conceptual link with Patricia Duncker’s fictionalised account of Barry in her novel *James Miranda Barry* (1999).

‘Swaying in limbo between the safe worlds of either sweet ribbons or breeches’
(JMB:35): Patricia Duncker’s *James Miranda Barry*

In contrast to Rachel Holmes’s depiction of Barry as an anatomical hermaphrodite, Patricia Duncker’s novel situates him/her in a liminal space between binary notions of gender – a ‘no man’s land’ in the war of the sexes – and inhabits the position of a

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.37.

transgendered person; a veritable site of indeterminacy.⁴⁸ Janice Raymond explains that ‘the term “transgender” covers pre-operative and post-operative transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens, cross-dressers, gays and lesbians, bisexuals and straights who exhibit any kind of dress and/or behaviour interpreted as “transgressing” gender-roles’.⁴⁹ For my purposes, I use the term transgender to classify Duncker’s Barry as a biological female who emotionally, psychologically, and sartorially assumes a masculine gender role. In Duncker’s novel Barry becomes ‘like quicksilver, fluid, indeterminate, yet utterly beautiful’ (*JMB*:229) in his/her position as a transgendered person. Contrary to Racster and Grove’s protagonist, Duncker’s Barry enjoys an idyllically liberal childhood, a problem-free education and a glorious career as a medical officer. The novel revolves around the shifting notions of gender in an attempt to highlight the constructedness of gendered roles by portraying Barry as a transgendered person and it is this concept of transgenderism which allows Duncker to undermine the binarity of gendered roles and expectations.

Whilst her initial exploration and experimentation of the topic in the short story entitled ‘James Miranda Barry 1795-1865’ in *Monsieur Shoushana’s Lemon Trees* (1997) created a ‘problem of saying “him” or “her” in the narration’,⁵⁰ in her later novel Duncker overcomes this obstacle by using alternative narrative strategies such as a mixture of first and third person. At the beginning of the novel the first-person

⁴⁸ As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, it was in 1910 that the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld classified transvestites into four separate categories of differentiation depending on the defining features of sex, sexuality, and gender. These groups were concerned with: 1) sexual organs 2) other physical characteristics 3) sex drive 4) other emotional characteristics. In this sense Duncker’s Barry fits into the fourth category where females assumed a ‘manly character, manly ways of thinking and writing, [a] strong tendency toward manly passions, manly dress, [and...] who more or less lead the life of a man’. Magnus Hirschfeld ‘Transvestites’ (1910) in Bland and Doan (eds.) *Sexology Uncensored*, pp.97-99. However, in the twenty-first century such people who have the biological anatomy of one sex and choose to adopt the behavioural characteristics of another are often labelled as pre-operative transsexual persons; they literally occupy the ‘trans’ or ‘crossing’ space between the binary categories of male and female.

⁴⁹ Janice Raymond, ‘The Politics of Transgenderism’ in Richard Ekins and Dave King, (Eds.) *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.215.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Wroe, ‘A Shadow At My Shoulder’, *The Guardian* (12 August 2000), available at www.guardian.co.uk [Accessed 4 February 2010].

narration, from the viewpoint of Barry, avoids the gendered pronoun distinction between she or he and him or her, yet from the moment that Barry is dressed as a boy any references to Barry are in the masculine pronoun. This change in pronoun emphasises Duncker's insistence on depicting Barry as a person who alters his/her gender and becomes a transsexual subject with the anatomy of a female yet the behavioural characteristics, psychology, and dress of a male.

Duncker explores the concept of the transsexual person by configuring Barry as embodying the gap between genders. As the Governor at the Cape exclaims, 'he's... well, God knows what he is' (*JMB*:212). The ellipsis of what Barry is represents the lack of language with which to describe him/her. Such a space in the text and in language results from the approach to the matter of gender as a binary, rather than a polymorphous and multiple category. Indeed, as Stoller notes, 'it is rarely questioned that there are only two biological sexes, male and female, with two resultant genders, masculine and feminine'.⁵¹ In *James Miranda Barry*, Barry can be compared to the maze into which s/he walks, where 'the old stone gods, unappealing and aggressive, marked the entrance to the maze. They were men's gods: Mars, Zeus, Hercules, Vulcan and Apollo. The women's gods were hidden within' (*JMB*:357). The entrance, or outer layer, is depicted as purely masculine, which hides an interiority of female space. Just like Barry him/herself, the exterior in the form of masculine clothing masks the biological female inside. In this way Duncker combines both masculine and feminine qualities to construct an utterly ambiguous figure.

As a child Barry is routinely dressed in informal male clothing, but when the opportunity arises for him/her to attend a ball, Mary Ann, Barry's mother, assumes that her child will dress appropriate to his/her biological sex and wear a ball gown.

⁵¹ Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, p.29.

However, even as a child Barry insists that s/he should don masculine clothing. The young Barry proudly declares that ‘I was to go to the ball in smart blue regimentals, dressed as a soldier. Costume was much more acceptable than disguise’ (*JMB:55*). Whilst the blue uniform of the soldier may be an extreme presentation of masculine dress, it is interesting to note that s/he views such dress as a costume rather than a disguise, thus rendering the feminine ball gown, which was previously offered, a disguise and a masquerade, whereas the costume of the regimentals represents a mere exaggeration of masculinity. Although Barry feels that his/her ‘ambiguous clothes were what had made [him/her] special and interesting’ (*JMB:55*), it is clear that s/he views them as an extension and expression of his/her gender ambiguity.

Whilst it may seem to Barry that this gender uncertainty depicted through dress offers a space of freedom of expression, Duncker problematises the figure of the cross-dresser or transsexual by configuring Barry variously as a ‘well-wrapped mutant’ (*JMB:80*), and ‘a tiny freak on springs’ (*JMB:81*). In the nineteenth century any person who stepped beyond the strict boundary of what was considered normative was indeed viewed as freakish, monstrous, or abnormal and was effectively relegated to the status of social outcast or even circus performer.⁵² In emphasising that Barry attracts adverse attention from his dress Duncker presents him as a spectacle: ‘he looked like a well-dressed dwarf that had escaped, in full costume, either from the stage or from the circus’ (*JMB:74*). In the collapse of the diminutive stature of the ‘dwarf’,⁵³ the ‘costume’ of the performer, and the connotations of the ‘stage’ and ‘circus’, Duncker conceptually links

⁵² In the nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century circuses and freak shows often displayed and paraded people with disabilities or bodily deformations for entertainment and financial purposes. Robert Bogdan defines such venues as ‘the formally organised exhibition for amusement and profit of people with physical, mental, or behavioural anomalies’, Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.2. Freak shows and the commodification of difference is also the subject of the next chapter which concerns Saartjie Baartman and her racially cross-dressed performance.

⁵³ Robert Bogdan explains the fascination with the figure of the dwarf as a confrontation ‘with our phobia that we will never grow up’. *Ibid.*, p.7. In respect of the fact that Barry could never grow the facial hair and other physiological attributes of an adult male, it is clear that Duncker’s concentration on his dwarfish stature emphasises Barry’s female anatomy.

the transvestite to theatrical performance. In combining gender transgression and the idea of staged sartorial satire, Duncker, being an academic herself, is drawing on the Butlerian theory of gender performance and performativity. Butler purports that theatrical cross-dressing in the form of drag ‘plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed, [and adds that] we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance’.⁵⁴ In this respect Duncker is exploring the concept of a complex gendered identity that is expressed in triplicate. Barry is variously a biological female (anatomical sex) who cross-dresses as a man (gender identity or performativity), yet her performance becomes over-performed to the point of freakish imitation (gender performance).

In the act of over-performance it is Barry’s dress which attracts the attention of the other characters. Seemingly always too large for him/her, the clothes, rather than hiding a lack of height and physicality, actually accentuate his/her small body, resulting in a figure which Barry in an interior monologue describes as ‘grotesque, [looking like] a puppet dressed in a carnival costume, a caricature of the Evil Baron’ (*JMB*:113). Once again notions of carnivalesque freak shows and the over-performance of a complex transsexual gendered identity abound in this description. The addition of the ‘grotesque’ and the ‘puppet’ representations likewise produce a depiction of Barry that is synonymous with the idea of the stage and surreal performance, a hardly human, uncanny figure who is more like a mechanical doll. Barry is similar to the kind of puppets discussed by Sigmund Freud: ‘waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata [which add] to the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.187.

living person'.⁵⁵ The 'grotesque puppet' Barry is associated with elicits the same uncanny effect as Freud's automata: both create a sense of unhomely reality; they certainly exist but their *unheimlich* appearance of known, yet unknown, instils a discomfort due to the fact that neither are truly what they appear to be. Robert Bogdan also notes, about the carnivalesque, that 'freak shows can teach us not to confuse the role a person plays with who that person really is'.⁵⁶ This statement, which emphasises pretence, roles, acting, artifice, and a lack of authenticity, is directly applicable to the transvestite or cross-dresser and to neo-Victorian fiction itself.

The stage-managed realm of make-up, wigs, costume and acting is often connected to cross-dressers and transsexuals. The paraphernalia associated with acting, and particularly in drag, along with the concept of performance are synonymous with the transvestite's ability to act or perform a particular gender. This conceptual link of the stage and the performance of gender is alluded to by Imogen Gassert who, in reference to the portrayal of Barry in Duncker's novel declares, 'stays, hair dye and high heels at the ready: this sure is a case of boys in the girl's room, girls in the men's room'.⁵⁷ The pretence of gender through dress produces the uncanny and disconcerting effect of deceptive appearances. The transsexual person refuses to be categorised into either of the binary classifications of gender; instead the transsexual inhabits the 'third' space and becomes a 'third sex' which undermines and destabilises the concept of fixed gender identity. As Marjorie Garber asserts, 'the figure of the transvestite in fact opens up the whole question of the relationship of the aesthetics to the existential. This indeed, is part of its considerable power to disturb, its transgressive force'.⁵⁸ Transsexual people, such as Barry is portrayed as being, have the ability to transgress the gender

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919; London: Penguin, 2003), p.135.

⁵⁶ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p.10.

⁵⁷ Imogen Gassert, 'A Man of Many Parts', *The Guardian* (28 April 2002) available at www.guardian.co.uk [Accessed 4 February 2010].

⁵⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.71.

boundary and express a performance of gender that results in the collapse of concepts such as the 'real' and the 'false'. As Christian Gutleben argues, this is

where the surface means the depth, where the sign becomes paramount, forcefully (and rhetorically) expresses the blurring of the distinction between appearance and essence. Barry's life-long performance and successful play-acting challenge the idea of an authentic or original gender; the fake, the false, the acted is all Barry ever was.⁵⁹

Such uncertainty of gender, therefore, destabilises comfortable notions of gender binarity and develops into a rift between pretence and 'truth'. The dress, or in Barry's case the trousers, thus becomes the site of the contest between the genuine versus the counterfeit.

This contest continues through the body for Duncker's Barry. Just as Racster and Grove's Barry had extremely 'feminine' and dainty hands, so too in Duncker, Barry has delicate hands that are perfect for surgical procedures. It is Barry's friend at Edinburgh University who 'looked down at the boy's tiny blue knuckles clutching the iron railings and suddenly noticed the size of Barry's hands. Dr Fyfe had stressed the advantages of a small delicate hand for their bloody profession' (*JMB*:75). For Duncker's Barry, however, his/her hands only cause confusion rather than reveal any 'true', essentialised notion of gender or sex. Barry's love rival and friend at the Cape, Captain Loughlin, feels that his/her feminised hands belie the truly masculine Barry. Loughlin 'had heard the rumours, of course, but was inclined to think that the surgeon's fine, elegant and carefully manicured hands were largely responsible, because the eyes which met his own were the eyes of a man who was unafraid and in control of himself and his world' (*JMB*:213). Loughlin believes that Barry's masculinity rests not in the form of the hands but in his/her steadfast eyes which exude a certain bravado and a confidence which he believes only a man could maintain.

⁵⁹ Gutleben, 'An Aesthetics of Performativity', p.220.

However, Duncker's Barry has to negotiate the difficulty of menstruation. Barry's mother Mary Ann Bulkeley is anxious about how s/he could possibly understand, cope with, and hide the necessary sanitary arrangements. She states, 'I'm terrified that he's going to start while I'm away and not there to help or show him how to organise the cloths. He'll have to wash them or burn them himself. He's eleven years old. And he hasn't started yet' (*JMB*:85). Here we see a perfect example of the slippage into the gap between the genders. Whilst using the male pronoun when referring to her 'son', Mary Ann is concerned that Barry will start *his* menses when away at Edinburgh University. The combination of the masculinised address and the anxiety over the menstrual cycle is a clear point of destabilisation of gendered expectations, which suggests that Duncker's Barry possesses a biologically female anatomy and at the same time expresses a masculine psychology, dress and behaviour. Barry becomes a transsexual person who disguises his/her sex and exaggerates a masculine performance through appearance and conduct.

Indeed it is in Barry's behaviour that the confusion, or rather the combination, of genders is expressed. At Edinburgh University, and still in the prime of his/her youth, Barry finds that a female body adopting a masculine role causes apprehension and awkwardness. Barry 'was no longer at home in his stunted body. This unease pervaded his gestures, his gait, his habit of taking stock of his surroundings, as if he feared the approach of an assassin' (*JMB*:82). The transsexual person obviously finds no immediate comfort in the assumption of a role that feels alien and strange. The unease of his/her gestures and gait speaks of Barry's fear in being discovered to be a biological female, who, under the pretence of a masculine disguise, has succeeded in duping the entire medical and military professions throughout his/her life. But this anxiety also reflects the discomfort with which society responds to the transsexual subject who cannot be fitted neatly into a gender category. Barry is right to fear the approach of the

assassin; the assassin is all around him/her, in everyone with whom s/he comes into contact. Barry only becomes confident in his/her manly behaviour after many years of living as a man. S/he eventually, and effectively, grows into his/her masculinity to become 'the lord and owner of every one of his gestures and expressions. He knew neither hesitation nor uncertainty. He gave rather than took orders. The Governor himself deferred to Barry's judgement. But even so, he was not a man like other men' (*JMB*:225). Although the masculine role has been assumed for many years and has, literally and figuratively, become Barry's 'second nature', s/he still remains outside the boundaries of the *real* men. Barry is biologically different to the other men, and therefore cannot possibly be part of their realm, and thus stays in the liminal space of the transsexual. Such a place of marginalisation can occasionally be uncomfortable or lead to unhappiness for the person concerned as they are effectively outcast from the categories of masculine male and feminine female. In an interview with Raekha Prasad for the *Guardian*, Duncker noted that 'the fact that Barry was a gender bender interested me. I think there are underworlds of gender. There are a lot of people who feel very unhappy in the roles ascribed to them'.⁶⁰ Duncker attempts to depict Barry as a transsexual person who is perpetually peripheral to society's strict gender definitions, thus forcing him/her to remain marginalised and in an underworld of gender.

Unlike Racster and Grove's protagonist who is unproblematically female, Duncker's Barry evinces a more complex concept of gender identity. For Duncker, Barry's outward behaviour and dress confusions are merely symptomatic of the psychological perplexity which is endured by the transsexual subject. Although Barry may declare that 'there is no gulf between the body and the mind. They form one another, just as a particular climate shapes the mind and character of a people, down to

⁶⁰ Raekha Prasad, 'Prisoner of Gender', *The Guardian* (31 May 1999), available at www.guardian.co.uk [Accessed 4 February 2010]

their most intimate habits and practices' (*JMB*:159), it is clear that his/her own mind and body are completely at odds with each other. Barry's body as biologically female is portrayed as the opposite of his/her masculine mind, dress and behaviour. As a transsexual person Barry is troubled by the lack of authenticity in other people, who 'perform' their class and/or gender, which consequently only reflects his/her own deficient validity. S/he finds that 'truth eludes me. There are no truths, there are only layers of lies, what should be and what is. I, who have lived so long inside a chrysalis of ambiguity, find that I no longer see clearly' (*JMB*:294). In this startling admission of his/her own uncertainty about an 'inner' sense of gender Barry demonstrates that the people s/he meets every day are merely presenting a façade of appearance with regard to their gendered or social status.

Duncker's exploration into the transsexual subject implicitly addresses Judith Butler's theory of performativity whereby 'what we take to be "real," what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality'.⁶¹ In other words, there is no such thing as a stable gender identity; gender and its determinants are in a constant state of flux. Butler then goes on to add that 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'.⁶² Thus, there are no true selves, only layer upon layer of gender performance. By commenting upon the masquerades that every person, unconsciously or consciously, assumes in his/her life, Duncker is situating Barry as an objective observer. Being in the business of disguise him/herself, Barry is able to see through the 'layers of lies' that are perpetually employed in order to negotiate the binary definitions of gender that society enforces upon itself. It is clear, though, that Barry's transsexual position between such gender definitions eventually becomes the essential self. Barry states that 'no disguise is

⁶¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.xxiv.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.34.

necessary now. I have no fears of discovery. What should I fear? The mask has become the face' (*JMB*:281). The external covering of dress and behaviour are now privileged as the gender markers that are not mere artifice but have become the actual embodiment of gender. Barry displaces and undermines the notion of gender as a stable concept by the stubborn refusal to be female, and blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine expressions of gender. Yet, due to the very nature of having to adopt a masculine persona, psychology, dress, and behaviour over a lifetime, Duncker's Barry is forced into privileging the masculine gender role over the female body which s/he possesses.

In various respects the transsexual subject can be said to assume many of the attributes and qualities which the anatomical hermaphrodite exhibits. They both appear to suffer the same crisis of gender. In order to survive undetected in the nineteenth century, or at least avoid being completely cast out from society, the transsexual subject and the hermaphroditic person were forced to choose one of the two gender roles available to them. In her novel Duncker speculates on the possible connection of the transsexual person and the hermaphrodite. Captain Loughlin ponders whether 'Barry be some kind of hermaphrodite, with a spectacular intelligence? He was neither man nor woman, but partook of both. He had a woman's delicacy and grace, but the courage and skill of a man' (*JMB*:226-27). Indeed, as a transsexual, Barry is free to partake of both gender definitions in order to express his/her liminal position. Whilst Barry's transsexual appearance, behaviour and psychology allow such expression, nineteenth-century society would have demanded a clearer, more obvious expression of either masculinity or femininity. The extent to which Barry's contemporaries accepted his/her performance in male dress and behaviour rested solely on their interpretation of his/her actions, demeanour, and manner. But as Joan Smith questions, 'was that sufficient to

override his physical gender, or did he exist in some kind of half-world?'.⁶³ This 'half-world', the realm of the hybrid, inhabited by the hermaphrodite and the transsexual raises the issue of the acceptability of Barry. Consistently configured as a freak, a puppet, and a dwarf, Barry indeed does seem to be 'a creature outside the boundaries of this world' (*JMB*:229). Yet perhaps it is not the world that has such boundaries but simply society which excludes and ostracises the transsexual person and the hermaphrodite. Whether Barry was truly, in the strictest scientific classification, an anatomical hermaphrodite as previously defined by Kubba or a transsexual person with a female body and masculine psychology, dress, and behaviour, the important thing to consider is the representation of Barry which Duncker portrays in her novel. We are shown a Barry whose dress, behaviour, mentality and body all evoke ideas of ambiguity and uncertainty. In his/her dress and behaviour Barry displays a masculinised persona that was recognisably so for the other characters. Yet, it is the body and mind which act as the sites of contest for the differences and similarities between masculine and feminine gender roles, male and female biology.

The main reason why Duncker emphasizes the fluidity of gender roles in her protagonist is due to the context in which the novel was written. As mentioned in the 'Betwixt and Between' section of this chapter, the 1990s saw a sudden increase of critical debate and theoretical discussion concerning sex, gender and transsexual roles. The rich and fertile ground of theory and analysis in gender studies provides both historians and novelists with material that can be adapted to other periods of history than our own. Both Holmes and Duncker utilised the interest in gender, transgenderism and sexuality to speculate on the enigma of James Barry. Duncker specifically attempts to address the concept that a woman living in the nineteenth century could not always

⁶³ Joan Smith 'A Superabundance of Paternity', *The Independent*, (6 June 1999) available at www.independent.co.uk [Accessed 2 February 2010].

be slotted neatly into a particular gender category when the criteria to do so required meant living a half-life of restrictions and facing the inability of combining personal and professional success. Indeed, as Gutleben explains,

what this novel demonstrates is the impossibility for a woman in the Victorian context to lead an exciting and adventurous life and be acknowledged and respected as a public figure. If the contemporary novels insist so much on the sexual discrimination of the past, it is of course to convince the reader that such a state of affairs would be totally out of place today.⁶⁴

However, Duncker is not necessarily insisting that the debates about female oppression, or indeed transsexual persons, are irrelevant in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but rather that this topic needs further exploration and theorizing, which as this thesis demonstrates, can be achieved through the prism of neo-Victorian fiction and analysis.

Much of Duncker's novel draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender roles are effectively the layers of social, historical, and cultural influences which are expressed through the body. Butler asserts that 'as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations'.⁶⁵ Thus, every gender expression is a product of the context in which it is articulated or performed. All of the characters in *James Miranda Barry* are performing in this novel, although the most obvious cases are James Barry and Alice Jones, who is the daughter of a kitchen-maid at a Barry family residence and in later life becomes an actress and Barry's lover. As Gutleben notes, 'here is a novel with no hero: the main two characters are female and, fascinatingly, they both spend their lives playing roles,

⁶⁴ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.123.

⁶⁵ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.14.

acting parts'.⁶⁶ As a transsexual character Barry successfully expresses the male gender role through his/her dress, behaviour, and mentality. Alice, though, as well as being a consummate actress on the stage of the London theatre, also performs her femininity to perfection, enjoying the wealth and social status which accompany her many dalliances with men. Alice also performs in terms of her class status. Born as a lowly daughter of a kitchen maid, she climbs the social ladder, so much so that Barry's housemaid declares that his visitor is 'a lady sir, a real lady' (*JMB*:328). Like Barry, Alice is aware that all people are in fact performing in various ways. She points out that 'nothing's absolutely genuine! You aren't the same person with everyone you know. You act out different roles. I've acted every minute of my life. I'm always on stage. We all are. It's all a performance' (*JMB*:358). In this respect Barry is simply assuming a gender role that other people recognise as male, but in actual fact everybody is performing their gender role, their class status, and any other ideological signifier of who they are as individuals. To what extent such a performance is recognised, validated, or even exaggerated largely depends on the individual, but also requires other people to acknowledge it as such. Butler's 'expressions' of identity can only ever become a *bona fide* identity when they are recognised, accepted, and authorised as such, but subversion and transgression occur when people attempt to elide or blur the boundaries of a specific understanding of gender or class identity.

In drawing on such a complex and intriguing topic as nineteenth-century transvestism and a historical persona, Duncker herself, like Holmes, is similarly acting out the part of author. Her intricate interweaving of historical sources, fictionalised characters, and feminist theory produces a novel in which the characters are able to manipulate gender and class expressions through a performance sustained by props such as dress and codes of behaviour. However, Duncker, like other authors discussed here,

⁶⁶ Gutleben, 'An Aesthetics of Performativity', p.218.

also enters this masquerade of performance through the selection of historical documents concerning Barry. Her masquerade is dependent upon her construction of characters, and her narrative techniques of flashback, flash forward, and her problematising of Barry's gender from the outset, such as when the character Alice exclaims to Barry, 'well, you're sort of a girl, I suppose. But definitely not like me. Perhaps you're a girl dressed up as boy? Or a boy that's got enough girl for it not to matter too much either way' (*JMB*:35). Duncker continues to destabilise the idea of a fixed gender by refusing to categorise her protagonist until the chronological occurrence in historical evidence of Barry's enrolment at Edinburgh University, in which s/he is classified as male. In her interview with Raekha Prasad Duncker poses the question 'why do we have to know if someone is a man or a woman?', arguing that 'the only possible reason for wanting to know is that you'd treat them differently. Get out of it'.⁶⁷ By manipulating the beginning of the novel so that the reader is not aware of the gender of such a strangely ambiguous child, Duncker is evoking the Butlerian theory that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender'.⁶⁸ There is only the performance of a particular gender which becomes relevant and influential to the person exhibiting the gender role traits, and which ultimately influences the response of other people who view the performativity of that gender role.

Duncker's employment of Butler's gender theory in her novel represents the feminist argument which the character of Barry symbolises. Living as a woman in the early to mid-nineteenth century was to be economically restricted, socially oppressed and politically disenfranchised. However, Barry's masculine disguise and persona allowed him/her, as a biological female, access to a university education, a professional career as a medical doctor, financial independence, and numerous social freedoms. One

⁶⁷ Prasad, 'Prisoner of Gender' (no pagination).

⁶⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.34.

such freedom was from the marriage market, for which most women were destined if they desired any form of financial security. Due to the fact that many professions were proscribed to women, their only alternative was stability achieved by proxy through a husband. The historical persona of Barry offers Duncker yet another alternative to this dilemma. As Duncker states in an interview with Julie Wheelwright, ‘I realised that [Barry’s] mother felt very strongly that she didn’t want her child to be passed from man to man as she had been. She wanted James to earn her own living’.⁶⁹ In order that Barry’s mother can achieve her aim of seeing her child live an independent life and not have to rely on a husband, Duncker configures Barry as a cross-dressed or transsexual person who embodies a version of a feminist forerunner. Barry is able to gain political independence, social freedom, and economic security through his/her transvestism, which, whilst still privileging nineteenth-century patriarchal hegemony through the imitation and impersonation of masculinity, simultaneously allows for any essentialist debates about sexual difference to be undermined.

Duncker’s depiction of Barry as a gender imposter is coincidental with her own authorial imitation of biography. As a neo-Victorian work of biofiction Duncker’s novel draws on and destabilizes contemporary notions of nineteenth-century assumptions regarding dress and gender. In her explorations into historical documents and personas Duncker creates a fictional arena which attempts to bridge the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. The beginning of the novel is a purely imaginative invention depicting Barry’s childhood. As no documents or evidence exist of Barry as a child Duncker creates a progressive and idyllic upbringing shaped by liberal humanists who educate and support the purposefully ungendered and unnamed child. Just as Barry lived his/her life between genders, Duncker’s novel similarly blurs the boundaries between fiction

⁶⁹ Julie Wheelwright, ‘The Books Interview: Transit and Transgression’, *The Independent* (29 May 1999) available at www.independent.co.uk [Accessed 2 February 2010] (no pagination).

and biography. As Dana Shiller argues, by its very nature of adaptation and engagement with the nineteenth century ‘neo-Victorian fiction explores the ground between writing as though there are no persisting truths, a way of thinking that gives the author tremendous latitude in reconstructing the past, and writing as though there is indeed a recoverable past, however attenuated’.⁷⁰ Such authors appear to be playing with textual genre, just as Barry plays with sexual gender. Duncker’s novel attempts such a reconstruction of the past by weaving together the historical evidence concerning Barry along with a fictionalised childhood and an invented lesbian love affair. The character of Alice Jones is completely fictitious, as is the relationship between Barry and Alice. Indeed, Duncker declares in the Afterword of her novel that she has ‘taken liberties which all novelists, who are not historians, always do take with history’ (*JMB*:374). However, their lesbian affair presents to the contemporary reader an alternative to the persistent assumption that the nineteenth century was dominated by prudish and asexual people who were averse to explore the nuances of sexuality and desire and it readdresses the heterosexual script offered by Racster and Grove.

The fictionalised elements of the novel, such as Barry’s childhood and the relationship with Alice, allow for different views and understandings of the past. Historians would possibly claim that such liberties with historical evidence and the genre of biography can weaken the empirical pursuit of ‘truth’. As Robert Kiely asserts, ‘even the most scrupulous attention to the study and preservation of the past risks overwhelming it and distorting it with techniques, statistics, concepts, and framing devices peculiar to our own time’.⁷¹ The fact that Duncker is reconstructing a historical persona does have a foundation in historical research, however, the two genres of historical biography and neo-Victorian fiction cannot always seamlessly meld together.

⁷⁰ Dana Shiller, ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1997), p.41.

⁷¹ Robert Kiely, *Reverse Tradition: Postmodern Fictions and the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.3.

As Cora Kaplan explains, ‘the “bio” in biofiction...references a more essentialised and embodied element of identity, a subject less than transcendent but more than merely discourse. It implies that there is something stubbornly insoluble in what separates the two genres and that prevents them from being invisibly sutured; the join will always show’.⁷² However, Duncker is not necessarily attempting to present a ‘truthful’ or ‘real’ James Barry, but a construction of him/her that avoids simple gender categorisation. Duncker and her depiction of Barry are presenting an obvious challenge to our views on the nineteenth century, and also our own (mis)understandings of contemporary gender definitions. The fact that we do not have a pronoun with which to identify the transsexual subject suggests that the twenty-first century reader is still haunted by the nineteenth-century ghosts of binary gender differentiation.

Conclusion: Biohazards

In summary, twentieth and twenty-first century constructions of Barry emphasise the feminine and female cross-dresser (Racster and Grove), the male-identified hermaphrodite (Holmes), and the gender-fluid transsexual (Duncker). Racster and Grove essentialise Barry as feminine through their use of the female pronoun, through various depictions of feminised physiology, and through configuring her psychology as an inherently caring yet irrational woman ‘by nature’. She is also ritually infantilised and becomes submissive in the presence of men and it is only in the role of the ‘effeminate’ dandy that Barry finds some resolution to her cross-dressed dilemma. Barry’s transvestism thus turns out to be a mere disguise, an escape narrative which proves unsuccessful because her femininity cannot be completely concealed beneath her gender masquerade: cross-dressing is here depicted as a superficial covering for a romantic love story. Very much in contrast to Racster and Grove, Holmes portrays Barry as a male-identified hermaphrodite who embraces the masculine ideal for

⁷² Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p.65.

financial security and professional success. Barry negotiates her gender identity by emulating male heroes and peers, and once again the figure of the dandy is utilised as a solution to gender dysphoria. Yet Holmes relies too heavily on Barry's thesis as an explanation for her masculine persona. She also confuses the concept of the dandified man by essentialising Barry's gender and making dress synonymous with gender. Duncker, on the other hand, creates Barry as a transsexual who embodies the notion of gender fluidity and undermines essentialist ideas of gender as a static state and instead depicts it as a polymorphous and performative concept. Duncker's novel ultimately reveals the lack of 'truth' in all genders and even class expressions, yet also complicates transsexualism and transvestism by emphasising the fact that Barry is merely an embodiment of a feminist agenda. Indeed, Joan Smith argues that Duncker's novel articulates 'the distorting effect of traditional gender assumptions on the female character, and the suggestion that Barry's imposture is only a more dramatic version of one experienced in some degree by every woman'.⁷³ What Duncker's biofiction does allow, however, is an illustration of the space between the genders in which various degrees of masculinity and femininity can be expressed. As Fausto-Sterling notes, 'if nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits'.⁷⁴

The reason why these authors have constructed Barry in such disparate ways is due to the context in which they were writing and also their varied authorial agendas. Racster and Grove privilege the romantic love story as a genre which appealed to the inter-war readership requiring escapism from the chaos of war. Their selective use of sources results in a protagonist who acts as a vehicle for first-wave feminist sentiments, but her transvestite imposture is undermined by the emphasis of the love story and their

⁷³ Smith, 'A Superabundance of Paternity' (no pagination).

⁷⁴ Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, p.31.

insistence on producing normative modes of behaviour and psychology. Thus, any subversive attributes of the cross-dresser are undermined, the transvestite act lacks authenticity, thus resulting in merely essentialised expressions of an ‘innate’ feminine gender identity. Holmes’s depiction likewise reverts to essentialised notions of gender by collapsing the ‘effeminate’ dandy and the male-identified hermaphrodite. With the advantage of writing during a period of intense debate concerning gender and sex roles Holmes, however, is able to show an alternative perspective which is in contrast to the feminine cross-dresser of Racster and Grove. She promotes the figure of the historical gender outcast and depicts Barry as the tragic hero of the oppressed and marginalised. Duncker, contrary to Racster and Grove, and Holmes, posits Barry as inhabiting the hybrid state of the transsexual in order to promote Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Barry becomes a feminist forerunner and an ambassador of gender transformation. In utilising historical evidence as her source Duncker is able to transfer contemporary literary and gender theory into an early nineteenth-century setting.

Racster and Grove also employed existing historical sources of Barry’s life and no doubt developed their novel from their previous play (1919) about Barry. Along with the rather blatant influences of the Mills and Boon romantic genre, it is highly likely that they also had access to Ebenezer Rogers *A Modern Sphinx: A Novel* (1881). In Rogers account of life in the colonies, with a ‘dear, darling, delightful [yet] odious Dr. Fitz-James’,⁷⁵ the flirtatious Doctor (a clear characterisation of Barry) provides the other characters with much gossip and mystery whilst simultaneously performing as a perfect gentleman in his care for the ‘bleary-eyed creatures’⁷⁶ of the colonial settlement. Likewise, Holmes’s treatment of the Barry story involves all manner of intertextual references, from both history and fiction. The previous explorations into Barry (by

⁷⁵ Rogers, *A Modern Sphinx*, p.76.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.203.

Rogers, Racster and Grove, Rose, and Duncker) have all amalgamated in Holmes's biography, yet Holmes supplements these literary and historical sources with an exoticisation of her subject matter (through her presentation of Barry as an anatomical hermaphrodite) and her inclusion of the references, from the outset, to the 'tropical' setting of the Sargasso Sea. For many twenty-first century readers a reference to the Sargasso Sea automatically brings to mind the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1965) by Jean Rhys. As a 'prequel' to the *Jane Eyre* story, it is itself a neo-Victorian text, and like Holmes's biography it attempts to (re)write/right the wrongs of the nineteenth century. Duncker also engages with such palimpsestic rewriting through her characterisation of the young Barry as a picaresque, Dickensian (yet privileged) urchin. However, *James Miranda Barry*, more directly, challenges contemporary gender definitions and effectively maps that challenge onto the Victorian era. In a similar way to Waters, Gautier, Stace, and Rachilde (as will be shown in later chapters), Duncker also refers to Greek mythology. In many transvestite narratives classical and ancient texts resurface and act as a veritable genealogy of cross-dressing often in order to emphasise that gender subversion and disguise in the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries is not the single exception to the gender rule but is situated in a historical timeline of transgression.

Like the intertextual references employed by neo-Victorian authors, the paratextual use of images which often depict the subject or historical persona in question are a pictorial representation of the collapse of history and fiction, between the Victorian and the contemporary, and literally act as the cross-dressing for the texts themselves. Unfortunately, no cover images exist for the Racster and Grove novel, although one edition of the story does include a portrait of Barry (the one used at the start of this chapter). However, both the Holmes and Duncker textual covers raise important issues regarding the use of image to illustrate and advertise texts. Holmes's

Scanty Particulars depicts a portrait of Barry exuding colonial gentlemanliness, complete with black servant and inquisitive dog. Duncker's cover image, though, provides us with a direct correlation between gentlemanly behaviour (swordsmanship), performance (theatrical setting) and disguise (the participants appear to be wearing costumes and feathered hats).

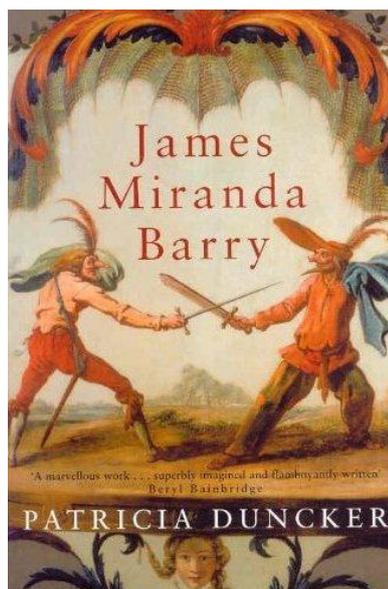
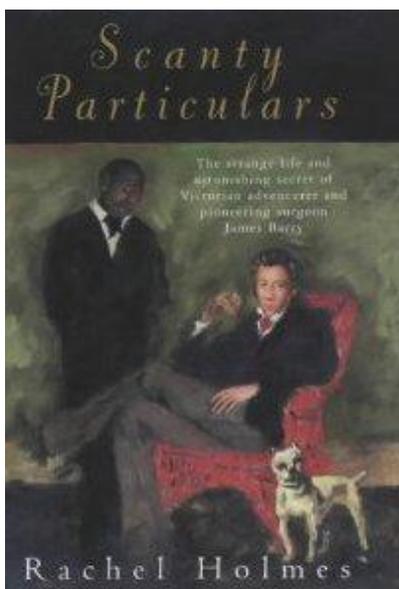


Fig. 2, Cover of *Scanty Particulars*. Fig. 3, Cover of *James Miranda Barry*.

These paratexts, as concise pictorial explanations for the textual contents hidden within, are the bibliographic equivalent of the transvestite imperative. They perform their role as a covering, they demonstrate that outward appearances are not always synonymous with an interior reality and they become the site of a contested field of enquiry. The book covers effectively bridge the gap between reader and text, between history and fiction, between the past and the present.

Thus we find that the difference between genders can be traversed through cross-dressing and also that the chasm between the past and the present can be negotiated. The differences between biography and biofiction are few. Dana Shiller notes that 'historical novels take a revisionist approach to the past, borrowing from

postmodern historiography to explore how present circumstances shape historical narrative, and yet they are also indebted to earlier cultural attitudes toward history'.⁷⁷ In this sense Racster and Grove, Holmes, and Duncker are all engaged with the nineteenth century, but their involvement with the past is reverberated back to them from the very history with which they are concerned. Whilst it may be easy to criticise fictionalised texts as devoid of empirical research and biography can become inaccessible without narrative continuity, all three texts that have been explored in this chapter tread a fine line between historical evidence and biofictional artistic licence. As Bruce Nadel states, 'biography is a complex narrative as well as a record of an individual's life, a literary process as well as a historical product'.⁷⁸ The romantic language and narrative element of Holmes's biography seeks to increase the enjoyment of reading history and make it more accessible to a wider readership. In that venture, 'narrative, in the end, paves over the gaps and creates plausibility, which for the historian and biographer is the best that can be hoped for'.⁷⁹ Biofiction is also a 'record' of someone's life, but it just happens to be delivered in an alternative format to hard factual historical writing. I would suggest that the 'gaps' which are paved over in biography are simply expanded and made more comprehensive in an attempt to produce a work that combines the research element of history and the creative imperative of literature. History and literature may not necessarily seem closely related, but in actual fact have more in common than many historians may be willing to admit. The 'story' of James Barry's life allows all the authors discussed in this chapter to create texts that defy easy classification, just as Barry's gender identity refuses to be categorised. The categorisation and commodification of class and race performances also proves to be a complex endeavour

⁷⁷ Shiller, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', p.540.

⁷⁸ Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p.1.

⁷⁹ Shiller, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', p.551.

as will be shown in the next chapter concerning neo-Victorian engagement with Hannah Cullwick and Saartjie Baartman.

Chapter 2 - Class and Race Acts: Dichotomies and Complexities



Fig. 4, Hannah Cullwick



Fig. 5, Sara Baartmann

Clothes are the visible signs of social identity but are also permanently subject to disarrangement and symbolic theft. For this reason the cross-dresser can be invested with potent and subversive powers.

(Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 1995)¹

Although transvestism and the act of cross-dressing are largely associated with cross-gender dressing, such as was the case in the previous chapter with James Barry MD, there are instances in both literature and culture, where the boundaries of social class and ethnicity are also traversed and elided by the adoption of particularly value-laden clothing and accessories. As the opening quotation by Anne McClintock confirms, clothes are subject to ‘disarrangement and symbolic theft’, meaning that the gender, class and racial associations that are implied in certain items of clothing, adornments, and make-up can be adopted and effectively performed by a person wishing to appear as a member of that specific class, race or gender. Referring specifically to Hannah Cullwick, Leonore Davidoff notes that ‘black becomes white, degradation becomes

¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.67.

love, masculine becomes feminine, working-class becomes genteel'.² Therefore, in these crossings between colour, gender, and social status there are indeed many similarities between the performances and masquerades of gender, class and race. Although the act of drag implicitly relies on the transgression of gender being exaggerated and overdetermined to produce a comedic effect, there is a large difference between cross-dressing for the purposes of entertainment and actualised transvestite 'passing'. To 'pass' in transgender terminology means to be accepted by the social world *as* a member of the intended gender, class, or race rather than merely subverting the gender boundary in an obvious way. As McClintock notes, 'much of the scandal of transvestism resides in its theatrical parading of *identity as difference*. Passing, by contrast, more often involves the careful *masking* of ambiguity: *difference as identity*'.³ In other words, the masquerade, or the impersonation itself, becomes overstated, and thus paramount, in acts of drag and theatre (as seen in the next chapter), whereas successful passing relies upon deceit, or the gender/class/race pretence being hidden from the world.

In terms of class and race crossing, the very same ideologies of identity and difference are prevalent. In the case of Hannah Cullwick, her cross-class performances were often an opportunity for her to be viewed by the public as the 'lady' she pretended to be, although she preferred to think of it as merely play-acting. In contrast, Sara Baartman's act of over-performing her ethnicity, which she thought of as theatrical display like Cullwick, was actually understood by her audiences to be the 'truth' of her body and race. However, the supposed 'truths' on which these class, race and gender ideologies are based are continually in a state of polymorphous alteration and depend

² Leonore Davidoff, 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Cullwick', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1979), p.110.

³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.65 (emphasis in original).

largely on the social expectations of a particular given moment. Indeed, ‘the forces constitutive of “the subject” including race, gender, and sexuality,’ notes Dorinne Kondo, ‘are seen as socially, culturally, and historically specific categories that are always contested and in flux, rather than natural, foundational, or biological essences’.⁴ Therefore, the class-specific and racial stereotypes which are enacted by Cullwick and Baartman are driven and created by the social, political, and economic ideals which were in place in their own specific historical eras. The neo-Victorian genre, though, which this thesis investigates, can often emphasise the constructedness of the past and in many ways can demonstrate the ability to explore history from an alternative perspective. For example in Chase-Riboud’s novel the epigraphs containing excerpts from the works of Georges Cuvier (who, as we shall see, was instrumental in ‘creating’ the Hottentot Venus of his imagination for a scientific audience) highlight how the past can effectively be taken apart and (re)constructed to suit an authorial agenda and/or a contemporary concern. The epigraph to chapter 18 reads, ‘A true historian must have the power of reshaping the universally known into what has never been heard and to announce what is universal so simply and deeply that people overlook the simplicity in the profundity and the profundity in the simplicity’ (*HVN*:230). This statement from Cuvier’s own correspondence is utilised by Chase-Riboud to undermine not only the scientific assumptions of race and ethnicity made by Cuvier but also references twenty-first century concepts of historical ‘fact’ and universal ‘truth’. The epigraphs also stand as signposts to both the nineteenth and the twenty-first century and their understandings of gender, race, sexuality and identity and in doing so serve a dual function and thereby complicate the use of historical personas in contemporary literature.

⁴ Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theatre* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.7.

The texts examined in this chapter, as was the case in the previous chapter on Barry, all problematise (sometimes unintentionally) the demarcation points and generic boundaries of fiction and history. *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick: Victorian Maidservant* (1984)⁵ by Liz Stanley combines the diary excerpts, originally written by Cullwick, with sections of historical analysis. This is taken further by Diane Atkinson in *Love & Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick* (2003),⁶ which presents the reader with an amalgamation of diary excerpts, theoretical debate and romanticised biography. In this respect, just as the boundaries of gender, class and race are crossed and blurred, so too are the literary and biographical genres hybridised. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn point out, ‘like the biographer as a grave-robbler, some neo-Victorian fictions deliberately confound the distinction between reality and imagination, lives lived and lives created’.⁷ Such confounding of historical fact and literary creativity can also be seen in the texts which explore the life of Sara Baartman. *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman: Born 1789 – Buried 2002* (2007)⁸ by Rachel Holmes contains many empirically researched and referenced ‘facts’ about Baartman, but delivers them couched in a semi-imaginative narrative. The openly fictionalised *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003)⁹ by Barbara Chase-Riboud recreates the eponymous heroine’s life with epigraphs drawn directly from historical sources alongside some obvious twenty first-century political agendas. As Heilmann and Llewellyn assert,

Chase-Riboud’s narrative is placed into the context of a spate of recent non-fictional resurrections of the story of Saartjie Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’,

⁵ Liz Stanley (Editor and Introduction), *The Diaries of a Victorian Maidservant* (London: Virago, 1984).

⁶ Diane Atkinson, *The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003).

⁷ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.20.

⁸ Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman: Born 1789–Buried 2002* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

⁹ Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

but also read through an interconnected web of theoretical perspectives which incorporate issues of objectification, scopophilia, and the pornographic gaze, in order to inspect the appropriation of a range of nineteenth-century cultural, sexual, and bodily moments and the resonances such appropriation carries today.¹⁰

It is not just Chase-Riboud's novel which carries such 'resonances', though. All of the texts analysed in this chapter can be seen as appropriating their subjects and utilising their stories for particular contemporary concerns. The diaries and the story of Hannah Cullwick's life, for example, are fertile ground for investigating modern issues such as class mobility, gender assumptions, and even sadomasochistic sexuality. Sara Baartman's life story, too, provides exceptional material for the enquiring biographer/creative writer whose intention it is to survey the racial prejudices and injustices which still exist in the twenty-first century. According to Richard Holmes, academia 'has not been very keen to recognise biography, especially of a literary kind. It has regularly assaulted the form as trivial, revisionist, exploitative, fictive, a corrupter of pure texts and probably also of scholarly morals'.¹¹ Yet, this chapter intends to address such an apparent imbalance and the dismissal of biography as a 'trivial' genre by analysing the hybrid fictional biographies and biographical fictions concerning Sara Baartman and Hannah Cullwick. In the case of Cullwick, her complex relationship with Arthur Munby was vital to her class performances and the diaries in which she described her various acts of subservience were initially written at Munby's instigation.

¹⁰ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.29.

¹¹ Richard Holmes, 'The Proper Study?', in Peter France and William St Clair (Eds.) *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.7.

'Massa' and the 'Drudge': Cullwick's Class Acts

Arthur J. Munby, born into an upper class family in York in 1828, had an upbringing of privilege and high expectations. Though he was originally educated and trained to be a barrister, it was while he was working for the Ecclesiastical Commission in London that Munby embarked on a multitude of forays into the countryside, seaside and the less salubrious areas of the city seeking out working-class women, who worked as maids-of-all-work, milkmaids and pit-brow lasses, in order to recruit them for his 'collection' of reports, drawings, photographs and diary entries concerning their lives. In itself this kind of social exploration was not unusual; as Micheal Hiley points out,

Henry Mayhew's monumental study of street life in London, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851/62), had brought in its wake a generation of popular social reporters who, in the 1860s and 1870s, searched out scenes of 'low life' and provided vignettes of the life of the poor. They brought back exciting reports from the slums into which their middle-class readership rarely dared venture. Their reports read like dispatches from a distant and barbarous land, where the likes of trotterscraping were routine occupations.¹²

On one of Munby's many urban strolls in 1854 he chanced upon a maid-of-all-work named Hannah Cullwick. Cullwick was born into the working-class community of Shifnal, Shropshire in 1833. Her childhood was remarkably different from Munby's as it consisted of minimal education at the local charity school and entering service at the age of eight.¹³ From their first meeting Munby and Cullwick found a mutual attraction; he saw in her a fine 'specimen' of working-class womanhood and she saw in him the ideal upper-class gent she could willingly serve. Although in the twenty-first century a cross-class relationship such as that upon which Munby and Cullwick embarked would barely raise an eyebrow, in the Victorian period class was the foundation of the social

¹² Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1979), p.17.

¹³ For a brief biography of Cullwick please see Liz Stanley, 'Cullwick, Hannah (1833–1909)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (available online at www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40826, [Accessed 23 May 2012]).

structure. Class was the signifier of an individual's station in life, the boundaries of which, due to the industrial revolution and the expanding merchant middle-class, were becoming increasingly blurred. Any relationship which openly breached the boundary of class was, therefore, sensational news. According to Diane Atkinson,

stories of 'misalliances' were popular in Victorian society. Accounts of handsome toffs seducing their young servants were commonplace, and there was an appetite for stories about marrying out of one's own class. The upper classes had the pleasure of tut-tutting such errant behaviour; the middle classes likewise; and the working classes could join the debate from both ends, being sanctimonious like their social superiors, or railing against the suffocating yoke of class (*LD*:104-5).

Here, though, Atkinson is perpetuating the 'popularity' of Victorian misalliances in a contemporary postmodern engagement with her subject and situates herself as both the tut-tutting toff and the working class espouser of injustice. As the author of a fictionalised biography that is often 'undertheorized',¹⁴ Atkinson has the privileged position of 'filling the gaps' of history and effectively 'creating' a Cullwick which suits her own authorial/political agenda of presenting the archival material in a way that slips between righteous indignation and romantised vision of nineteenth-century class structures. Cullwick herself had strong views regarding class, particularly the 'refined' and genteel ladies whom she served and observed in the city. On 26 May 1863 she notes in her diary that 'we rode through Hyde park, & there was such a lot of proudly dress'd people – some on horses & some ladies with their beautiful silk trailing quite ½ a yard on the ground, which I thought was disgracefully extravagant & ridiculous' (*DHC*:123). Cullwick clearly viewed these upper-class women as frivolous and wasteful with their notions of a femininity which created even more laborious tasks for those maids, such

¹⁴ Martha Vicinus, 'Review: *Watching Hannah: Sexuality, Horror and Bodily De-Formation in Victorian England* by Barry Reay; *Love & Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby & Hannah Cullwick* by Diane Atkinson', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Papers from the Inaugural Conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association (2004), p.36.

as Cullwick, serving them. Cullwick who had worked as a kitchen maid, a scullery maid, a cook, cleaner and maid-of-all-work would obviously see the labour and toil which was required in order for such women to parade in their finery with seemingly effortless elegance and no regard for its maintenance.

As Cullwick and Munby's relationship developed, Munby increasingly desired that she dress up as a lady and act the part of his equal. In his diary entry of 26 July 1863 he states that she 'has become a noble and gentle woman, not only without the aid of technological help but in spite of ignorance and lowly isolation, and by means of that very toil and servile labour which is supposed to make a woman contemptible and vulgar' (*LD*:113). Munby, who, as Leonore Davidoff observes, 'had never worked with anything heavier than a pen in his life, romanticized manual work',¹⁵ and firmly believed that through hard work Cullwick could raise herself above her lowly station in life and truly become a lady. He relished the idea of her being able to transgress the rigid class boundary which separated them. Cullwick was no mere puppet in these games of performance; indeed, she was an eager participant in their play-acting fantasies and blurring of the boundaries of class, gender and race, even to the point where she would instigate a trip to the photographers to have her likeness taken 'in her dirt'. As McClintock declares, 'fundamentally, the scripts for their fantasy life involved theatrically transgressing the Victorian iconographies of domesticity and race, and their fetish rituals took shape around the crucial but concealed affinity between women's work and empire'.¹⁶

The many different guises which Cullwick adopted during these fetishistic performances range from upper-class lady to gentleman's valet, country milkmaid to

¹⁵ Davidoff, 'Class and Gender', p.127.

¹⁶ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.138.

working drudge, and culminate in the filthy chimney sweep. Yet, another, and more important, way in which she performed was through her diary writing. At Munby's request, and all through their relationship, Cullwick kept detailed diaries of her daily routines and chores in the households in which she served. At times the diaries speak of the sheer relentlessness and tedium of her work, but Cullwick excelled at, and even enjoyed, her laborious tasks. What she did resent, however, was having to write these arduous endeavours in her diary in a furtive manner (so as not to attract attention to their relationship) which were then to be read by Munby at his leisure. As Cullwick notes in her last diary entry of 30 September 1873,

This is the last day o' the month, & Massa only wishes me to write to the end. And I am glad of it somehow, for I've got so thoroughly tired o' writing what I think to most people must be very tiresome & certainly disinteresting. I hardly think I shd care to read one lady's diary of twenty years standing tho' of course their'n would be more varied than a servant's can possibly be. And so I've told M. that by making me write for so many years he has quite tired me of it, & yet for some things I am most glad that he's not tired of reading it (*DHC:279*).

There are many revealing insights into Cullwick's life in just this small entry. Firstly, she felt her life would not be of any interest whatsoever to anyone except her 'Massa' (the slave term for Master, which she used for Munby as part of their performances), secondly, she believed that a 'lady's' diary would make far more intriguing reading compared to her own life of repetitive drudgery and lastly, but most significantly, we see that Cullwick was not at all afraid of voicing her opinion (through her diary) to Munby with regard to how much she had disliked writing about her daily chores for his perusal and pleasure. Cullwick, therefore, is a complex historical persona, who embraces the dichotomies of freedom and enslavement, black and white, ladyhood and working-class womanhood, masculine and feminine; as Martha Dana Rust suggests, 'to

view Cullwick either as pure victim or as model proto-feminist is to sweep away many of Cullwick's complexities'.¹⁷

Throughout her life Cullwick was acutely aware of her station in life and the differences between herself and the ladies for whom she worked. As Davidoff asserts, Victorian women 'were not only divided between working class and middle class, they were divided between "ladies" and "women," categories which signified as much gender as economic and social meaning'.¹⁸ For Cullwick, this distinction of her being a 'woman', who toiled on a daily basis in the households of 'ladies', was most exhibited in her behaviour towards her tasks, but also through her willing subjugation to her social superiors. One of the fetishistic rituals that Cullwick and Munby both engaged in involved her washing his feet. Like Sara Baartman with her 'employer/owners', Cullwick would regularly engage in the symbolic ritual of getting on her knees and wash the feet of the mistress, gentleman, or guests in the household as a clear sign of deference and respect, yet it was also one of the many ways in which she effectively constructed her identity as common drudge and manipulated Munby's desires. She obviously delighted in this duty, for when washing Munby's feet after a long abstinence from it she remarked that 'I think he must have miss'd it these two years as much as I have, for it's a pleasure to me, as well as a useful and humble little service that I can never tire of, especially as long as I know that M. likes it and loves me too' (*DHC*:54). In her cleaning of Munby's feet there appears to be a combination of true enjoyment at pleasuring her 'Massa', as well as the over-determined display of her servant status. In this exaggerated way Cullwick also seems effectively to perform her enjoyment of this intimate task by emphasising the connection between her act of servitude and her

¹⁷ Martha Dana Rust, 'In the Humble Service of Her Emancipation: Hannah Cullwick's Maid-of-All-Work Diaries', *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1994), p.97.

¹⁸ Davidoff, 'Class and Gender', p.91.

relationship with Munby. 'The cleaning activity', according to Heather Dawkins, 'is dramatised as a theatrical performance, the cross-class voyeurism moves the text to excess'.¹⁹ Whether Cullwick actually enjoyed the act itself or not is rather irrelevant; what is significant is that her 'theatrical performance' of both the feet washing and its description in the diary add layer upon layer of artifice and pretence to her role, which in turn suggests that *all* of Cullwick's actions and writings were, in fact, mere performance.

Not only did Cullwick perform her duties to the best of her abilities and 'performed' the role of servant-cum-slave to Munby, she was also able to cross the class divide by 'acting' the part of the lady. But Cullwick only ever saw her cross-class dressing as a bit of play-acting and fun. She found the entire etiquette of 'ladylike' behaviour baffling, and the restrictions surrounding the normative 'femininity' of being a lady rather than a woman made her feel awkward and suppressed. When in upper-class feminine dress, Cullwick rarely felt comfortable. One day during a visit from Munby at her place of work, and at his behest, she dared to try on one of her mistress's dresses. Munby recollects the incident in his diary of 11 January 1890, stating that

she took off her own servant's dress and put on that of her mistress....she stood before me to be looked at; smiling and slightly blushing; feeling awkward and strange in that unknown garb, but not looking awkward at all but most graceful...I longed to take her away from her slaving and make of her a lady indeed...She tore off that strange...finery...and hurried me down to her kitchen where she could feel properly clad and at home (*LD:70*).

Once again Cullwick is 'awkward' and no matter how much Munby wished he could 'take her away from her slaving and make a lady of her', Cullwick could not bear to lead the life of frivolous extravagance and restraint that constituted upper-class

¹⁹ Heather Dawkins, 'The Diaries and Photographs of Hannah Cullwick', *Art History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1987), p.170.

femininity. She detested being ‘muffled up’ in the finery, hats and gloves and would ‘much lieber feel [her] hands free as they used to be’ (*DHC*:266). To Cullwick, as a maid-of-all-work, one of the lowest rungs on the service ladder, the thought of living the life of genteel ladyhood was tantamount to a prison sentence. When she cross-dressed as a lady she was constantly reminding herself that she was simply playacting the role in behaviour and dress only. Like Baartman’s performance on-stage as the ‘Hottentot Venus’, Cullwick’s role as ‘lady’ inevitably resulted in an oppressive restriction of self. She avowedly felt that when she dressed up as a lady, she was in actual fact ‘in disguise’ (*DHC*:277), compared to being ‘more at ease in [her] own dress’ (*DHC*:274) as a servant ‘with dirty frock & striped apron & my old bonnet & hands & arms & face begrimed with dirt’ (*DHC*:57). No matter how much Munby desired Cullwick literally to ‘act’ the lady in his *Pygmalionesque* fantasy, she resolved to remain firmly wedded to her role as servant, common maid, drudge and ‘slave’.

Such remonstrations of a desire to remain a servant-cum-slave are another game in the theatrical performances of her relationship with Munby. The relentless toil of her everyday working life, though, did have its effects on how she was viewed by others. The sheer filthiness of her work, which included cooking food, scrubbing and polishing boots, carrying coal and cleaning chimneys, left Cullwick absolutely covered in the detritus of everyday life. This vision of a strong woman literally black with dirt attracted Munby, as it appealed to his (and Cullwick’s) concept of her willing slavery and his total mastery. Therefore, Cullwick embodied a chameleon-like figure who could dress up as a lady, over-perform her servant role, or even ‘black up’ like an African slave in order to manipulate her relationship with Munby and keep him utterly within her thrall.

Cullwick was in fact able to ‘paint on both the skin of a *whitened* lady and the skin of a *blackened* slave’.²⁰

Indeed, one of the other methods in which Cullwick ‘performed’ her servile status was through smearing her body with dirt or blacking her ‘face with oil & lead’ (*DHC*:40). As the theatrical fetishes of their relationship developed, Cullwick found that the dirtier she was, the more she could prove herself to be a lowly drudge, resulting in Munby being ever more attracted to her and her humility. In this way, as Carol Mavor notes, ‘she literally used the black lead like make up’.²¹ Sometimes her daily duties and the grime with which she was bespattered were still not sufficient for Munby; he liked to see her utterly soiled with the marks of her labour. Cullwick declared in her diary of 10 January 1863 that on one occasion ‘Massa came after 7. I went out & walk’d up the road together. I was in my dirt, but he said I wasn’t black enough’ (*DHC*:116). According to some critics, this ‘blacking up’ ritual is a symbolic gesture on Cullwick’s part which confirms her slave status and Munby’s mastery over her. As Rust argues, ‘his frequent request that Cullwick black her face with a mixture of black lead and oil suggests that he was marking her body with a sign associated with colonized groups of people’.²² In some respects, this would be an easy assumption, but while she was painting her face and body with muck, oil, and lead, Cullwick at any time in the procedure could have decided that the game had gone too far. What we are shown in the diaries is a Cullwick who practically revels in the thought of getting dreadfully dirty and then writing about the experience in the full knowledge that Munby would read it later. One excerpt from her diary, of 16 October 1863, shows her pleasure in such an act of self-degradation:

²⁰ Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (London: I.B. Publishers, 1996), p.101.

²¹ Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, p. 97.

²² Rust, ‘In the Humble Service’, p.99.

[I] stripp'd myself quite naked & put a pair of old boots on & tied an old duster over my hair & then I got up into the chimney with a brush....I swept lots o' soot down & it come all over me & I sat there for ten minutes or more, & when I'd swept all round & as far as I could reach I come down... I black'd my face over & then got the looking glass & look'd at myself & I was certainly a fright and hideous all over, at least I should o' seem'd so to anybody but Massa (*DHC:139*).

The act of climbing naked into the probably still warm chimney in itself may seem quite practical with regards to the fact that it is easier to clean one's skin than it is to wash an entire outfit; however, the fact that Cullwick then proceeds to inspect how dirty she is and to anticipate how much Munby would like her appearing in such a manner suggests that she is either deliberately savouring the event as it happened and enjoying the moment again when writing about the occurrence in her diary, or perhaps this is simply another performance for Munby; after all we have no proof, other than Cullwick's own diary, that this event even occurred. Atkinson, though, takes Cullwick's writing at face value and states, 'there are moments of a kind of ecstasy in getting as dirty as she could, and telling Munby about it' (*LD:53*). In this case it seems as though Atkinson herself is a voyeuristic performer; Cullwick performs for Munby, Munby performs for the archive and the researcher then performs for the contemporary readership. We have no idea if Cullwick really did feel a 'kind of ecstasy' in her blacking-up incidents, but clearly Atkinson (and probably Munby too) liked to think she did.

The supposed 'ecstasy' that Cullwick enjoys whilst 'blacking up', though, does hint at fetishistic behaviour which has more symbolic overtones; that of sadomasochism. Some critics, such as Liz Stanley, may not 'accept the usefulness or appropriateness of labelling it as sado-masochistic' (*DHC:15*), deeming it an anachronistic marker and part of our contemporary need to see the Victorians as 'Other Victorians'. However, it is difficult to ascribe any other label to Cullwick and Munby's relationship which involves such obvious role play of dominance and submission with the ritualistic fetish of 'blacking up', added to which is the fact that Cullwick

consistently wore a chain and padlock (to which Munby had the key) around her neck along with a leather wrist strap which held enormous symbolic value for both. On one of the many occasions when Cullwick went to have her photograph taken (this time posed as a bare-breasted Magdalene character), she writes of the incident where her chain came into the view of Mr Stodart the photographer: ‘when I was stripp’d for the Magdalene I was a little confused, having my steel chain & padlock round my neck, for Mr S said, “Oh take that chain off.” I said, “I canna, sir.” He said, “Is it lock’d?” I blush’d a bit as I said, “Yes, & I’ve not got the key”’ (*DHC:77*). The chain and padlock had become so commonplace to Cullwick that it was only when the items were mentioned by another person that she realised the significance of what they meant to other people. Nevertheless, Cullwick was (ironically) unbowed in her submissive position *vis-à-vis* Munby’s dominance.

Often there is a misconception about the power relations in a sadomasochistic relationship. As McClintock astutely declares, ‘to argue that in S/M “whoever is the master has the power and whoever is the slave has not” is to read theatre for reality...The economy of S/M, however, is the economy of conversion: master to slave, adult to baby, power to submission, man to woman, pain to pleasure, human to animal and back again’.²³ In this respect it is clear that the ‘submissive’ partner (Cullwick) actually has the power to withdraw at any time from the activities which place her in the subservient role and similarly, the ‘dominant’ individual (Munby) can only perform as a tyrant as long as the passive partner allows it. According to Andrea Beckman,

the social censure of ‘Sadomasochism’ is part of what Foucault (1990) termed the ‘deployment of sexuality’. In Foucault’s view, power did not and does not operate through means of repression only but may be even more effective

²³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.143.

(because less obvious) through productive power relations which occur and operate throughout the social body.²⁴

In other words, sadomasochism, which is often thought of as an ‘abnormal’ or ‘pathological’ sexual act, exists largely because of inherent power structures and hierarchies that are evident in everyday life. The class structure, particularly during the Victorian era, for example, relied upon the exploitation of the working classes in order for the nobility and middle classes to thrive financially. However, the supposed power relationship existent in a sadomasochistic sexual encounter can be subverted because the apparently ‘dominant’ partner in the theatrical performance of dominance and submission is, in actual fact, only *theoretically* in control of the ‘submissive’ partner, who could at any time withdraw this unspoken contract of powerlessness.²⁵ With regard to Cullwick and Munby’s relationship, this is particularly pertinent as Cullwick insisted on being independent and therefore physically in control of her labour *and* her body. As Beckman notes further, the body ‘serves as a tool for the construction of fantasies of eternal possession, power and desire. As a site of inscription the “body” gets used and shaped in order to conform to impossible ideals’.²⁶ The impossible ideal to which Cullwick ascribed, through her body, was the theatrical combination of working-class drudge, middle-class lady and occasionally, ‘blackened slave’.

Much of Cullwick and Munby’s fetishistic endeavours involved performance, staging, play-acting and even theatrical make-up in the ‘blacking up’ incidents. Another

²⁴ Andrea Beckman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.5.

²⁵ Whilst some may view the submissive partner as being vulnerable to *actual* sexual abuse and rape, the whole S/M lifestyle is predicated upon ‘safe’ words, trust and mutual consent. If rape were the real intention of a dominant partner, then there would little point in experiencing a *performance* or ‘game’ of submission; sadomasochism as pretence would not suffice.

²⁶ Beckman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion*, p.16.

such occurrence of theatrical staging was exhibited when Cullwick was photographed as a male chimneysweep.



Fig. 6, Cullwick as chimneysweep/slave (1862)

This photograph perfectly illustrates the excess of theatricality which was inherent in Munby and Cullwick's relationship. Cullwick, seated cross-legged on the floor and looking up in a submissive manner, depicts a figure that defies definition. With her head covered by a scarf her gender becomes ambiguous and although she is bare-breasted, her chest resembles over-developed male pectoral muscles which then are complemented by her truly muscular arms. The chain, seen clearly, represents her status as the slave and the colouring of her body which accentuates her muscularity symbolises racial associations of oppression by a 'Master' tyrant. In fact, Munby notes in his diary of 9 August 1862 that 'she was taken in [that] black and forlorn condition, crouching on the ground at my feet – I doing my best to look down upon her like a

tyrant! That was for the “contrast”: Contrast indeed – but which the nobler?’²⁷ Munby himself emphasises the significance of the ‘contrast’ between the submissive chimneysweep-cum-slave, whom Cullwick represents, compared to his own pretended role of tyrant and master (whose shoe can be seen in the bottom right corner). Yet, this photograph also highlights the triplicate of iconographies which have coalesced in their relationship. Cullwick’s ‘likeness’ shows how the ideologies of gender, class, and race have become amalgamated to form an exaggerated persona who on the face of it is oppressed through being racially different, gender transgressive and socially inferior. The photograph clearly displays both Cullwick’s body and the fetishised symbols of her ‘slave’ status, namely the chain, padlock and the leather wrist strap. ‘In Cullwick’s slave-band’, according to McClintock, ‘three of the formative contradictions of the Victorian era converge: between slave labour and wage labour; between the private realm of domesticity and the public realm of the market; and between metropolis and empire. In the fetish of the slave-band, race, class and gender overlap and contradict each other; the slave-band, like most fetishes, is overdetermined’.²⁸ The photograph demonstrates sadomasochistic power relations literally bared to all. However, such ‘acts’ of dominance and submission cannot possibly be taken as serious oppression; they are far too theatrical, as was much of Cullwick’s ‘subservience’ to Munby. It is pure performance and play-acting, as McClintock argues further, ‘with its emphasis on costumery, script and scene, S/M reveals that social order is unnatural, scripted and invented’.²⁹

The clearly ‘invented’ and performed scenes represent the nature of the power relations between Cullwick and Munby. Cullwick excelled at the role of ‘Slave’ to her

²⁷ Munby’s diary, 9 August 1862, in Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p.32.

²⁸ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.149.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

'Massa'; she subjugated herself through cleaning for him, bathing him, being photographed for him, dressing up in various guises for him and even ritually licking his boots clean. While this may seem a revolting 'act' to many people, Cullwick embraced yet another opportunity to overemphasise her symbolic and theatrical submission to Munby; she 'took Massa's boots off after I'd lick'd one of my own accord' (*DHC*:123-4). The boot-licking, chain, padlock and wrist strap all signify her staged position as property and chattel of her master; yet it is significant that after Cullwick and Munby were married in 1873 she no longer wore these symbols of slavery,³⁰ possibly due to the fact that she now had a wedding ring which represented the same thing but in a more real sense. In fact, Cullwick equated her chain and padlock to the commitment of marriage when she stated that 'I am his slave and he is my master freely given and freely received only for love and while I have the chains on I am sure nothing can part us and that is the same to us as marriage is to other folks' (*LD*:141). When Munby did produce a marriage licence, Cullwick was not particularly enamoured with the idea, because for her, it symbolised a very real and sanctified form of possession. Consequently, even after their marriage, Cullwick refused to relinquish her independence. While she did move into Munby's home, she still adamantly rejected the role of lady to which she was legally entitled. The theatrical episodes and scenes which dominated Cullwick's and Munby's relationship all but disappeared when they became a married couple; all of a sudden the dominance and submission role-playing had become a very real version of enforced subservience. Not that Cullwick ever let it impact on her own sense of independence. It is interesting to note that, once married, Munby attempted to persuade Cullwick more and more often to literally become the 'lady' she had previously imitated, yet Cullwick withdrew further and further from that

³⁰ Davidoff, 'Class and Gender', p.128.

lifestyle and even returned to the boot-licking she had previously performed. According to McClintock, Cullwick's 'theatrical displays of submission were a way of negotiating power over Munby as well as a means of gaining ritual power over her own very real social disempowerment. She clearly saw her "enslavement" as ceremonial rather than real – a symbolic gift to Munby that she could retract at any moment'.³¹ The power relations exhibited and made complex by the dichotomy of sadomasochism and through cross-class dressing, as well as cross-race dressing and cross-gender dressing, became even more confused. Who really was in control of whom, and how?

In many respects Cullwick was the ultimate 'master' of their relationship. Before meeting Munby she had seen a performance of Byron's *Sardanapalus* (1821), in which King Sardanapalus utterly dominates his favourite female slave Myrrha. This play had a profound and lasting effect on Cullwick; she noted, 'when I see that Myra [sic] as was the King's slave, you know, I was took with her!...if I was to love anyone, that's what I should like: for him to be above me, and me to be his slave, like Myra' (LD:33). From this excerpt it is clear to see that Cullwick already had in mind the concept of becoming a symbolic 'slave' to a masterful man, and as Atkinson argues, 'Arthur knew the plot of *Sardanapalus* but he did not know that for thirty-four years he had been playing Sardanapalus to her Myrrha' (LD:309). Cullwick was obviously delighted to find herself a gentleman Sardanapalus in Munby to whom she could be a Myrrha. Cullwick was insistent that her Sardanapalus would allow her to work slavishly and subserviently for him and in this respect she demonstrated her desire to remain free to contract herself and her labour out to whomever she chose. She wrote in her diary of 14 September 1873: 'I made up my mind that it was best & safest to be a slave to a gentleman, nor wife & equal to any vulgar man, still with the wish & determination to

³¹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.159.

be independent by working in service and without the slightest hope o' been rais'd in rank either in place or by being married' (*DHC:273*). From these examples it would be apparent that Cullwick was the instigator of the sadomasochistic elements of their performative relationship. She also had no burning desire to be married as that would impinge on her financial and social independence. 'Here was one of the paradoxes of their relationship', argues Davidoff, who moreover asserts that 'Cullwick was in many ways a more independent agent than Munby as she had supported herself from the age of eight while he was financially and in many ways still emotionally and socially dependent on his parents'.³² Unlike Sara Baartman, Cullwick was able to pick and choose her employers and the terms of her employment, whilst Munby had no such freedom. He was bound by his parents' financial support of him and had to submit to their will in regard to his life choices.

Likewise, Cullwick revelled in the role of slave to her Sardanapalus when she wrote in her diary on 31 May 1863 that 'I wouldn't get out of it if I could, nor change from being Massa's slave for anything else I know of. I've bin a slave now 9 years & worn the chains & padlocks 6 years' (*DHC:126*). Cullwick's self-determination to remain a complex version of a free 'slave' emphasises both her financial independence and also her independence of thought. Indeed, as Rust notes, 'to Cullwick, "slavery" becomes the equivalent of independence, and safety lies in the single working life'.³³ The very thought of being a married and leisurely lady appears to have filled Cullwick with abject terror. After all a lady was expected to behave, dress and act in a particularly idealised way that, whilst Cullwick was willing to occasionally act the part in a bit fun, was certainly not something she would wish a lifetime of. As Cullwick herself wrote, 'I

³² Davidoff, 'Class and Gender', pp.124-5.

³³ Rust, 'In the Humble Service', p.105.

like the life I lead...better even than a married life, for I never feel as if I could make my mind up to that, it's too much like being a woman' (*LD*:189). Cullwick thus constructed in her own mind her ideal life and it had nothing to do with social ideals of femininity, upper-class dress and behaviour, or even marriage as she equated such concepts with restriction and oppression. Thus, marriage became abject in Cullwick's opinion, which ultimately saved her from the terrors of femininity, while everything else in their relationship was purely performance and play. Dawkins points out that such a 'refusal of the implication of marriage occurs as a resistance on four fronts: a denial of aspirations above a servant's station in life, a rejection of the constrictions and disguise that passing for a lady entails, a fundamentally cynical and critical attitude towards marriage and a determination to be independent and self-supporting'.³⁴ Even though she eventually agreed to marry Munby, Cullwick reserved the right to maintain her own financial, psychological and gender autonomy when she stated, 'I will be your servant to my life's end and I hope you'll never take me out again as a lady. It makes me miserable, I feel so useless and idle!' (*LD*:268). Their relationship, and indeed Cullwick herself, contain complex, and often conflicting, dichotomies of control and freedom, subservience and power, submission and domination. Therefore, 'oppression and liberation', argues Stanley, 'aren't absolute states, or mutually exclusive ones. They co-exist, together at the same time in the same places and situations and in the same persons' (*DHC*:19). Munby, though, believed that Cullwick's submission to his control was due to his special training and lessons in humility and Cullwick reflected this idea in her diary entry of 31 May 1863 when she wrote that 'he has taught me, though it's been difficult to learn thoroughly, the beauty in being nothing but a common drudge & to bear being despised by others what don't have to work the same way' (*DHC*:125).

³⁴ Dawkins, 'The Diaries and Photographs of Hannah Cullwick', p.164.

However, Munby felt that she had learnt the lessons too well and that the play-acting and performing had to come to an end. In his diary Munby despaired of the situation he thought he had created: 'it is high time that all this discipline should cease but I have no way of ending it!' (*LD:72*) and 'it is my fault of other years, hard to be amended now, that this sweet soul has been brought so low in her own eyes. That wasn't what I meant by those strange trials' (*LD:228*). To Cullwick, her servitude to Munby was simply an extension of her working life, but taken to excess. No matter how much Munby may have admonished himself for his instigation of the trials, and no matter how much he wished he could control Cullwick's obvious zeal for dirty work, ultimately Cullwick refused to accept or even to acknowledge that she could in any way be on a social par with him. As Munby noted in a diary entry of 21 June 1876, 'all this year Cullwick has been receding from the possibilities of ladyhood, and becoming more and more what she used to be – a servant, and nothing else...she will not appear with me anywhere as an equal' (*LD:263*).

The one area where Munby did have control was in fact in the diaries themselves. The incident of the excised pages about his training programme proves that ultimately Munby was the editorial overseer of their production. He had the power to deface or even destroy all of the diaries and letters which Cullwick had written. It seems, though, that Munby simply wanted to obliterate the 'strange trials' which Cullwick submitted to. He asserts that 'all the excised passages in this and other volumes, had references, so far as I can remember, to my darling Cullwick, now my wife. They described the hours we spent together; and the training and teaching that I gave her; and the work often of the lowest and most servile kind' (*LD:59*). Whether he was embarrassed about his own involvement and performance in the ritualistic role-playing or whether he was ashamed of himself for instigating such practices in the first place is not clear; however, what we can assume is that whatever was the reasoning

behind the destruction of these pages, it was Munby who decided they should never be read. Cullwick had no control over her diaries after she had sent them or handed them to Munby. Rust also argues that ‘by reproducing her work in writing for Munby, Cullwick made her work Munby’s property. Thus, even though Cullwick was employed, “owned,” by someone else, since Munby owned her diaries – her re-presentation of her work – he positioned himself as Cullwick’s ultimate “owner”’.³⁵ However, I find this argument unconvincing for various reasons: firstly Cullwick could never be said to be ‘owned’; as I have argued previously, she refused to be controlled by either Munby or her employers in any real sense.³⁶ Her staunch independence and reluctance to get married suggest that she was well aware of her own freedom and resolved never to allow anyone to impinge on that. Secondly, Cullwick’s diaries are merely her ‘representations’ of her work, they are constructed, selected and assembled by Cullwick before Munby could read them. Thus, as the true ‘author’ of her diaries Cullwick retains the intellectual copyright in a sense and Munby could not control what was written. Although he did have the final editorial power, we find that Cullwick actually used her diaries as a method of manipulating and controlling their relationship.

In her diary writing Cullwick is able to relay her thoughts and emotions on given situations, therefore marking them as her own territory and gaining some control in their relationship by illustrating to Munby the impact that certain incidents and conversations had on her. In one particular entry, of 3 December 1872, she upbraided Munby for his thoughtlessness and disregard of her feelings. She wrote: ‘I couldn’t help telling him how he’d crush’d my spirit altogether & that I couldn’t bear for him to be cross with me

³⁵ Rust, ‘In the Humble Service’, p.100

³⁶ In one particular incident where Cullwick’s employer Miss Otway neglected to pay the wages owed, Cullwick confronted her and told her in no uncertain terms that ‘I should never be much obliged to her if she would give me some money...[and that it] was most disgraceful living with a lady and having to pawn my watch for one’s own dinner’ (*LD*:204). Cullwick left this employment shortly after.

– he mustn't, if he car'd anything for me. And I told him how he didn't seem to know how much I'd suffer'd, & so he couldn't tell how low I felt' (*DHC:257*). In this candid entry Cullwick shames Munby for his authoritarian behaviour. Although she was not afraid openly to speak of her disappointment about some of his actions and for the liberties he took, she knew that when reading the diary Munby would be taken aback by reading that his own behaviour had caused her so much suffering. Along with the various photographs, which were at times devised or instigated by Cullwick, her diary writing was a constant barometer through which Munby could judge his own conduct. As McClintock notes, Cullwick 'learned quickly to use her diary and her theatrical performances to manipulate Munby's desires and maintain control over him'.³⁷ Through her cross-class, cross-race and cross-gender dressing Cullwick could visually appeal to Munby, but it is through her written compositions that she could psychologically direct and influence Munby's emotions towards her.

Thus Cullwick in very minute ways was able to control Munby and his feeling through her written compositions. Along with the occasional admonishment, Cullwick also used her diary to appeal to Munby's fetishistic desire. She emphasised how many boots she cleaned, how dirty she became through her work and how much she enjoyed being a 'slave'. Therefore, as Barry Reay points out, Cullwick's diaries 'should not be read as a straightforward account of her life. They were part of Cullwick and Munby's "experiment", central to their disciplining, sadomasochistic relationship. She chronicled the minutiae, drudgery and dirtiness of her labour because her lover wanted to hear about it'.³⁸ Thus, in various ways Cullwick was able to appeal to, and attract Munby through her racial, class and gender performances, in life and in photographs, and then

³⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.146-7.

³⁸ Barry Reay, *Watching Hannah: Sexuality, Horror and Bodily De-formation in Victorian England* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p.69.

later she was able to manipulate his emotions through her nuanced and subtle insinuations in her letters and diary. At the same time, she became increasingly self-reflexive and self-aware. This is shown in the diary entries where initially Cullwick referred to herself in the lowercase 'i', but eventually this is replaced with the capital 'I'. With regard to diary writing though, Janice Bottoms notes of Alice James (sister to Henry), that 'if the first instinct of the diarist is towards freedom of expression, the second instinct is to retreat, for no sooner does pen touch paper than the writer becomes also a reader, and a complex of inhibitions and an inculcated self-consciousness come into play'.³⁹ Cullwick then, as Munby's 'slave', was in actuality an adept author who self-consciously created a 'Cullwick' that Munby would find irresistible, proved to be adroit at manipulation and utterly in control of her life, her work and her self-representation; a very different situation to what Sara Baartman faced through her self-representation as the 'Hottentot Venus'.

However, both Baartman and Cullwick have also been constructed and composed by other people, namely the historians, literary scholars and sociologists who have found their life and various personas fascinating. McClintock notes that Munby himself and his biographer, Derek Hudson, 'both portray Cullwick as little more than a cloddish, if charming, marionette, a curiosity trained, costumed and controlled by her "massa," lumbering through her awkward theatrical paces to indulge his pleasures'.⁴⁰ However, Cullwick, her diaries and her relationship with Munby have employed other authorial agendas. As Reay purports, such motivations on the part of various authors have been to explore,

³⁹ Janet Bottoms, 'Writing Herself: The Diary of Alice James', in Julia Swindells (Ed.), *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p.110.

⁴⁰ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.139.

the double life of a friend of Victorian ‘literary and artistic greats’ (Hudson), for ‘realistic’ representations of working women (Hiley), as an account of the interactions between sex and gender in Victorian England (Davidoff), as a documentary source for the life and attitudes of a domestic servant (Stanley), as a telling instance of the imbrications of race and empire in private and domestic interactions (Pollock and McClintock)...[and] for the rehabilitation of Munby as an English *flâneur* (Allen).⁴¹

Therefore Cullwick not only presents various ‘Hannahs’ herself through her multitude of class, race, and gender crossings, and their representations in both written and photographic form, but Cullwick has also been constructed variously as Munby’s ‘great experiment’,⁴² a perfect example of a Victorian maid servant (Atkinson), an interesting case study of fetishistic behaviour (McClintock), a proto-feminist (Stanley), an outright victim subjected to the unorthodox desires of a Victorian gent (Reay), and an icon of female strength and masterful control (Davidoff). Cullwick thus becomes a palimpsestic persona, onto which authorial desire and manipulation has been written. As Dawkins declares, ‘the sense of her as a historical person is an effect of the texts. Cullwick is produced in the reading of the archive’.⁴³

Nowhere is Cullwick more ‘produced’ and created than in the naming of her as ‘Hannah’. The use of the familiar forename collapses the distance between historical subject, academic/creative writer, and the reader. Whilst also being a marker of her lower social status (maids-of-all-work were often referred to by their first name only, or were even given a new name altogether), it likewise signifies an unrequited intimacy between the researcher and Cullwick herself. Invariably the historical investigations into Munby and Cullwick refer to Arthur Munby by his surname, the texts by Stanley (1984), Atkinson (2003), Davidoff (1979) and Mavor (1996), all refer to Cullwick as

⁴¹ Reay, *Watching Hannah*, p.10.

⁴² Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p.35.

⁴³ Dawkins, ‘The Diaries and Photographs of Hannah Cullwick’, p.155.

Hannah. There are, though, instances in which researchers use the formal, distanced and objective surname to identify Cullwick. For example, Barry Reay refers to her as Cullwick, apart from his titular employment of 'Watching Hannah' along with only occasional slippages into the less formal forename, and Heather Dawkins, writing in 1987, uses quotation marks to distinguish between 'Hannah' the persona, and Hannah Cullwick, the subject of enquiry. But one important lesson that we can learn from Cullwick and the appropriations of her and Munby is that the lapsing into the informal referents can lead down a slippery road that would clearly de-problematise our relationship to history by disintegrating the detachment between the present and the past, as well as between the researcher and the historical subject. Likewise, Reay's title of 'Watching Hannah' emphasises the voyeuristic pleasure which researchers experience during the investigation into their subject. But in this specific case the voyeurism is multi-layered and problematic in itself due to the fact that the reader is also implicated in this action. As Kate Mitchell notes, with regard to the relationship between history and memory, 'the (dis)remembered pieces of the past are reconstituted in and by the text, and also in the reader's imagination. The reader thus literally embodies (re-members) the re-imagined past'.⁴⁴ The reader is effectively 'watching' Reay, who is watching Munby, who is watching Cullwick. These layers of interpretation, while supposedly bringing Cullwick closer to the present reader, in actuality are creating further complexities in terms of selectivity and a lack of empirical objectivity much as we saw with the uses (and abuses) of James Barry as a historical subject in the previous chapter. These slippages into familiarity and intimacy with

⁴⁴ Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.7.

Cullwick are most clearly apparent in the paratextual employment of her photographic image.

Many of the investigations into the relationship between Munby and Cullwick have focused on the diaries themselves, yet the photographs are consistently employed as evidence to support the theories and perspectives of the individual researcher. In this way, Carol Mavor argues, ‘we perform a dialogue with these special photographs (and it usually has nothing to do with the original intentions behind the taking of the picture). What is no longer there performs us and we perform upon it’.⁴⁵ Likewise, the cover images of the texts also illustrate the way we perform upon the historical subject. Both texts (as well as Reay’s) use images of Cullwick but in very different ways.

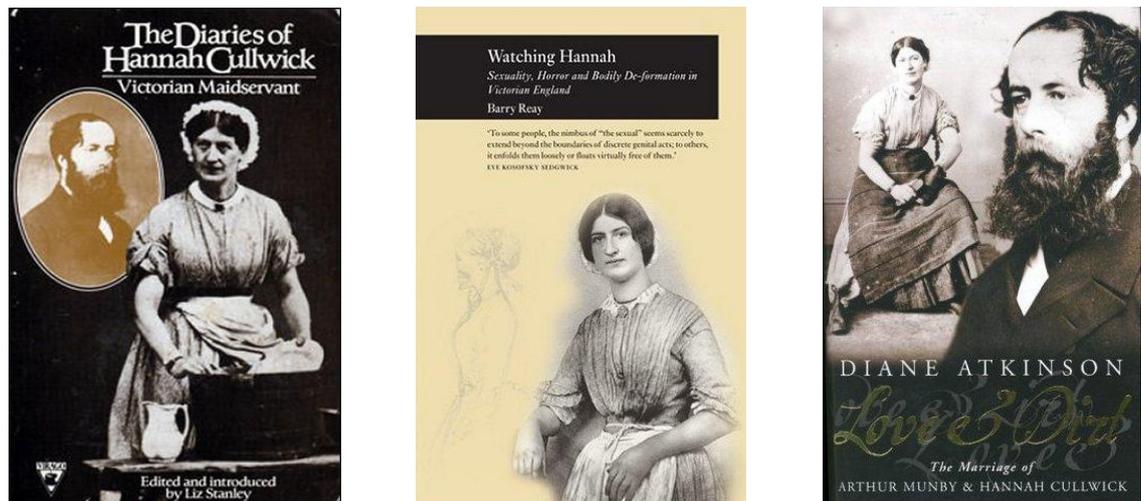


Fig.7, *Diaries of Hannah Cullwick*, *Watching Hannah*, and *Love and Dirt*.

Liz Stanley foregrounds an obviously hard-working Cullwick showing her bulging biceps, while the ghostly portrait of Munby literally seems to ‘oversee’ the task at hand. Barry Reay uses an image of a much younger, and more demure, Cullwick that is contrasted with a faint copy of Munby’s pencil sketch of Harriet Langdon whose face

⁴⁵ Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, p.4.

was ravaged by Lupus, representing the deformity and horror of his subtitle, and surprisingly, considering he is the main subject of enquiry, Munby's image does not figure at all. Diane Atkinson, though, foregrounds a looming portrait of Munby as an attempt to mark him as tyrant, while Cullwick scrubs boots in the background with biceps bulging yet again. Even in the metatexts exhibited by these covers, a dialogue between the researcher (or editor/publisher) and the historical subject is created and revealed. This is partly due to the richness of the archive in which these photographs were kept. But without the archival proof in the form of diaries, letters and photographs, their relationship and how they interacted, the life stories and compositions of Cullwick and Munby may well read like a dramatic play, such as *Sardanapalus*. In fact, as Cullwick herself pointed out, 'it's like a play only better nor all the plays that was ever wrote' (LD:249). The link between theatrical performance on-stage, the performance of the self and of the exaggeration of gender, class and race expectations as they are evidenced through the body directly relates to the exhibition and racial representation of Sara Baartman as the 'Hottentot Venus'.

Venus in the Afterlife: Sara Baartman's Acts of Race

Saartjie, or Sara, Baartman⁴⁶ was born in South Africa in the 1770s⁴⁷ and she has come to symbolise many different things to various groups of people. Her childhood in South

⁴⁶ The name Saartjie is a Dutch diminutive meaning 'little Sara', which once was used as a term of endearment but now seems rather derogatory and patronising. See Holmes, *HV*, p.xiii. Historical evidence shows no other 'real' name for Sara Baartman, although she was christened on 1 December 1811 in Manchester Cathedral. See Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.107. Therefore, throughout this chapter (and with an awareness of the colonial implications of naming as an instrument of domination) I shall refer to the historical Baartman by her surname, whereas the fictionalised persona will be referred to by her chosen christened name of Sara.

⁴⁷ Crais and Scully in their text, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus*, have provided the most detailed and convincing evidence for placing Baartman's birth in the 1770s, whilst many other explorations into her life often assume that she was born later. For example Holmes, in her biography, posits that Baartman was born in 1789 but does not offer any proof of such a date. (*HV*:xiii)

Africa would have consisted of the multitude of influences and conflicts between her Khoekhoe or Khoisan heritage and traditions and the European colonial way of life that had infiltrated South Africa and which she witnessed every day. After losing her father in a settlement raid, it seems that Baartman worked as a domestic servant for a variety of colonial and 'free black' employers. However, her status at the time rendered her as little more than a chattel that could be bought and sold at will, and at least once Baartman was included in a Will of Testament and her service was passed to the inheritor.⁴⁸ In 1799 she was working for Pieter Cesars, but within four years she had moved, as a servant and possibly wet-nurse, into the household of his brother Hendrick and his wife Anna Staal. Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully claim that in order to pay off his debts Hendrick Cesar persuaded Baartman to 'show' herself to the sick patients at the military hospital and it is during this time that they presume Alexander Dunlop, a Scottish Military Surgeon, encountered her.⁴⁹ A plan was hatched between Dunlop and Cesar to take Baartman to London and exhibit her as a specimen of the 'Hottentot' people.⁵⁰

The 'showing', or exhibiting, of indigenous peoples, persons with a unique skill, or even those with a physical disability, was a common occurrence in Britain in the nineteenth century. As Nadja Durbach observes, 'freak shows reached their zenith at the height of Britain's modern and imperial self-fashioning'.⁵¹ In Chase-Riboud's novel the freak show is ostensibly a theatre of exploitation and commodification where 'barkers

⁴⁸ See Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus*, pp.20-4, 32, 38-40, 46-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.50-1.

⁵⁰ The Dutch word 'Hottentot' translates to mean 'stutterer'. It is an offensive term that derives from the colonial inability to understand the complex Khoisan language which was spoken with a series of clicks and sounds that the colonisers found incomprehensible and, therefore, 'uncivilised'. See Chase-Riboud, *HVN*, 'The Heroine's Note', n.p.

⁵¹ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p.2.

and animal trainers pleaded for...two shillings or three shillings, proposing every deformity, accident of birth, human degradation, eccentric skill and degenerative disease on earth for the delectation of the British public' (*HVN*:110). Here, Chase-Riboud is effectively *selling* Baartman and the idea of the Hottentot Venus to the contemporary readership by configuring her as another 'freak' to be historically 'prodded' and examined. Likewise, Holmes too engages in commodifying Baartman through configuring her not only as a historical subject, but also in simplistic terms as an oppressed victim, which denies her any agency and elides the complexities of Baartman's life. The particular 'fascination' Baartman has exerted on us was (and still is) two-fold; she was an exotic female from a dark, distant continent and she also had rather large buttocks. Her 'condition' was labelled 'steatopygia' and many nineteenth-century scientists, physicians, and commentators equated her large buttocks to her race and a sign of an inherently atavistic, sexually voracious nature. Janell Hobson makes the important point that Baartman did not 'suffer' from steatopygia in the medical sense but that 'she does...suffer under the dominant cultural gaze that defines her as an anomaly, a freak, oversexed and subhuman'.⁵² There was a great interest, among scientists and the public alike, in any person who differed from the white, eurocentric ideal of physical appearance. In the early nineteenth-century race to prove the hierarchy of life in the 'Great Chain of Being', anthropologists, ethnographers, and natural scientists drew comparisons with indigenous populations in all colonised areas and their relation to the animal kingdom. In their mission to evidence the link between black people and apes they were in fact attempting to justify the colonial regime of oppression and exploitation by figuring the foreign body as bestial, 'uncivilised', 'abhorrent', and in obvious need

⁵² Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p.6.

of control. As Crais and Scully attest, ‘the Hottentot Venus confirmed to Europeans the inferiority of the Hottentot and people with dark skins. It also confirmed the inequality and unfitness of all women, for women were closer to nature, and the Hottentot Venus was closest of all’.⁵³

In the body of Baartman this colonial endeavour was also linked to the concept of the *Lusus Naturae*. As Robert Bogdan notes,

Lusus Naturae, or ‘freaks of nature’, were of interest to Physicians for whom the field of teratology, the study of these so-called monsters, had become a fad. To the joy (and often at the instigation) of showmen, debates raged among scientists and laypersons alike as to whether a particular exhibit actually represented a new species or was simply a *lusus naturae*.⁵⁴

Baartman’s enlarged buttocks and elongated labia⁵⁵ were the evidence with which scientists and showmen throughout her life used to exploit her variously as a ‘freak’ to be displayed, a prostitute to be pimped, a specimen to be examined, a symbol of degeneration to be excised, and since her death, a political tool to be bartered for. Baartman was exhibited as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ in England and France from 1810 until her death in Paris between 29 and 31 December 1815.⁵⁶ Immediately after her death was discovered, her body was taken to the laboratory of George Cuvier, an eminent scientist at the time, who then proceeded to examine and dissect her body. A cast was made of her body and subsequently painted, then her genitals were removed and placed in a specimen jar, and her skeleton was cleaned of tissue, fixed together and

⁵³ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus*, p.3.

⁵⁴ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp.6-7.

⁵⁵ Often referred to as the ‘Hottentot Apron’ it was a supposed form of genital mutilation which apparently enhanced the pleasure a man obtained during penetrative intercourse (*HVN*:22).

⁵⁶ As was the case with Sara Baartman’s birth date and real name, the historical evidence becomes vague as to the precise date of her death. See Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus*, pp.138-9, for the most convincing argument as to why evidence is so scarce.

displayed along with the body cast in various museums in France.⁵⁷ In the 1990s campaigns by the South African government were made to repatriate Baartman's remains and she was finally buried on 9 August 2002 to coincide with Indigenous People's Day and Women's Day.⁵⁸ Yet, since her death, and into the twenty-first century, Baartman is still being examined, displayed, and exploited as an example of 'freakishness', a racial and sexual victim, and a political symbol.⁵⁹ 'Whether she was physical fact or theatrical fiction was a mystery popular audiences had to decide for themselves' (*HV*:138) and still do, to this day. Yet, Holmes's comment, and entire biography for that matter, is couched in terms which conflate Baartman (the physical fact) and Sara (the theatrical fiction), thus problematising our understanding of the historical past along with the appropriation and commodification of that past. Are we, as postmodern consumers, being 'sold' the *myth* of the Hottentot Venus or are we being shown Baartman? In both Chase-Riboud's novel and Holmes's biography the answer is not at all clear and in many respects it is this blurred boundary between the authentic and the imagined which, when linked to contemporary consumerism and commodification, emphasise the fictionalising potential for exploiting the past and its subjects.

Like Cullwick, Baartman was commodified (created, bought, marketed, and sold) in a variety of ways. Although Chase-Riboud in her biofictional novel has the character of Ssehura (Sara) declare that 'I cannot sell myself...You can't buy me. I'm not for sale' (*HVN*:68), throughout her life in South Africa, England, and France, Baartman was literally, and figuratively, bought and sold as a chattel. In Chase-

⁵⁷ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus*, pp.139-42.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.163. See also Holmes (*HV*:176).

⁵⁹ I am acutely aware that in my own analysis of Sara Baartman and her life, I am also 'exploiting' her body for my own particular agenda, however, my analysis is by no means a simple voyeuristic dissection of her body, but rather an exploration into how she was, and still is, commodified, and I also investigate her performance of her racial and sexual self on and off the stage.

Riboud's novel Sara is exhibited to an eager audience who 'did not want a statue of Venus, but a heaving, stomping, undulating, living Venus, with beastly breasts, beastly hips, beastly eyes and above all a beastly face that held no beauty for them' (*HVN*:5). In the fictional text, through her performance of racial and sexual stereotypes, Sara is effectively marketing a pre-conceived and racially constructed idea of a 'Hottentot', and through such a display of expectation is perpetuating that very myth and stereotype. In many ways, it is necessary for Sara to 'prostitute' herself and her body. She is hoping to capitalise on the concept of the racial and sexual Other. For her 'act' she receives wages, meagre as they are, but it is a financial reward nonetheless. However, no matter how much Sara may profit from her own exhibition, it is merely a drop in the ocean compared to the various men in her life that exploit her. Unlike Cullwick who retained control and financial independence of her body and labour, Sara had to rely on her owner/employer's business acumen for her monetary income.

Chase-Riboud creates an incident in which Sara, while still in South Africa, is passed between a variety of these 'employers' and eventually to a 'Wesleyan missionary, the Reverend Cecil Freehoueland' (*HVN*:18). Whilst this example is fictitious, it does highlight how indigenous people were exploited by colonial migrants. As Holmes notes, 'before 1809, there was no legal wage structure for Khoisan domestic servants and they were usually absorbed into the households on an all-found shelter and food basis' (*HV*:26). Although somewhat simplified, the Holmes quotation concerning the selling of servants is not far from the actuality of Baartman's life in the Cape. She worked as a servant for David Fourie, Cornelius Muller, Pieter Cesars, Jan Michiel Elzer and Hendrick Cesars.⁶⁰ It was during the period she was working for Hendrick Cesars that her exploitation took on a more comprehensive, sexual and racially

⁶⁰ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, pp.20-50.

determined course. According to Chase-Riboud's novel it is Alexander Dunlop who states to Cesars that 'her shape is so extraordinary as to be absolutely freakish...you would make a fortune' (*HVN:57*). Baartman's exploitation, and indeed her own self-commodification as an 'erotic entertainer' in the municipality of Cape Town,⁶¹ was thus already established before she even left the shores of South Africa. Mansell Upham goes further and posits that 'Baartman was possibly even associated with, if not a member or "disciple" of, the first theatrical troupe at the Cape started by impresario Charles-Marthurin Villet (1178-1856)',⁶² thus, suggesting a link between her 'show' and its development when she reaches London.

The exhibition of 'freaks', animals and other curiosities was not a new phenomenon when Baartman arrived in the metropolis of London in July 1810. Many showmen and impresarios had already established a growing market of extraordinary 'creatures' to be viewed by the crowds, hungry for entertainment and thrills from the exotic and unusual to the deformed and disabled. Many of these impresarios actually 'invented' the 'freaks' to be witnessed in their displays. If an act was not exotic enough, then tales of ferocious lands, weird 'accidents' of nature, and abnormal skills were manufactured in order to make them appear so. As Bogdan argues, 'showmen fabricated freaks' backgrounds, the nature of their conditions, the circumstances of their current lives, and other personal characteristics. The actual life and circumstances of those being exhibited were replaced by purposeful distortions designed to market the exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak'.⁶³ The concept was simple; the more unusual the

⁶¹ See Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, pp.50-1 and Mansell Upham, 'From the Venus Sickness to the Hottentot Venus: Saartje Baartman and the Three Men in Her Life: Alexander Dunlop, Hendrick Caesar and Jean Riaux' Part 1, *Quarterly Bulletin NLSA* (Vol. 61, No.1, 2007), p.16.

⁶² Mansell Upham, 'From the Venus Sickness to the Hottentot Venus: Saartje Baartman and the Three Men in Her Life: Alexander Dunlop, Hendrick Caesar and Jean Riaux' Part 1, *Quarterly Bulletin NLSA* (Vol. 61, No.1, 2007), p.16.

⁶³ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p.95.

display, the more people would be willing to part with their cash for a glimpse into a world that they personally were thankful was distant, and most decidedly ‘Other’, from themselves.

The thrill that these paying ‘punters’, ‘marks’, and consumers obtained was due in part to this Othering process, yet contained within that difference was the implication of the illicit, the erotic exotic – the exototic, and the pornographic. This is exactly what appealed to the London audiences when Baartman was advertised as a new sensation. As the character of Robert Wedderburn, in Chase-Riboud’s novel, exclaims, ‘the public loves it, cheap thrills, pornography...it beats two-headed gorillas or an albino rhinoceros any day! This kind of exploitation has a sleazy life of its own, borne upwards by the ignorance and intolerance of the English’ (*HVN*:118). The fame of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ persona that Baartman performed was created out of the imagined notions that existed in Europe concerning the sexual excess and exoticism of the racially different female. The ‘Hottentot Venus’ was often marketed in pamphlets and advertising posters. Baartman could not escape the bondage she had been subjected to, but neither could she avoid images of that very subjugation, because ‘on shop-fronts, street corners and newspaper stalls she saw posters bearing the image of her stage self, reflected back at her, vivid with aquatint, larger than life’ (*HV*:75).



Fig. 8, 'Sartjee, The Hottentot Venus. Now Exhibiting in London' (1822)

It is clear from this nineteenth-century advertising poster that Baartman was viewed as the 'exotic' Other, due to the tribal wear and adornments, but also as the hypersexual, monstrously 'erotic' Other, reflected in the angle and centrality of her enlarged buttocks in the picture. This poster depicts the imagined, the performed, and the constructed African 'Venus' that nineteenth-century London crowds flocked to see. In a similar fashion Holmes recreates this image on the paratextual cover of her semi-fictionalised biography. In (re)printing the aquatint Holmes is perpetuating the myth of the Hottentot Venus as a sensational 'freak' to be examined and explored in the twenty-first century. Such a cynical move to 'capture' both Baartman and contemporary attention on the bookshelves is surely another, but more blatant, commodification of her.

By the time Baartman arrived in Paris in September 1814, the image and her reputation as the 'Hottentot Venus' had preceded her. As Sara narrates in Chase-Riboud's novel, 'I was a female who was the missing link between beast and man, a wonder of nature created only for the delectation of discovery by hordes of paying Parisian customers, who for three francs could, from a distance, contemplate the form and color of monstrosity' (*HVN*:5). Likewise, the fictional and biographical

explorations by Holmes and Chase-Riboud offer a similar distance (albeit historical rather than spacial) with which to ‘view’ the ‘Hottentot Venus’. In twenty-first century marketing terminology, her USP (unique selling point) was both her erotic shape and her exotic colour. In the advertisement poster both the form and skin tone of Baartman’s body were combined to produce an exemplar of the Dark Continent’s ‘hypersexual’ and ‘swarthy’ inhabitants that had been imagined by European minds. Baartman’s shape and colour were just as much a fascination for the natural scientists, ethnographers and anthropologists as they were for the thrill seekers. When in Paris she was brought to Cuvier’s attention. Cuvier, along with his colleagues, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Henri-Marie Ducrotay de Blainville, were keen to understand the physiology of the Hottentot people and were particularly curious about the famous ‘Hottentot Apron’. These scientists attempted to prove that the Hottentot people were the ‘missing link’ between ape and man in the evolutionary chain. As Holmes notes, they viewed, presented, and promoted, Baartman as

a ‘perfect example’ of her tribe while simultaneously differing ‘greatly in character from her people’. Saartjie was marketed, once again, as being both typical and unique. In fact she captured the essence of contemporary Parisian entertainment: a compound of science, phantasmagoria, fantasy and curiosity. (*HV*:123).

Equally, Holmes and Chase-Riboud capture the ‘essence’ of postmodern concerns and concepts of racial, sexual and gendered difference. But in doing so they re-package Baartman as an entertainment commodity and tap into the contemporary desire for sexual fantasy, voyeuristic curiosity and phantasmagorical history. Chase-Riboud, though, does also demonstrate how a historical subject can be utilised in order to make a political statement about contemporary racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Baartman was eventually brought to the Jardin des Plantes, by her then ‘owner’ Jean Reaux, an animal exhibitor, where Cuvier, Saint-Hilaire and de Blainville proceeded to examine her, as she stood naked⁶⁴ before an audience of scientists and artists. The artists were employed to draw, paint, and sculpt likenesses of Baartman for future reference, while the scientists debated over her bodily shape and the reasons for its ‘unique’ physiology.⁶⁵ Aside from the fact that she was naked, the ‘scientific’ exhibition had much in common with the popular entertainment shows she was subjected to on a daily basis.

Both the ‘freak show’ exhibition and the scientific lecture theatre required Baartman to display herself for a curious and titillated audience, and both expected to witness the imagined ‘Hottentot Venus’ they had already created in their minds. The links between scientific examination and freak show display are numerous. Both revolve around presentation for the sake of curiosity and both include a high element of exploitation. Indeed, as Bogdan notes, ‘the use of the word museum in the title of many freak shows attests to the association of this form of entertainment with natural science...The linking of freak exhibits with science made the attractions more interesting, less frivolous to puritanical antientertainment sentiments and more believable’.⁶⁶ Yet the scientific form of display also makes the scientific exploitation of Baartman just another ‘freak show’ but in the disguise of scientific advancement. In Chase-Riboud’s novel *Sara* may seem initially comforted by the idea that her new ‘audience was not the braying, giggling, merry mob of Piccadilly. This was the intelligentsia born of the Age of Enlightenment: medical doctors, anatomists,

⁶⁴ She was naked barring a small handkerchief, to cover her genitalia, which she resolutely refused to relinquish. See (*HV*:142); Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.135. Also fictionalised in (*HVN*:229).

⁶⁵ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.135.

⁶⁶ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p.107.

paleontologists, alienists, naturalists, evolutionists' (*HVN*:281), but she fails to grasp that there is very little difference in the kinds of exploitation she experiences. Until, that is, de Blainville states the connection between science and show business, when he tells Sara that 'this is no different from your circus performances. I've paid my money, now I want my show!' (*HVN*:247). In the scientific lecture theatre of the Jardin des Plantes Sara Baartman is simply another 'freak' to be examined, another specimen of curiosity, and ultimately, another commodity to be used, but this time for 'intellectual' gain and reputation enhancement.

Even after her death Baartman could not avoid the stares, gawps and gasps of the curious and, as Holmes dramatically states, 'thenceforward she would remain permanently in the public gaze for two centuries' (*HV*:115). On her death in late December 1815, her body was taken back to the Jardin des Plantes, where Cuvier, Saint-Hilaire and de Blainville finally had the opportunity to examine her in minute detail. The 'Apron' she had so resolutely avoided showing was now available for the delectation of the scientific community. The act of incision by the dissecting blade can be conceptualised as a scientific form of rape and the 'Hottentot Venus' was literally laid out for all of the scientists to see. The exterior of her body, which was once the most fascinating phenomenon in London and Paris, was now supplemented by the exploration of the interior. Very much like nineteenth-century Africa itself, Baartman was a curio, a commodity, and an exotic land to be explored, conquered, and abused. Her body took on further layers of commodification as the autopsy itself in the novel, Heilmann and Llewellyn contend, became a 'public performance of an erotic act undertaken on an exotic subject, the object of manifold fantasies'.⁶⁷ Likewise, when a full body cast was made of her form immediately after her death, it rendered her shape

⁶⁷ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.128.

as a permanent *objet d'art*. This cast, according to Hobson, reminds 'us of her ultimate powerlessness in death, when she could no longer refuse the persistent curiosity of those scientists who wanted to unveil her interior body'.⁶⁸ She remained a commodity to be viewed by the customers and patrons of the museum of Jardin des Plantes until 1937, when she was moved and once again was on display in the Musée de l'Homme until she was moved yet again in 1994 to the Musée d'Orsay.⁶⁹ In Chase-Riboud's novel the ghost of Sara gains some form of fictionalised post-mortem agency by continuing the narration of the story and states that this kind of exhibition in the various museums of France was 'no freak show. I am on display without compensation or compassion, in the name of all mankind and the great Chain of Being' (*HVN*:285). Chase-Riboud uses Sara's living-dead voice in order to create a sense of the past in the present. In an interview she notes that 'very often my characters are remembering past lives in the present tense'.⁷⁰ Unlike Holmes's biography which speaks *for* Baartman after her death, Chase-Riboud engages with what Mitchell describes as 'subversive function, disrupting and diverting the gaze of traditional histories'.⁷¹

Baartman was commodified even further, though, when during the dissection Cuvier removed a sizeable portion of her anatomy that incorporated her genitalia and she remained a commodity due to the simple fact that Cuvier then proceeded to publish his theories and findings concerning Baartman, the 'Hottentot' and the 'Apron'. The story of Baartman as an article of trade does not end there, however, as Crais and Scully assert, for 'in the 1980s the Hottentot Venus returned, as a symbol not of sexual excess

⁶⁸ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, p.5.

⁶⁹ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.142.

⁷⁰ Suzette A. Spencer, 'On Her Own Terms: An Interview with Barbara Chase-Riboud', *Callaloo*, Vol.32, No.3 (2009), p.743.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p.6.

⁷² Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.3.

and racial inferiority but of all the terrible things the West has done to others'.⁷² Feminist groups argued that Baartman stood for all the abuses suffered by all women, while the anti-racist movement claimed her as the exemplar of ethnic injustice. Thus, as Holmes contends, 'fittingly, the end of apartheid in South Africa was the crucial turning-point in Saartjie's afterlife' (*HV*:169). Post-apartheid, free South Africa claimed Baartman as a lost foremother and, therefore, 'in formally claiming the right of possession to Saartjie's remains, Mandela declared the new state's commitment to honouring her as a heroic ancestor' (*HV*:170). Yet, we see once again that Baartman had not only become a political tool to be debated over (as she was in the Paris lecture theatre in 1815), she was also the source of further financial opportunity. In total the estimated repatriation, burial service and memorialisation costs (provided by the Department of Arts and Cultures) amounted to 10,350,000 South African Rand.⁷³ Although this may seem to be the end of Baartman's 'story', she does, in fact, continue to be commodified by contemporary academics, authors, and artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as do Cullwick and her famous diaries.

Baartman, along with Cullwick, has also been a conduit for exploring our own concerns regarding femaleness, femininity, and sexuality. As Sadiya Qureshi notes about Baartman, 'the movement to reclaim her physically is metaphorically paralleled by the movement to reclaim her image, as black artists are beginning to explore representations of their own sexuality in the modern media through work evoking the infamous breasts and buttocks'.⁷⁴ Baartman's shape became the 'the pre-eminent icon of atavistic sexuality in nineteenth-century European art and literature, from Zola to Baudelaire, Manet to Picasso' (*HV*:161). The various depictions of the hypersexual,

⁷² Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.155.

⁷⁴ Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman', p.233.

exotic Other were simply another method of commodifying Baartman after her death. Whether such images and creations contained within them portrayals of enlarged buttocks, dark skin, or a mysterious erotic allure, the result is still the same as it was in London in 1810; the ‘Hottentot Venus’ is an *imagined* erotic fantasy, because as Nicolas Tiedeman says in Chase-Riboud’s novel, ‘we invented her, made her what we wanted and expected her to be’ (*HVN*:300). In many ways this invention of Baartman is still occurring; each historian, sociologist, creative writer, poet, and academic is creating a Hottentot Venus to suit their own political agenda. For example, Chase-Riboud employs the character of Ssehura to narrate Baartman’s life and post-mortem thoughts concerning nineteenth and twenty first-century racial prejudice. Holmes, though, who names her subject of enquiry, as was the case with Cullwick, as the informal and intimate ‘Saartjie’, speaks for Baartman in order to elucidate the racial oppression she suffered. Ultimately, Baartman represents the epitome of a marketable product: her body, her image, and her story have been utilised to create the imagined, the constructed, and the performed ‘Hottentot Venus’.

Baartman’s success as a commodity, though, is largely due to her unflinching performance of her race and sexuality both on and off the stage. The stage looms large even in factual accounts of her life; thus, Crais and Scully’s use of a theatrical list of ‘Dramatis Personae’ at the start of their biography, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus* (2009), suggests that everything in Baartman’s life was a performance. Crais and Scully use such a technique to illustrate the performative aspect of both Baartman’s exhibition and their own investigation. Chase-Riboud openly portrays her account of Baartman as an imaginative exploration while Holmes attempts to present a purely ‘factual’ biography and fails to acknowledge the fictional and theatrical elements of her approach to biography. The opening of Holmes’s text, though, does confirm the theatricality pertaining to Baartman’s story, as the ‘Hottentot Venus emerged from

behind a crimson velvet curtain, stepped out onto the three-foot-high stage in pointed green slippers adorned with black silk bows and surveyed her London audience with a bold stare. Her high cheekbones and dramatic greasepaint-and-soot make-up gave her a prophetic, enigmatic look' (*HV*:1). Here we clearly see the attributes which appealed to the viewing public. The 'Hottentot Venus' is presented as 'enigmatic' through her adornment of make-up that is constituted of grease and soot. Like Cullwick, who would daub herself in soot and shoeblack, Baartman emphasised her exotic 'blackness' by exaggerating her skin colour.⁷⁵ In order to draw the curious crowds, the 'Hottentot Venus' advertising had to proclaim Baartman as an exemplar of the Khoisan people. Similarly, contemporary historical biography and biographical fiction rely on the theatricality of their subject; where they falls short of facts, they create them, modify them and replace them with sensationalist or freakish narratives that serve to illustrate further the 'Otherness' of the Victorians.

In Chase-Riboud's novel the character of Nicholas Tiedeman ponders the important question: why is it 'that white freaks are always exhibited as oddities, the exception that proves the rule, while black freaks, on the contrary, are exhibited as *typical* of their race?' (*HVN*:302). In Tiedeman's question we find the crux of the matter regarding Baartman's exploitation and performance – the 'freakishness' in itself is not a strong enough marketing strategy; she must also be the example, the specimen, from the Dark Continent that has never been seen before. Yet contained within that concept is the idea that *because* she is a black Khoisan woman she is, by nineteenth-century definitions, already a freak, an abnormality, an Other. However, Holmes declares that

⁷⁵ Whilst Baartman may have been among the first indigenous people to perform for European audiences, she was certainly not the last. Many others followed in her wake, including: 'Sámi ("Laplanders", 1822), South Americans (1822), Esquimaux (c.1820s), Native Americans (1840s), San ("Bushmen", 1847), Aztecs (1853), African "Earthmen" (1853), and Zulus (1853)', in Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman', p.238.

‘in an African context her build was unremarkable, but Dunlop believed that unfamiliarity could make her extraordinary in European eyes; her image might be tailored to fulfil European fantasies about “Hottentots”’ (*HV*:46). Here, Holmes marks Baartman as a victim to the machinations of male overlords and appears to neglect to mention Baartman’s own entertainment career and involvement in the creation of her act. Whilst in Cape Town Baartman would engage in showing injured sailors, at the local hospital, her extraordinary body, so she was already familiar with self-commodification. When in London, the ‘unfamiliarity’ of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ did play some part in the marketing of Baartman, but it was the construction, tailoring, and, indeed, stage-setting that were the main instruments which would ‘turn her into that “subject worthy of attention”’.⁷⁶ In fact, Holmes’s own rendering of Baartman as a ‘subject worthy of attention’ is similarly constructed and tailored with marketable potential as a foremost consideration. In Chase-Riboud’s novel such stage-setting is wrought with openly dramatic effect when Henry Dunlop, one of Sara’s ‘owners’, narrates that ‘I said nothing about a cage, but it was already in my mind...the setting, the cruelty, the drama’ (*HVN*:59). In the novel the emphasis for Dunlop is clearly in the ‘cruelty’ and the ‘drama’ of the spectacle, and that is precisely the draw for many of the paying customers who eagerly go to witness the exhibition. The paratextual cover images of *Hottentot Venus* also act as metatext to infer such a setting and the fascination it would cause.

⁷⁶ ‘Letter from H. Cesar’, *Morning Post*, 23 October 1810, p.4. Quoted in Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.72. They also note that ‘Hendrick Cesars was illiterate. [Therefore] it was highly likely that Dunlop wrote the letter’, p.194, n.30.

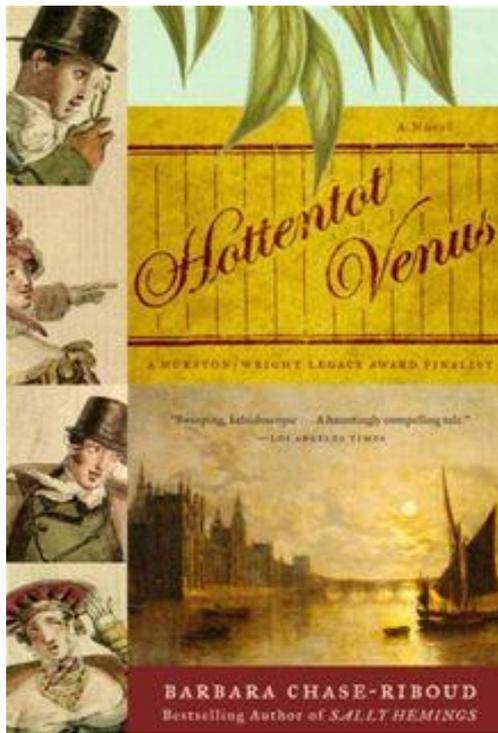


Fig. 9, Cover image of *Hottentot Venus: A Novel*.

The cover of the novel depicts a portrait scene of nineteenth-century London along with four patrons of the exhibit enjoying the performance and the display of this ‘rarity’. Yet it is the seemingly innocuous leaves and yellow box (overwritten with the title) which hold the greatest meaning. The yellow box, which literally contains the titular ‘Hottentot Venus’, represents the cage in which Baartman/Sara is displayed. During her performances Baartman was caged like a wild animal, thus adding to the ‘ferocious nature’ she was assumed to possess, but she was also psychologically behind bars, as she saw no apparent alternative to her subjugation and imprisonment. The leaves on the cover are likewise a subtle representation of implications within the story of Baartman. The leaves metaphorically portray the verdant fertility and abundance of both Baartman/Sara and her homeland of Africa, both of whom are subjected to the whims, designs, and symbolic rape by Europe. The peering, leering freak show patrons on the cover act as a mirror to our contemporary desire for the shocking, the scandalous and the freak and as Heilmann and Llewellyn point out, the cover ‘also implicates us, the

reader, in this appropriatory gaze, hinting at our own complicity in processes of objectification and commodification'.⁷⁷

Along with the setting in which Sara is placed, her dress and adornments are equally important for the correct and 'authentic' performance. Like Cullwick's case, the importance of dress, make-up and play-acting are fundamental to the supposed 'authenticity' of a class or race performance. In Chase-Riboud's novel the 'Hottentot Venus' is

exhibited in an eight-by-twelve-foot bamboo cage just high enough for me to stand and almost naked, shivering in my apron of pearls and feathers, my leggings of dried entrails, my painted face, my leather mask, my dyed and braided hair, my doeskin red gloves, my sheepskin *lappa* slung over my shoulder, my necklace of shimmering glass and shells, my crown of feathers, my cowrie seed earrings. (*HVN*:4)

While the 'Hottentot Venus' is staged in the novel, so too is Baartman the subject staged for contemporary readers. The pearls, feathers, face-paint, leather mask all create images of theatricality and sexuality. Thus Chase-Riboud is effectively re-staging history and dressing it up with paratextual make-up and narrative costumes. The supposedly 'genuine' tribal dress that Baartman wore during her display consisted of a skin-tight and almost see-through body stocking with various beads, and jewellery made from 'ostrich feathers', 'bushbuck' (*HV*:54) and other natural materials. These adornments, which are reminiscent of the leather wrist-strap, chain, and padlock worn by Cullwick, were all intended to add to the 'effect' of an overdetermined piece of theatrical costumery. Baartman's 'natural' look was obtained through an unnatural and artificial construction of stage dressing. Likewise, the covering which was meant to hide her genitalia and allude to the mystery of the 'Apron' is, in Holmes's biography, 'an elaborate female codpiece of dramatic size. The effect of its soft folds, fur fringes and

⁷⁷ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.114.

pendulous extensions was to imply that its purpose was to modestly conceal her elongated labia (*HV*:64). More than likely this ‘codpiece’ actually encodes her genitalia more explicitly with its pubic hair made from ‘fur fringes’ and labia produced by the ‘pendulous extensions’. In the covering the viewers of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ actually ‘saw’ the genitalia underneath, just as Holmes’s biography acts as a covering by which contemporary readers can view Baartman’s life.

As well as dress and ornaments, Baartman augmented her act with musical entertainment. In her cage ‘she strummed, she hummed, she strutted and wriggled and sashayed and sang. Saartjie sang folk and popular songs in Khoi, Afrikaans and English, some tunes easily recognisable to her London audience, although Dunlop and Cesars preferred her to sing traditional folksongs in order to emphasise her strangeness and authenticity’ (*HV*:66). That Holmes emphasises Baartman’s actions on stage but does not explore her involvement in song choice is testament to how she portrays Baartman only as a victim. The fact that her ‘owners’ insisted on her performing her race through traditional songs, though, strongly suggests that *all* of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ act was a performance of artifice, creation and imagined exoticism. Regardless of whether she wanted to perform in English or Afrikaans, she had to adhere to the construction of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ which had been imagined prior to her landing on the shores of England. As Bogdan notes of other freak show examples, ‘certain exhibits played musical instruments, sang, danced, or performed novelty acts. But whatever they did, however they appeared, their act had to correspond to the fabricated image that was created for them’.⁷⁸ Therefore, through careful staging, detailed, yet inauthentic, ‘tribal’ dress and the rendition of traditional tunes, the ‘Hottentot Venus’ came to embody the image of an illusory manifestation of Europe’s desires and fears. As the Reverend

⁷⁸ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p.103.

Robert Wedderburn explains to Sara, in Chase-Riboud's novel, 'you are no more a real, genuine Hottentot than I am. You are a fake, a myth, a joke, a misrepresentation, a victim used to promote a freakish mythology...a false blackness...a grotesque caricature of so-called savagery' (*HVN*:133).⁷⁹

Whilst Baartman's act on-stage as the 'Hottentot Venus' may well have been 'a grotesque caricature' of her race, when off-stage such imagined misrepresentations were believed to be the 'truth' of her race. In the nineteenth century the black body was mythically endowed with an atavistic sexual drive that was essentialised and shown on the actual surface of that body. As Sander L. Gilman, in an often cited article, declares, 'the black female looks different. Her physiognomy, her skin color, the form of her genitalia mark her as inherently different. The nineteenth century perceived the black female as possessing not only a "primitive" sexual appetite, but also the external signs of this temperament, "primitive" genitalia'.⁸⁰ The 'Hottentot Venus' as representative of the Khoisan land displayed on her body, with her 'apron' and enlarged buttocks, the hypersexuality which Europeans believed was an innate quality. However, these outward markers of excessive libido and uncivilised behaviour were also viewed as the *result* of such uncontrollable desires. Yet, as Chase-Riboud explores in her novel, even the body can be altered through artifice and manipulation. Sara narrates that

my waist was the smallest of all the virgins of the village and its size accentuated my wide jutting buttocks and sumptuous, mountainous hips. My clan carefully cultivated my shape according to our traditions. Like my peers,

⁷⁹ The character of Robert Wedderburn in the novel is the mixed-race son of an aristocratic Scottish plantation owner and an indigenous female slave who later founded the African Association and attempts to defend Sara's right to freedom. In this quotation he is explaining that the Hottentot Venus persona is not Sara's essentialised biology, it is mere masquerade and costumery, just as he himself is not a 'Hottentot Venus' either.

⁸⁰ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) p.85. Chapter 3 of Gilman's text concerning Sara Baartman, 'The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward and Iconography of Female Sexuality', is also reprinted in Deborah Willis (Ed.), *Black Venus: They Called Her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), pp.15-31.

my bottom parts were massaged with butter and secret swelling ointments until they sprang a foot from the curve of my spine. (*HVN*:21)

According to Chase-Riboud the sensationalism concerning Sara's enlarged buttocks and the buttocks themselves are just as artificially produced as her dress, ornaments, stage-setting and entertainment act. Even when not performing, the 'Hottentot Venus' literally follows Sara everywhere she goes, in the imaginative sense, in the fame which her act produced and in the posterior which, to nineteenth-century Europeans, signified her racial and sexual status.

Like her performances of race, Baartman also represents the construction of gender and sexuality both on and off-stage. The previously mentioned body-stocking she wore whilst engaged in her exhibition was 'a silk mousseline sheath so formfitting and so exactly matched to [her] own color it will be like a second skin' (*HVN*:103). Being 'like a second skin', the body-stocking signifies both racial and sexual performance. It covers her body and mimics her ethnic origin by matching her skin colour, but simultaneously, it effectively displays that body and its titillating curves for her audience. In the actual court case regarding Baartman's perceived freedom or enslavement,⁸¹ Zachary Macaulay, the Secretary for the African Institution and leading abolitionist, declared in his affidavit that 'her dress is so tight, that her shapes above and the enormous size of her posterior parts are as visible as if the said female were naked, and the dress is evidently intended to give her the appearance of her being undressed' (*HV*:92). In a clever marketing ploy Baartman's managers/owners dressed her in a costume that actually accentuated her bodily features, while, at the same time *appearing* to cover her completely. In fact, the body-stocking came to represent Baartman during

⁸¹ Baartman declined the African Association's offer of repatriation to South Africa, believing that she had a contract of employment rather than the status of a slave.

the court case as it was one of the main reasons why the abolitionists viewed her as an exploited slave. The impropriety and inappropriateness of the costume raised complaints as to the respectability of the act and, in doing so, emphasised the sexual and racial abasement of the wearer.⁸²

When off-stage the fictional Sara engages in practices which are meant to enhance her appearance so as to appeal more directly to the stereotype of the erotic exotic; or the exototic. She is determined to emphasise her skin's lustre and sheen, in order for it to look more sumptuous to the touch. She endeavours to keep her 'skin soft and smooth, unblemished as when I polished it with whale fat. I spent my waking hours, out of the cage, trying out new grease and pomades, oiling my face and neck, my hands and feet, my breasts and thighs' (*HVN*:7). Just as throughout history women have succumbed to the fashion for white-lead face paint, fake tan, and anti-wrinkle moisturisers, Baartman/Sara wanted to make her skin, and therefore, her sexual body, more desirable. Whilst for Baartman/Sara this involved various lotions and perfumes, for Cullwick it was the dirt and grime which she smeared all over her body. The contemporary readership may well be interested in these 'beauty regimes' as in the twenty-first century emphasis is increasingly placed on outward appearances, but it also offers the titillation of the naked nineteenth-century body. However, even the beauty regime is an act of performance, because when in South Africa, well before thoughts of the exhibition halls of London and Paris, the historical Baartman was an inhabitant of Cape Town, which had its own set of cultural and social expectations concerning dress. According to Crais and Scully, Baartman 'was a colonial woman. She walked, talked, and worked, and lived in the commercial *mélange* that was Cape Town. She wore skirts

⁸² See Holmes, *HV*, p.97; Chase-Riboud, *HVN*, p.151; Altick, *The Shows of London*, p.270.

and tops and dresses, humble yes, but European clothing nonetheless'.⁸³ When working as a servant in the Cape, Baartman assumed no artificial racial clothing. There was no need to appear different and exotic because she was simply a member of the servant community. Although on some level the European skirts and dresses themselves were a masquerade,⁸⁴ the sexual and racial acts which Baartman performed as the servant and as the 'Hottentot Venus' were, like the transvestite act, an exaggerated representation of imagined and expected manifestations of gender and race norms. Baartman's performances on and off-stage and Cullwick's theatrical sadomasochistic acts along with the commodification of their bodies do, however, highlight the constructedness of dress, the body, gender, class and race. These constructions carry similar resonances in the twenty-first century with regards to identity politics and the desire to classify a person as belonging to a particular gender, ethnic, social, or sexual group.

Both Baartman's and Cullwick's bodies become the site where sex, gender, and race are all performed, and that very act of display raises important issues concerning the politics of dress and the body politic. With regards to dress, Chase-Riboud creates an interesting image of Sara conforming to European gender expectations of how European women should comport themselves. When meeting the scientist Cuvier for the first time Sara proudly states that 'I wore a dress of thin white silk, cut straight and caught by a girdle just under the bosom, held by a green sash. Over it I wore a large cashmere shawl and a wide-brimmed bonnet of green and blue grosgrain decorated with cock feathers. I carried a parasol against the sun like white women did'. In this act of class, as well as race, like those of Hannah Cullwick, we see that for Baartman appearance is paramount. Unfortunately, her dressing in 'European' clothing merely

⁸³ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.57.

⁸⁴ See Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10 (1929), pp.303-313.

results in disappointment for both Sara and Saint-Hilaire, who exclaims that she ‘doesn’t look like she’s African. I expected her attire to be much more ferocious’ (HVN:223). The fictionalised version of Saint-Hilaire here is symbolic of nineteenth-century European attitudes. The African woman must surely be savage if she is representative of the wild land that is Africa. In Sara’s gown, hat, shawl and parasol lay the most profound of the nineteenth-century elite’s fears; that beneath the dress we are all merely human beings with the same emotions, dreams and rights. Although today we may think that such reasoning is taken for granted, Edward Said points out that the Western view of non-Westerners still relies on a dichotomy between *understanding* another culture and *exerting power* over that culture. He asserts that there is ‘a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion’.⁸⁵ In both Baartman’s (historical) and Sara’s (fictionalised) artificial presentation of ‘authentic’ tribal dress and ornaments she was forced into exhibiting not only her own subjugation but her entire nation’s domination by Europe. Her representation as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ stood ‘at the line between the sexual, the wondrous, and the ethnographic’.⁸⁶ Yet, her outward dress was merely one instrument of such complex and multi-layered coalescence. Her physical body, too, was constructed as the exotic Other designed to increase both sexual desires and financial wealth.

In Chase-Riboud’s novel Sara describes in minute detail the procedure for effectively creating the ‘Hottentot Apron’ and its potential value. Sara narrates that her Aunt Auni performs genital mutilation by making an incision on each labia,

⁸⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin, (2003), p.xiv.

⁸⁶ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.72.

so that the flesh curves downwards and [then] placed a small pebble within. As the stones stretched the delicate membranes, she would insert a larger, heavier pebble until the flesh has descended to the length she desired and found beautiful. She explained, but I already knew from my sisters, that for my future husband, the act of love was not only the penetration of my vagina but also the enfolding of his gland within those fleshy lips. This would augment the ultimate moments of his pleasure. For my husband, I could procure rapturous levels with this apron of pulsing flesh filled with racing blood, fluttering like the burning wings of a butterfly or the fiery folds of a medusa. Each month the pebble got heavier and my bride-price increased. (HVN:22)

Such minute and explicit detail of genital mutilation speaks of contemporary concerns over tribal clitoridectomies and Western ideals of a ‘designer vagina’.⁸⁷ While Cullwick relied on her muscular physique and the literal sweat from her brow to gain monetary income, in this ritual of Sara’s genital modification it appears that the concepts of commodity and construction unite to produce a desired body that will attract financial reward for the family and satisfy the future husband. The myth of the ‘Hottentot Apron’ in nineteenth-century Europe drove laypersons and scientists to commit the atrocious acts that Baartman suffered. Her suspected genital mutilation created the mystery, which only increased her allure, and resulted in what Heilmann and Llewellyn term ‘scopopornia’,⁸⁸ thus leading Cuvier, Saint-Hilaire and de Blainville to become insatiable and unstoppable in their desire to view, examine, and indeed possess, her.

In a similar vein, Baartman’s enlarged buttocks are also configured as the outward sign of her imagined overt sexual desire. In *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* it is noted that ‘steatopygia is a fascinating topic to Europeans. It is perfumed by sex, deformity, monstrosity and prostitution. Whatever is forbidden. And like yellow journalism, whatever is forbidden is big news. The exhibition of *lusus naturae* draws a

⁸⁷ Genital mutilation is still practised today all over the world, whether it is for ‘traditional’ reasons, such as the clitoridectomy performed in Kenya and Tanzania, or for purely aesthetic motivation, such as the vaginoplasty which is practised world-wide. See Ronán M. Conroy, ‘Female genital Mutilation: Whose Problem, Whose Solution?’, *BMJ*, Vol. 333, No. 7559 (2006), pp.106-107.

⁸⁸ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.128.

healthy interest in London. Unusual and unnatural beings are in great vogue. The stranger the creature, the stronger the draw' (*HVN*:60). Baartman's buttocks were the very essence of nineteenth-century constructions of racial and sexual stereotypes. Being 'unnaturally' large they appeared to be 'presented' to the viewer in a sexual display of availability. This construction has less to do with the actual flesh itself and is more concerned with the imagined and expected concept of sexual desire. Indeed, the exhibition of the 'Hottentot Venus' and her buttocks emphasises the power relationship between the object being viewed and the subject engaged in the viewing, thus highlighting, as Qureshi asserts, 'the power that an observer possesses to construct significance and how location shapes meaning'.⁸⁹ Similarly, Cullwick's photographs and likenesses, a majority of which were instigated by Munby, represent his perceived voyeuristic pleasure and control over her viewed body. In South Africa Baartman's body, though, was not unusual, but in the London and Paris exhibition halls it gained immense attention due to the illusory racial and sexual difference, the arena and setting of display, the marketing which advertised the wondrous 'exotic', and the performance itself. Baartman's body became the site where the fields of enquiry such as natural history, sexuality, race and politics all united. It was also, like the cage she performed in, her prison. She was powerless to stop the stares, the gawping, the prodding and the jeers of the audience. In many respects, according to Crais and Scully, 'she remains imprisoned still, literally behind bars that surround her grave site, but also ensnared by diverse people's expectations'.⁹⁰ These various expectations are seen in the way that Baartman still represents the racial, gendered, and sexual expectations of today's

⁸⁹ Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartmann', p.248.

⁹⁰ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p.6.

society, be they biological, constructed or performed.⁹¹ However, the ‘sodomasochistic’ submissiveness shown by Cullwick in her relationship with Munby and the ‘freak show’ such as that performed by Baartman can, as Bogdan notes, ‘teach us not to confuse the role a person plays with who that person really is’.⁹² Both Baartman and Cullwick were arch performers of their race and class respectively. What the historical evidence and the literary re-imaginings demonstrate to us are merely the interpretations and (re)presentations of these historical subjects; they do not denote the authentic lived reality of their existence but the authorial agendas of creative writers, historians, sociologists, and even Cullwick and Baartman themselves.

Conclusion: (Re)commodified Similarities

The various performances of class and race as exhibited by Cullwick and Baartman speak of the relationship between ideological assumptions regarding social status, racial definitions, and the capitalist economy which drives such unequal power balances between the oppressed and the oppressor. Yet, the fact that both Cullwick and Baartman engaged in the commodification of the self (willingly or not) suggests that the balance of power between the ‘performer’ or servant-cum-slave and the employer/owner was not a simplistic equation that can be classified as an exploitative versus free relationship. The fact that Cullwick remained a servant and demanded a working wage from Munby, even after their marriage, emphasises her resolute independence in the face of financial penury. Likewise, Baartman’s refusal to accept the Abolitionist offer of repatriation to South Africa and remain in England to earn money, while complicated

⁹¹ For example, in a 2011 advertisement for Gillette Venus female razors, the singer/actor Jennifer Lopez (also known for her ample derrière) sings British pop group Bananarama’s hit ‘Venus’ which incorporates the line ‘Black as the dark night she was/Got what no one else had’. Bananarama, ‘Venus’ (London Records, 1986).

⁹² Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p.10.

by translation issues and lack of awareness of the implications of the court case, still highlights her involvement with the act of self-commodification.⁹³ Beckman asserts that such

commodification expresses and creates alienation and therefore in Marx's view not only institutions but people themselves have to change in order to be able to live 'uncommodified' lives. Marx's notion of 'commodity fetishism', which denoted human subjection to commodities, implies the projection of power and action onto consumable commodities which transform human social interactions as well as concepts of 'self'.⁹⁴

More importantly, the stories and historical evidence concerning Cullwick and Baartman illustrate, or at least hint towards, the performative and artificial nature inherent in all social categories such as class, race, gender and sexuality. In the case of Baartman in particular, both Holmes's biography and Chase-Riboud's novel accentuate 'the ways in which science, literature and art collectively worked to produce Baartmann as an example of racial and sexual difference [thus highlighting] ...that racial and sexual alterity are social constructions rather than biological essences'.⁹⁵ In a similar way, the performances of class and race by Cullwick and Baartman themselves not only undermine a strictly essentialist view of social categories but actually explode the definitions of difference. Although their 'acts' may seem successful in terms of their ability to produce the desired effect through artifice and façade, the contravention of social boundaries and expectations may not always be as subversive as assumed. With regard to Cullwick and the sadomasochistic/fetishistic elements of her relationship with Munby, McClintock argues that even though 'fetishism is founded in contradiction [it] does not necessarily guarantee its transgressiveness; that cross-dressing disrupts stable

⁹³ The court case involved a complicated set of translations from English to Dutch and back again, so Baartman could understand the proceedings, but the authorities failed to explain to her the ramifications of her decision to stay 'contracted' to Dunlop.

⁹⁴ Beckman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion*, p.20.

⁹⁵ Zine Magubane, 'Which Bodies Matter?: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, Race and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the "Hottentot Venus"', in Willis, *Black Venus*, p.47.

social identities does not guarantee the subversion of gender, race, or class power'.⁹⁶ On a superficial level it may often appear that the 'abused' subject is utterly dominated, yet on a more complex and fundamental level, the submissive partner in the relationship actually holds the ultimate power of engagement in the act. Likewise, the acts themselves, such as those displayed by Cullwick, may occasionally be read as an enactment of the actuality like Munby's perceived 'real' social superiority over Cullwick in the lived Victorian environment.⁹⁷ In a similar vein, the acts of cross-class, cross-race, and particularly, cross-gender dressing may in actuality reinforce the social stereotypes they are attempting to undermine. As Nathan Wiseman-Trowse illustrates, masquerade 'forms part of two different discourses whose ideological aims are at odds. Whereas masquerade in the Brechtian sense aims to subvert, resist, and transform the social order, masquerade as the conceptual partner of mimesis serves precisely to affirm and naturalise social hierarchies'.⁹⁸ In other words, the philosophical endeavour of transvestism and cross-dressing is to dismantle the strict codes of gender, class, and race categories; the lived reality of this aim can sometimes result in the assumed identity appearing as a simple underpinning of the ideological concepts that the act of masquerade initially sought to destabilise.

In some respects, the biographical approach to the neo-Victorian project itself can also suffer the same fate of actually supporting the very methodologies it seeks to challenge. The entire concept of re-vision, re-writing, and re-commodifying the past can at times collapse into a fictionalising narrative which merely requisitions historical facts

⁹⁶ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p.67.

⁹⁷ When comparing the relationships of Cullwick and Munby with Baartman and Dunlop, it is clear that while Cullwick retained financial, and at times emotional, independence from Munby, Baartman was beholden to Dunlop (and her subsequent 'employers') for her accommodation and living costs, thus creating an unequal power balance which Cullwick resolutely refused to submit to.

⁹⁸ Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, *Performing Class in British Popular Music* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.12.

and persons, re-packaging them with twenty first-century perspectives and concerns. Mark Kinkead-Weekes attests that ‘if, as sceptics insist, the truth about the past is not to be had, perhaps the best a biographer can hope to achieve would be a convincing fiction that fits all the facts’.⁹⁹ However, I find this explanation rather obtuse in its overgeneralisation as neo-Victorian biography, in this specific case by the four different authors of Atkinson, Stanley, Holmes, and Chase-Riboud, in four different variations of form, can in fact subtly alter our perception of the past through the contemporary lens. For example, Crais and Scully argue that ‘fixing Sara Baartman within the conventional genre of biography raises fundamental questions about how we know what we know and how we write about people whose lives traversed so many geographies and different cultural worlds’.¹⁰⁰ The examples of neo-Victorianism in this chapter, like class, race, and gender transvestism (wittingly or not) attempt to complicate the class and racial readings and suppositions made by historians, literary analysts, sociologists and academics in general, but they do so with a distinctly political aim of disrupting comfortable notions of the experienced and knowable lives by creating an agenda that is constituted through archival retrieval, contemporary interpretation and twenty-first-century critical perspective. As Upham posits, ‘can we bury our dead and forget them? Resurrecting them will always be a political act calculated to correct any pressing issues of the present’.¹⁰¹

The literary and historical drag act that is complicit in the neo-Victorian texts examined in this chapter, though, *can* still subvert the expectations of biographical fiction and fictional biography by emphasising that very destabilisation inherent in its

⁹⁹ Mark Kinkead-Weekes, ‘Writing Lives Forwards: A Case for Strictly Chronological Biography’, in Peter France and William St Clair (Eds.), *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.235.

¹⁰⁰ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartmann and the Hottentot Venus*, p.5.

¹⁰¹ Upham, ‘From the Venus Sickness to the Hottentot Venus’, p.81.

hybridised form. These explorations into the lives of Cullwick and Sara Baartman are personal and occasionally intimate narratives that are, simultaneously, theatrical demonstrations of the literary form. The degree to which history and fiction overlap depends upon the author's creativity, the purpose of the project, the ideological assumptions of the time, yet also on the readers themselves. When biographical fictions and fictional biographies are purchased and consumed, the reader engages with the subject in an unconscious act of viewing. 'As the reader/viewer (for there are visual as well as written images)', Reay theorises, 'you can distance yourself through the knowledge of fictive historical representation...[though] you will be in continual danger of becoming enmeshed in this story of voyeurism and fetishism'.¹⁰² This continual danger is most apparent in the depictions of Cullwick and Baartman (as historical subjects) compared to 'Hannah' and 'Sara' (as constructed personas).

The examples of Cullwick and Baartman evidence the larger concern of history itself as a construction, therefore, as Chase-Riboud claims, 'art makes history. It does not explain history'.¹⁰³ We see, in many neo-Victorian (re)visions of the nineteenth century which are postmodern in their production, what Mitchell purports as a challenge 'to the traditional authority of history [which] seemed to open up new possibilities for the role of fiction in historical recollection, freeing it from questions of accuracy and authenticity'.¹⁰⁴ However, the three 'biographical' texts by Atkinson, Stanley and Holmes all do make a claim towards authenticity. It is an oversimplification, though, to declare that history is constituted only in 'fact' and that historical biographies are merely fiction. The contemporary engagements with the past are much more complex than such a statement can possibly elucidate and to denigrate the Victorians as sexually

¹⁰² Reay, *Watching Hannah*, p.9.

¹⁰³ Spencer, 'On Her Own Terms', p.757.

¹⁰⁴ Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p.13.

repressed, ideologically archaic, racist misogynists is to elide or even avoid the subtle nuances of their experience. In relation to Baartman's portrayal as a freak, for example, we can turn to Matthew Sweet who asserts that

condemning the freak-fancier's attitude as patronising or barbaric will simply not suffice; nor will assuming the freak performer to be the pathetic victim of exploitation. The culture of the nineteenth-century exhibition market was too complex and ambiguous to allow for such a reductive reading of the relationship between freaks and their fans. To dismiss all as the shame of our great-grandparents would be an undeserved insult to the Victorians.¹⁰⁵

The Victorians, and the nineteenth century as a whole, are not scapegoats onto which we can map our own twenty-first-century prejudices. But this historical period does allow for the racial, class and gendered dichotomies and complexities which concern us today to be negotiated and (re)visited through the lens of the past.

The neo-Victorian investigations in this chapter all 'perform' upon their subject matter. Through the selection of material and historical documents depicted we see that we are only ever given a subjective glimpse into these past lives. Although it would be impossible to include every single piece of evidence pertaining to Cullwick and Baartman, we are not shown a comprehensive picture of the actuality of their lives; we only ever see a mediated version of events by the original writers of the documents, diaries and court reports which is then re-mediated by Atkinson, Stanley, Holmes and Chase-Riboud. 'It is not diaries and letters which offer up the life histories of the marginalized and the persecuted', notes Chris Youé, 'but official records and court cases. [And] such "reconstructions" are not so much biographical as structural'.¹⁰⁶ The same applies to the images and photographs of Baartman and Cullwick. The aquatint

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.153.

¹⁰⁶ Chris Youé, 'Sara Baartman: Inspection / Dissection / Resurrection, Review : *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: The Hottentot Venus* by Zola Maseko; *The Return of Sara Baartman* by Gail Smith; Zola Maseko; *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman: Born 1789-Buried 2002* by Rachel Holmes', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2007), p. 561.

advertisement (Baartman) and photos (Cullwick) were originally stage-managed by their producers (including Baartman and Cullwick themselves as agents, or at the very least, manipulators of their likenesses) and are then (re)produced with a specific authorial agenda. The photographs of Cullwick in particular reflect what Mitchell describes in relation to memory, ‘a series of flashes and repetitions that suggest the alterity of the past, its difference, while also, paradoxically, producing a shock of recognition’.¹⁰⁷ In other words, we see Cullwick performing her various guises for Munby and the photographer, demonstrating her difference as a woman, a maid, a lady, and a chimneysweep, but we may also see our postmodern selves in those very poses and recognise the similarities between the past and the present.

The photographic images and the ways in which they have been employed are analogous to the paratextual employment of Cullwick and Baartman’s depictions on the texts’ covers. These are the first performances the reader encounters and illustrate just how important our perceptions of the nineteenth century are with regard to classifying the subject matter. They simultaneously attract our attention, gaze back at us from the shelves or webstore, and literally advertise the contents and, therefore, the history held within. Such literary performances are simultaneously re-enacted and mirrored in the class and race performances of Cullwick and Baartman within the texts. More than anything else, the various masquerades of Cullwick and Baartman stress the connection between the perceived self and the performed self. Similar to the male and female impersonation acts on the Victorian music-hall stage, class and race pretences explicitly reveal the concepts of performativity and theatricality which we enact on a daily basis. As Kondo notes, along with class, ‘gender, sexuality, and race may condition the degree to which we are conscious of the ways we perform ourselves in everyday life, [and] of

¹⁰⁷ Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p.8.

the ways fashion and theatre performs us'.¹⁰⁸ In a similar vein, do neo-Victorian re-imaginings attempt to understand the nineteenth century or as Mitchell questions 'are they playing nineteenth-century dress ups?'¹⁰⁹ In many ways, the answer can be a resounding 'yes' to both. Texts such as *Tipping the Velvet* attempt to comprehend the nineteenth century and simultaneously play 'dress up'. As we shall see in the next chapter, the process of dressing up and performing can become a dangerous endeavour for both cross-dresser or for the viewer of the drag act.

¹⁰⁸ Kondo, *About Face*, p.16.

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p.3.

Chapter 3: Performing the Performance of Gender



Fig. 10, Gustave Doré's picture of the music hall (1872)

A dapper young man in an exquisite purple holiday costume strolls from the wings leaning on his bending cane. He comes to the centre of the footlights, and poses with crossed legs and staring monocle, the features deliciously quizzical and inane. It is a perfect picture – perfect in colour and composition, the quintessence of seaside dandyism; but for a subtle hint of womanly waist and curving hips you might fancy it a round-faced boy. Even so, you are doubtful.¹

(W.R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall*, p.127)

It's all an illusion, and we're all recreating the past in a different way, and it's always a process....they're not fixed, and how we feel about women changes all the time, and how we feel about sex and sexuality and class, these things change all the time...historical fiction can dramatically enact that.²

(Sarah Waters interview with Abigail Dennis, 'Ladies in Peril', p.48)

As the previous chapter argued, the staged-managed class and race crossings by Cullwick and Baartman and the slippage between neo-Victorian genres can emphasise the permeability of ideological and conceptual boundaries. The act of cross-gender

¹ W.R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall* (London: Stephen Swift and Co., 1912), p.147.

² Abigail Dennis, "Ladies in Peril": Sarah Waters on neo-Victorian narrative celebrations and why she stopped writing about the Victorian era', *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 2008), p.48.

dressing can likewise produce a destabilisation of gendered categories, especially when produced for the musical hall stage; this is depicted in Gustave Doré's illustration of a London music hall from 1872. The first opening quotation is a vivid description of the Victorian music hall male impersonator Vesta Tilley by the theatre and music hall critic W.R. Titterton. It is with relish that he notes her feminine figure beneath the outward appearance of masculine dress; importantly he declares his own confusion and doubt with regard to the 'true' gender of the performer. The fantasy that is created in the act of cross-dressing on the stage enables the spectator to glimpse both feminine and masculine attributes simultaneously in the male impersonator. Such an 'illusion' of pretence is also (re)created in the production of neo-Victorian literature and culture, as Sarah Waters asserts in the second opening quotation. Our notions of historical 'truth' and gender 'truth' become slippery subjects that can be adapted; they are mutable and elided when the gender impersonator takes to the neo-Victorian music hall stage.

This chapter will investigate how the act of male impersonation is created, depicted and received on and off the music hall stage. The constructions of the characters Dan Leno and Elizabeth Cree as gender impersonators in Peter Ackroyd's novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994)³ will be examined alongside the real-life gender transgression of Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park, who caused a popular press sensation when they were arrested for dressing in female clothing. This will then be followed by an analysis of *Tipping The Velvet* (1998),⁴ comparing the male impersonation act as portrayed by Sarah Waters and the act as actually performed by Vesta Tilley. The final section will offer a discussion on the filmic adaptation for the

³ Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

⁴ Sarah Waters, *Tipping The Velvet* (1998; London: Virago Press, 2008).

BBC (2002)⁵ of Waters's novel by the screenwriter Andrew Davies and the director Geoffrey Sax, an adaptation which attempts to literally re-create the music hall in the form of a theatre-style film set.

The Victorian music hall developed from the pantomime tradition and was often associated with the lower classes and vulgarity. The bawdy nature of some performances, along with the raucous behaviour of the audience, suffused the atmosphere of the hall with vice and libidinal voracity. The music hall became a site of contention where the working and lower classes could freely enjoy entertainment and the middle classes would attempt to exert their moral authority. 'Victorian Puritanism', according to Sara Maitland, 'tended to believe that acting was in and of itself a form of immorality and that the theatres were redolent with sexual corruption (prostitutes, to the annoyance of professional actresses, were always euphemistically described as "actresses" in the press)'.⁶ The fact that the music hall was assumed to be a place riddled with social impropriety, unrepressed sexuality, and the fantasy world that is created by theatrical performance all suggest that the actual business of show and performance carried with it a corresponding association of degeneracy. Yet such a space of irreverence and enjoyment also produced a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the performers. The audience was able to respond to social or cultural criticisms that were evinced in the various performances, whilst simultaneously the performers themselves were able to explore ideologies and societal paradigms and occasionally push them beyond the limits of acceptability. As Dagmar Kift notes, the music hall was an arena 'where social trends and values could be presented and commented on by performers and audiences alike, and where social identities were

⁵ Geoffrey Sax, Director and Andrew Davies, Screenwriter, *Tipping The Velvet* (Sally Head Productions: BBC, 2002).

⁶ Sara Maitland, *Vesta Tilley* (London: Virago, 1986), p.63.

shaped'.⁷ The stage allowed for experiments in the portrayals of class, race and particularly gender to be attempted, undermined, responded to and, above all, disseminated throughout the wider community.

Male and female impersonation on the music hall stage was an extremely popular act that included a performance of specific gender roles. From the Pantomime dame to the Piccadilly Johnny, the gender impersonator exacerbated, exaggerated gender norms and definitions, yet at the same time s/he also offered a glimpse at the possibility of transgressing such rigid codes of behaviour and dress. 'Transvestite theatre – cross-dressing in performance', asserts Lesley Ferris, 'is an exemplary source of the writerly text, a work that forces the reader/spectator to see multiple meanings in the very act of reading itself, of listening, [and] watching a performance'.⁸ While the gender impersonator is on-stage the audience is forced to read into the performance the encoded gender assumptions of the act whilst being concurrently engaged with the concept of reading the act's transgression of those very assumptions.

Just as the audience in the music hall is subjected to the simultaneous 'double-reading' of the transvestite, so too is the reader of neo-Victorian literature involved in a double reading of history, as we saw in both of the preceding chapters. While the neo-Victorian text references, (re)visions, or is influenced by the Victorian era and the longer nineteenth century, it is also concerned with the ideological debates in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, the neo-Victorian texts analysed in this chapter will be complemented by investigations into the nineteenth-century historical personas that also chose to cross-dress on-stage and the dangers which ensue when the

⁷ Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.2.

⁸ Lesley Ferris, 'Introduction: Current Crossings' in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.8.

cross-dresser breaks free from the confines of the music hall and ventures off-stage and onto the streets of the city. The text examined in the first section, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, collapses the distance between genders, between historical fact and fiction, and between narrative techniques.

'Let's perambulate upon the stage' (DL:73): *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*

Ackroyd's neo-Victorian novel, which revolves around the act of gender impersonation on and off the music hall stage, depicts a series of murders committed in London's East End in the late nineteenth century. Ackroyd combines the narrative techniques of diary entries, court proceedings, flashbacks and an investigation of murder depicted in a linear narration, to produce a novel which portrays both the nineteenth century and the act of cross-dressing as complex and multi-faceted. In the amalgamation of these various narrations, he creates a Victorian world that conceptually links female and male impersonation and the music hall stage with murder. The narrative flashbacks describe how the protagonist, Elizabeth Cree, suffered from a neglectful childhood and eventually found herself in the company of music hall star Dan Leno. Elizabeth is encouraged to take to the stage and ultimately finds that her talent lies in male impersonation, which reverses, and yet complements, Dan Leno's female impersonation act.⁹ The court proceedings, which are interspersed throughout the novel, describe the trial of Elizabeth, who is eventually sentenced to hang for the murder of her husband, John Cree. Such reports and flashbacks are intertwined with detailed diary entries

⁹ Dan Leno (George Wild Galvin, 1860-1904) was a music hall favourite who was noted for his larger-than-life delivery and comic timing. His speciality was the role of pantomime dame which incorporated his physical lampooning, facial expressions and rapid patter with the audience, gaining him the epithet of 'The Funniest Man on Earth'. For further biographical details see James Hogg, 'Leno, Dan (1860-1904)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34497> [Accessed 19 March 2011]).

concerning the gruesome activities of a murderer and which are supposedly written by John, but are in actual fact composed by Elizabeth in order to frame her husband for a series of graphic and horrific murders she herself has committed. The dénouement of the novel reveals that Elizabeth has been dressing in male attire and committing acts of murder on the streets of London, which have become her new stage. While Elizabeth's cross-dressing remains on stage in the music hall, it is controlled and regulated by the audience and the parameters of her act, as is the case with Dan Leno. It is only when her cross-dressing ventures off the stage onto the streets that Elizabeth's transvestism becomes dangerous.

Elizabeth first encounters Dan Leno and his female impersonation act as an audience member in the music hall. She sits in awe as 'he sauntered off the stage with his hands in his pockets. A few moments later an old woman emerged – except that, as far as Elizabeth could tell, she was not really old at all. She was of no age, and any age....Even as [Elizabeth] laughed she realised that this was the same boy, dressed in female clothes' (*DL*:19). Ackroyd draws on historical evidence to recreate Dan Leno as a character and to depict his female impersonation act and the effect it has upon the audience, including Elizabeth. However, Leno's impersonations relied largely on the comedic angle where the dame, queen, or peasant woman was the epitome of brash, aggressive feminine stereotypes and Ackroyd draws upon this comic persona as a foil to the male impersonation act of Elizabeth Cree. The similarities between male impersonation and female impersonation are emphasised throughout the novel.

The parodic element in impersonation is of paramount importance when delivered on the music hall stage. Just as our contemporary equivalent of drag depends on the awareness of the audience that drag is actually being performed, the music hall impersonation stars of the nineteenth century had to over-exaggerate and amplify the

stereotypical dress, behaviour and mannerisms of the opposite sex. Yet parody is employed in two different but not necessarily opposing methods. In one sense the male or female parody is shown to push an impersonation to its logical limit; it becomes the clownish and ludicrous version that is viewed as a subject of ridicule, yet simultaneously it can also emphasise precisely the constructedness of gender through dress and behaviour, resulting in the exaggeration simply being ordinary. As Peter Bailey notes, like 'its more vengeful brother satire, parody operated in two basic directions, neatly rendered in our contemporary usage as to send up or put down.'¹⁰ Ackroyd's depiction of both male and female impersonation accomplishes both senses of parody. Dan Leno and Elizabeth Cree employ an over-emphasised and over-produced characterisation in their gender performances on stage, whilst at the same time being able to make such acts appear ordinary and mundane. The comedic element ensues from the careful balance between the everyday portrayal of gender stereotypes and the outlandish exaggeration of those very stereotypes.

Elizabeth finds that such a parody of the male persona allows her a life of relative wealth, security, and most importantly, freedom. Finding that 'the stage was my element' (*DL:96*), she revels in the opportunity to gain adoration from the audience, the freedom to literally act how she pleases and the sense of family she gains from her music hall peers. Initially she is employed as a dresser and a copy-hand to Dan Leno, yet after the death of another comic performer, Little Victor, she takes up his mantle and pretends to be 'Little Victor's Daughter', using Victor's act to secure her position on the stage rather than behind the scenes. She first stumbles across the idea of cross-dressing for her performance when as a joke she tries on the discarded clothes of Dan Leno. With

¹⁰ Peter Bailey, 'Champagne Charlie: Performance and Ideology in the Music Hall Swell Song' in J.S. Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp.63-4.

his support she transforms her act into one of male impersonation adopting the persona and epithet of 'Little Victor's Daughter's Older Brother' (*DL*:151). She finds that

the hat was a little too big and came over my eyes, so I tilted it on the back of my head like a coster; the trousers and coat fitted me perfectly, and I realised that I would be able to swagger in them ever so well. But what a picture I made in the mirror – I had become a man, from tip to toe, and there might have been a slangster comedian standing there; it was a perfect piece of business. (*DL*:150-51)

It is on the stage and dressed as a male impersonator that Elizabeth finally experiences the thrill of applause, the adoration of the crowd and a sense of control in her life. She performs the role of the Older Brother to much acclaim from the music hall patrons and her fellow performers. However, this 'act' of impersonation also permits her the opportunity to 'act' in a very different and very dangerous way. Whilst the 'new act' is her idea of a swell impersonator on stage, it can also be said to pre-empt the murderous 'act' when her transvestite self is 'performing' her crimes off stage, as the masher she pretends to be on-stage becomes a Jack-the-Ripper-style character off-stage, therefore increasing the deviance associated with gender transgression, moving it into a different arena and to a whole new level. The similarities between the stage and real world thus go beyond the idea of mere (re)presentation. It is easy to see how the city and its inhabitants are reconstructed for the stage by Leno and Elizabeth, yet it is also clear that the street infiltrates the stage and how the two worlds of on-stage and off-stage become intertwined when we see the (re)created street as the backdrop for the music hall performers.

Having a horrendous and abusive upbringing at the hands of a 'fallen', but religiously zealous mother, it is not surprising that Elizabeth prefers the picturesque, painted, and idyllic version of the city. When she first ventures into the music hall, the backdrop for Dan Leno's performance showed 'a picture of the Strand along which she

just walked – but how much more glorious and iridescent it now seemed, with its red and blue shop-fronts, its tall lamp-posts, and its stalls and their goods piled high. This was better than any memory’ (*DL*:19). The ability of the theatre and the stage to transform the grime-covered city streets into an idealised locale allows the audience to suspend their belief and transports them to a place that is pretty, colourful and not affected by death, disease, and abject poverty. On stage the streets become ‘much more glorious here than they were in reality’ (*DL*:52). Indeed, life on stage becomes much more glorious than in reality for both the performer and the audience. It is apparent from Elizabeth’s disappointment at having to leave the music hall that her enjoyment of life exists solely within the safe, controlled and idealistic world of the theatre: ‘it was like being expelled from some wonderful garden or palace, and now all I could see were the dirty bricks of the house fronts, the muck of the narrow street, and the shadows cast by the gas lamps in the Strand’ (*DL*:53). The dirt, grime and crime of the city are non-existent in the music hall. Muck, filth and the shadows of death are too real for the world of lights, sparkle and glamour. Yet when Elizabeth cross-dresses for real and begins to commit her murderous acts, the street becomes the stage. A blurring between the street and the stage occurs and they effectively become interchangeable. ‘As the world is a stage’, Oswald Stoll notes in a forward to H. Chance Newton’s book concerning the music hall idols, ‘so is the stage a world. It has its greater and its lesser lights, its peculiar atmosphere, its many forms of life, its wide range and variants of mood and social status and a strange psychology, sometimes worthy of the cloister and sometimes of the slum’.¹¹ In Ackroyd’s novel the distance between the real and the imaginary worlds is collapsed by the transvestite murderer who takes her act onto the streets of London and performs for an unaware public and unknowing readership as the

¹¹ Oswald Stoll, ‘Forward’ in H.Chance Newton, *Idols of the Halls* (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1975), p.5.

reader is not party to the knowledge that it is Cree committing the murders until the end of the text.

Elizabeth's transvestite act becomes effectively unleashed on the city. She uses her male disguise to 'hang around the docks or the markets to pick up some more of the "slanguage"' (*DL*:173) as a way of improving her act upon the stage, but her cross-dressing allows her to adopt whatever role she chooses, be it music hall star, male impersonator, urban stroller, or even psychopathic killer. The transvestite act opens up a whole world of possibilities and freedom. Certainly, when Elizabeth dresses as a man she finds it an easy transition from the stage to the street. This is partly due to the fact that 'the transvestite is always acting, playing a role'.¹² Cross-dressers, and particularly those who rely on transvestism for their performances on stage, are in a constant state of ambiguity. The boundaries between real and fantasy, masculine and feminine, street and stage become elided in their gender performance. Elizabeth does, however, reserve a distinction between her stage persona and her off-stage disguise. Although she refers to herself as the 'Older Brother', it appears that a desire for urban strolling can only be indulged, and murders possibly committed, in male clothes other than those used on the stage. Thus she declares that

I would quietly dress myself as the Older Brother...and then creep out of the back window by the staircase. Of course he never wore his stage clothes, which were a trifle too short and too shabby, and he had bought for himself a whole new set of duds. He was a scamp, as I said, and liked nothing better than to stroll through the night like a regular masher; he would cross the river Southwark way and then wander by Whitechapel, Shadwell and Limehouse. (*DL*:153)

The distance created between the separation of the stage costumes and street clothes is exacerbated by the use of referring to herself not only in the third person, but also as the

¹² Roger Baker (with contributions by Peter Burton and Richard Smith), *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (London: Cassell, 1994), p.144.

alias of the Older Brother. These psychological and physical techniques afford Elizabeth the opportunity to remain guilt-free from the murderous acts she commits whilst dressed as a man off-stage. Although the lines between the stage and street are conflated, the differences in her act on-stage and her performance off-stage are apparent in her employment of the alias and alternative male clothing. However, it is these performances off the music hall stage which especially highlight the danger that the cross-dresser poses to the general public.

Elizabeth's various wanderings onto the East End streets of Victorian London dressed as a male and 'performing' murderous 'acts' invite comparisons with the fear which the theatrical community elicited regarding its supposedly 'unwholesome' lifestyle. As Dan Leno comments to John Cree, 'stage folk are capable of anything' (*DL:179*). The performing arts, and particularly the loud, brash and gaudy music hall, with its working-class clientele and gregarious performers, was a cause of concern for the authorities who suspected that promiscuous behaviour, drunkenness, and general vice-ridden activities were conducted both on-stage and in the auditorium. In her gender masquerade off-stage Elizabeth undermines such prejudices by committing the most gruesome and horrific murders outside the confines of the music hall. As a transvestite, she is always playing a role, but her role as murderer appears to be her best performance. She is highly conscious of the fact that her 'work' or her 'act' will be seen and scrutinised by the public, the media and the police, therefore she requires, in true theatrical style, a rehearsal. In a falsified diary entry she compares herself as a murderer to 'an understudy who could not appear on the great stage without rehearsal....I was still in my own particular private theatre, this garish spot beneath the gas lamps, and here I must perform. But, at first, let it be behind the curtain' (*DL:26-27*). As with all great moments of theatre, practice and learning are required in order to perfect an act. Elizabeth distances herself from the murders and relates her homicidal tendencies to her

rehearsals, for her role on stage as the Older Brother. These techniques enable her to commit such atrocities, not only without guilt, but also she manages to delude herself into believing that as long as her act of murder is flawless ‘anything will be forgiven me’ (*DL*:126). Her justification for the killings remains within the realm of the theatre. In some senses she believes that she is providing a valuable service to the London public by giving them exactly what they want: after all ‘Londoners love a good killing, on stage or off’ (*DL*:166). Although we are given no direct reasoning or motive for her murderous endeavours, her career on the music hall stage feeds her desperate need for attention which her childhood was clearly lacking. The male impersonation act she inhabits then enables her to extend such audience fascination to her off-stage life as an indiscriminate serial killer, thereby gaining the constant interest of the popular press and mass public.

Just as the Jack the Ripper murders caused a media sensation in 1888 that quickly rose to fever pitch, Ackroyd (re)creates a sense of why such atrocities appealed to so many people. In Elizabeth Cree we are shown the murderer’s need for attention, speculation, and in some cases, adoration, yet in comparison to Jack the Ripper, we also see the public and police frenzy around the mystery, fear and superstition which surrounds serial killing. As Ceri Radford comments, ‘London is shown as menacing, bewildering, diverse and elusive. Attempts to make moral sense of the City flounder: authorities fruitlessly link the murders to the degradation of the urban poor; while the press busies itself chasing supernatural demons’.¹³ The murders in Ackroyd’s novel elicit the same confusions and fears which were witnessed during the Rippers murders of 1888. Indeed, ‘the atmosphere surrounding them, the newspaper paragraphs, the

¹³ Ceri Radford, ‘A Gory but Cerebral Murder Story’, *The Telegraph*, (20 September 2006, available online at <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news> [Accessed 11 December 2010]).

crowds of spectators – it’s like being in some kind of penny gaff or theatre of variety’ (*DL*:205). Likewise the narrative exploration of the murders in the counterfeit diary entries, the police investigation which attempts to identify the killer and the press reports of the slayings all revolve around the world of the theatre and the idea that the murderous act is synonymous with other kinds of acts of performance. In one diary entry the reader is informed that ‘they had depicted [the killer] with a top hat and cloak in general theatrical representation of a swell or masher’ (*DL*:83). Here we see a direct correlation between murder and the theatre, and even more importantly, the concept of performative dress and a link to the image of the swell or masher. The swell or masher was a young nineteenth-century man of middle income pretending to be, and dressing like, a gentleman in an attempt to gain status and/or attract a lover. ‘Typically’, as Bailey notes, ‘the swell was a lordly figure of resplendent dress and confident air, whose exploits centred on drink and women; time, work, and money scarcely intrude as the swell struts his way across town’.¹⁴ He was often parodied on the music hall stage as being sexually incompetent or socially inept, and became a favourite role of male impersonators such as Vesta Tilley and Hetty King. However, the murders in Limehouse also have the added element of being committed by a transvestite urban prowler, whose delusions of theatrical grandeur undermine the gendered connotations of serial killing. Nevertheless, the murders themselves are seen variously as acts of a supernatural creature, the golem, which has the ability to change its shape at will. The idea of a living thing being able to change shape, to appear and to disappear seemingly by choice accentuates the transvestite’s ability to change gender, to be conspicuous, or to vanish into the crowd accordingly. The fear of the golem in Ackroyd’s novel symbolically represents the very act of cross-dressing itself. It creates widespread panic,

¹⁴ Bailey, ‘Champagne Charlie’, p.49.

superstition and terror amongst the majority of people, who cannot conceive of the possibility of anybody being able to elide the gender boundary in normal public daily life as opposed to the obvious, yet sanctioned, gender transgression on the music hall stage.

The pretence of gender exhibited by the cross-dresser also highlights other disingenuous aspects of the novel. Elizabeth's falsified diary entries effectively frame her husband John for the murders and are only acknowledged as such when she herself declares that 'I made up a diary and laid the guilt upon him' (*DL*:273). Yet, this is simply one example of how pretence, charade and imitation work in the novel. There is layer upon layer of simulation and masquerade, the most revealing of which is the neo-Victorian endeavour itself. Even in the text the reader is made aware that 'certain details were embellished, or on occasions invented, in order to ensure more notoriety for what were already gruesome accounts' (*DL*:6-7). Whilst this quotation relates directly to the press frenzy which ensues in the plot, it is also a very clear indication of Ackroyd's intent and methodology for producing fictional history. The novel, according to William Hutchings, 'convincingly evoke[s] Victorian popular culture and the largely unrecorded and unrecounted world of working-class London'.¹⁵ As the neo-Victorian project relies largely upon the pretence of authenticity and the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, Ackroyd's novel is successful. Indeed, in an interview with Attila Vékony, Ackroyd justifies his methodology and claims that 'playing with styles and almost historical parodies is very much part of the English native genius'.¹⁶ Ackroyd, being both historian and fiction writer, destroys the myth that history is solely obsessed with empiricism, that fiction is purely fantasy and that never the twain shall meet. He openly

¹⁵ William Hutchings, 'Review', *World Literature Today*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (1997), p.149.

¹⁶ Attila Vékony, "I think real worlds escape from books": Interview with Peter Ackroyd', *Atlantis XIX*, Vol. 2, (1997), p.241.

advocates the concept that it is in fiction where truth must be in plain view and in history that some form of fictionalisation can occur. As he provocatively states in another interview with Susan Onega, ‘the difference between biography and fiction is that in biography you can make things up, whereas in fiction you have to tell the truth’.¹⁷ Here, Ackroyd appears to conflate the notion of historical ‘truth’ with the concept of fictional authenticity. The neo-Victorian project itself plays with the idea of truth versus authenticity in its endeavour to (re)create a Victorian world. However, Ackroyd’s simulation of Victorian history (re)presented in the novel highlights his ability to see through the restrictive, but largely accepted, suggestion that history is the sole locus of truth. He also admits to a surprised Vékony that Elizabeth Cree ‘was an invention. You thought she was real, eh? Lots of people did think that there was a real case. There was not. It was completely imagined’.¹⁸ Even when questioned further regarding the seemingly very real court reports Ackroyd again admits that they were all fictional. In this respect, Ackroyd himself is part of the whole neo-Victorian masquerade. The fact that he relies on a female cross-dresser to embody his authorial pretence is also significant. ‘The change of gender identity’, he declares, ‘is very appealing to me and I think that, from a certain perspective, the female characters are really *me*’.¹⁹ Subsequently we see that the layers of imitation begin to multiply: we are presented with a transvestite protagonist in a pretend Victorian novel concerning the fake persona and falsified diary entries of a serial killer, which is written with the use of simulated court reports, by a male author who psychologically cross-dresses to produce his fiction.

¹⁷ Susan Onega, ‘Interview with Peter Ackroyd’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (1996), p.213.

¹⁸ Vékony, ‘I think real worlds escape from books’ p.244.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.246, emphasis in original.

Mimicry was also the imperative of two historical transvestites, Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park, who in 1870 were caught in women's clothes and charged with 'having personated women with a felonious intent, and conspired with others to commit an abominable crime'.²⁰ The case of Boulton and Park created a popular press sensation and revolved largely around the fact that both men were dressed in female attire, therefore raising suspicions as to their sexuality and intent. Yet the case became as theatrical as any play or drama performed on the stage of a music hall. It caused such a furore that Mr Collette, an agent of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, pleaded that the 'inquiry ought to be conducted in secrecy for the sake of public decency'.²¹ The issue which the Society for the Suppression of Vice had with the case was not only the implication of homosexuality but the sheer theatrical nature with which the trial was conducted. The attire that Boulton and Park appeared in to address the court seems like a carefully constructed piece of drama that would not have been out of place on a music hall stage. As *The Times* reported on 30 April 1870,

when placed in the dock Boulton wore a cherry-coloured evening silk dress trimmed with white lace; his arms were bare, and he had on bracelets. He wore a wig and plaited chignon. Park's costume consisted of a dark green satin dress, low necked, trimmed with black lace, of which material he had a shawl round his shoulders. His hair was flaxen and in curls. He had on a pair of white kid gloves.²²

²⁰ 'The Men in Petticoats', *Reynold's Newspaper* (5 June 1870, Issue 1034), p.6.

²¹ Mr. Collette, 'The Men in Women's Clothes', *The Times* (30 May 1871, Issue 26764), p.13.

²² 'Police', *The Times* (30 April 1870, Issue 26738), p.11.



Fig. 11, Boulton and Park From Bow Street Station to the Van, April 1870

After being held in the cells and physically examined, Boulton and Park were allowed to opt for masculine attire, but it did not arrive in time for their court appearance, thus leaving them with no option but to wear the female clothing in which they had initially been apprehended. The defence counsel relied heavily on the concept of dramatic performance for his justification for Boulton and Park to be dressed in female apparel. The defence argued that both defendants were female impersonators in local, provincial and private theatrical performances and were merely extending their ‘act’ to the public arena. Indeed, Mr. Seymour acting as counsel for the defence stated that ‘the evidence adduced on the part of the prosecution amounted only to folly and frivolity, and that the young man [Boulton] had been merely led away by the love of admiration excited by his impersonation of female characters’.²³ The prosecution emphasised the fact that neither Boulton or Park were actually ‘performing’ for an audience when they were arrested, but it is clear that the defendants *were* performing, it was just that their audience was the general public. The court room gave them further opportunity to act

²³ ‘The Queen V. Boulton and Others’, *The Times* (12 May 1871, Issue 27061), p.11.

their female impersonator roles and the city streets and theatres which they frequented were indeed their stage.

As we see in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, the city of London itself becomes one enormous stage on which everyone plays their parts. It was ‘a sinister, crepuscular London, a haven for strange powers, a city of footsteps and flaring lights, of houses packed close together, of lachrymose alleys and false doors’ (DL:38). If the city affords the transvestite murderer an arena in which to perform her gruesome deeds, it equally allows Boulton and Park ample space and an appreciative audience for *their* masquerade. Using the pseudonyms Stella and Fanny, they and their companions often delighted in the adoring glances and remarks they received. They were the nineteenth-century equivalent of the twenty-first-century performer in drag. As Roger Baker asserts, ‘Stella and Fanny were votaries of the secular drag queen, the exuberant exhibitionist anarchic figure who overturns the rule-book of polite society, mocks its manners and parodies its modest social strategies. They were young and clearly glamorous, assertively camp and responsive to the gaze of a delighted or bewildered audience’.²⁴ Even when appearing at court for their trial, Boulton and Park could not resist playing to their audience. On 30 May 1871 *The Times* reported that ‘a large portion of the crowd outside the court cheered the prisoners as they were stepping into the van, while others hissed and hooted at them. Boulton took off his hat, and both the prisoners bowed to the mob in return’.²⁵ The press, the public and Boulton and Park all seem to have enjoyed ‘a good show’ during the trial, with costume changes, an enthusiastic audience and the appearance of theatrical reviews in the newspapers. After a long and drawn-out trial Boulton and Park were eventually acquitted of the charges

²⁴ Baker, *Drag*, p.151.

²⁵ Collette, ‘The Men in Women’s Clothes’, p.13.

levelled against them as the prosecution could not prove that any felonious deed was committed. It was probably also due to the fact that if they were jailed for merely wearing female attire, then in light of the prominence of female impersonators it would mean that entire theatre companies would have to close down. The defence, according to Baker, ‘was emphasising the theatrical, and therefore respectable, nature of men’s cross-dressing’.²⁶

Ultimately, then, we see that cross-dressing for the street-stage can become an endeavour fraught with hazard, risk and occasionally peril, be it for the cross-dresser him/herself, such as Boulton and Park, or for the members of the general public who are brutally murdered by the uncontrolled transvestite serial killer. The prosecuting attorney in the Boulton and Park case pleaded with the jury to do what they could to ‘stop this plague, which, if allowed to spread without check or hindrance, might lead to serious contamination of the public morals’.²⁷ The fear that the act of transvestism might infiltrate and infect the highly moralistic fabric of society appears to be a very real concern. However, the case also highlights the implications of cross-dressing. It was assumed by the police, the prosecuting counsel, and the popular press that the transvestism of Boulton and Park was simply an extension of their homosexual proclivities, which at that time in England were illegal. Even the presiding Lord Chief Justice conflated the act of cross-dressing with homosexuality when he stated:

No one can doubt it is an outrage not only for public morality but also of decency, and that deserves in some way or other, not only reprehension, but actual and severe punishment, and that without the suggestion of any ulterior sinister purpose. It is an outrage against public decency that ought to offend any right-minded person of either sex, and ought not to be tolerated.²⁸

²⁶ Baker, *Drag*, p.149.

²⁷ ‘The Queen V. Boulton and Others’, *The Times* (10 May 1871, Issue 27059), p.11.

²⁸ Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p.465.

It may only be implied in his statement, but the message is abundantly clear: the wearing of opposite sex clothing is an abomination and a danger to society. It is impossible to tell whether a real threat induced such vehemence against the cross-dresser or whether the homosexual implication of transvestism appalled society more. What is obvious, though, is that according to nineteenth-century press reports and neo-Victorian fiction gender masquerade must be confined to the theatre or the music hall stage, otherwise, when unleashed into the city streets, it has a tendency to contaminate, pollute, or even destroy the very foundations of society. For as one nineteenth-century commentator argued,

The tendency on the part of some persons to adopt the apparel of the opposite sex is a sign of intellectual and sexual weakness – an indication that passion instead of prudence holds sway, and in very many cases is indicative of a diseased mind...it would be to our benefit to cultivate an appetite for higher and nobler things, instead of allowing our higher aspirations to be overwhelmed by dwelling upon inferior subjects the end of which is disease and death.²⁹

Whilst disease and death may be a little overdramatic in terms of the consequences of transvestism, the fear and trepidation with which the subject of cross-dressing was and is approached is very real indeed. This over-reaction, though, was only exhibited from outside the transvestite community. Within the relative safety and comfort of cross-dressing acquaintances and companions, it appears that gender masquerade was to be applauded, delighted in and could even be linked to classical Roman mythology. In a letter to Ernest Boulton, John Fiske notes that a common friend (probably Louis Hurt) had told him that Boulton was “living in drag.” What a wonderful child it is! I have three minds to come up to London, and see your magnificence with my own eyes...the

²⁹ E. R. Tarling, ‘Male-v-Female Dress’, *The Family Doctor* (16 June 1894), p.252, in Peter Farrer (ed.), *Men in Petticoats* (Garston, Liverpool: Karn Publications, 1987), p.16.

thought of you, Lais and Antinous in one, is ravishing'.³⁰ Such a reference to classical Roman myth³¹ suggests that for the nineteenth-century communities of transvestites, a history that stretches back to antiquity can give a sense of continuity and genealogy along with an opportunity for seemingly 'respectable' theatrical performances such as those that occur in Sarah Waters's 1998 neo-Victorian novel *Tipping The Velvet*, where the protagonist Nan also dresses as Antinous for a theatrical soirée in Diane Lethaby's Sapphic house.

'All performers dress to suit their stages' (TTVB:272): *Tipping The Velvet* (1998)³²

Tipping The Velvet by Sarah Waters is narrated by the main protagonist Nancy, or Nan, Astley. In her small hometown of Whitstable Nan visits the provincial music hall and immediately falls in love with the male impersonator Kitty Butler. Kitty invites Nan to join her in London as her dresser, but Nan quickly becomes part of the act itself and embarks on a 'curious gaslit career' (TTVB:218). The performance, the double act, of Nan and Kitty soon increases in popularity alongside their blossoming love affair. When one day Nan fatefully discovers Kitty in bed with their manager, Walter Bliss, she runs away, taking only some cash and a few of the costumes they had worn on stage. Nan realises that the streets of London are not safe for an unchaperoned young girl and so utilises the male clothing as a disguise that allows her to walk freely without fear of being accosted. Her confidence in such a masquerade proves false as she is approached by gentlemen who are seeking sexual services from the young man she appears to be.

³⁰ 'The Men in Petticoats', *The Standard* (16 May 1870 Issue 14285), p.7.

³¹ Antinous (110-130AD) was the favoured courtier and assumed lover of the Emperor Hadrian and was renowned for his unsurpassed beauty. See 'Antinoüs', *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (available at <http://original.search.eb.com/eb/article-9007851> [Accessed 19/3/2011]).

³² For an earlier version of some aspects discussed in the following sections see Allison Neal, '(Neo)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping The Velvet*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol.4, No.1 (2011), pp.55-76.

Embracing this opportunity for earning some money, Nan becomes a regular ‘renter’, a young ‘male’ prostitute. During one of her many nightly forays into the seedy London underworld she is stopped by the wealthy aristocrat Diana Lethaby. Diana entices Nan back to her home, Felicity Place, and keeps her a virtual prisoner and a sexual slave who performs ‘living art’ pieces for Diana’s Sapphic guests. One of these *tableaux vivants* has Nan painted gold, wearing a strap-on dildo and assuming the role of Antinous, the famous lover of the Emperor Hadrian.³³ After much abuse and humiliation, Nan finally confronts Diana, which results in Nan being beaten and ousted from Felicity Place in the middle of the night. With nowhere else to turn Nan seeks out Florence Banner, a young woman she had met briefly whilst acting as a renter. Florence and her brother Ralph, both socialist activists, take pity on the down-trodden Nan and allow her to stay. Nan eventually ingratiates herself within the household by undertaking the chores and cooking for the family, and it is during this time that Nan and Florence fall in love with each other. One evening they both venture out to a local public house and Nan is astonished to discover that the entire place is full of lesbian women dressed as men. The novel concludes with Nan once again returning to the stage, but this time she is dressed in feminine attire and it is the platform of a socialist rally, where she is supporting Ralph Banner’s speech.

Waters exploits the complexities, both explicit and implicit, produced by the drag act of male impersonation. Throughout the text she employs her knowledge of gender and queer theory to emphasise the performativity of gender through her cross-dressed protagonists. Kitty’s surname, Butler, directly references the influence which Judith Butler’s theories have had on her neo-Victorian fiction. However, it is the

³³ Waters, in her prior career as a researcher, actually published an article concerning Antinous; Sarah Waters, “‘The Most Famous Fairy in History’: Antinous and Homosexual Fantasy”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1995), pp.194-230.

character of Nan who embodies every aspect of gender transgression both on and off the music hall stage. Drag and the male impersonation act have the ability directly to challenge the biological basis of gender difference. As Butler contends, '*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*'. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary'.³⁴ Waters' protagonists Kitty and even more so Nan represent the 'radical contingency' that Butler refers to. They effectively embody the very notion of alternative gender and alternative sexuality. But these 'alternatives' must be confined to the music hall stage as the only acceptable place for transvestism to appear. The stage, the theatre and the realm of fantasy allow, if only for a brief time, the normative and validated to be abandoned. The illicit, the transgressive, the unthinkable can all be explored and experienced, through acting and dress, when on stage in the Victorian music hall.

When Nancy first views Kitty, on the Palace music hall stage in Canterbury, she closely examines every feature of Kitty's dress and body. She declares that Kitty

looked, I suppose, like a very pretty boy, for her face was a perfect oval, and her eyes were large and dark at the lashes, and her lips were rosy and full. Her figure, too, was boy-like and slender – yet rounded, vaguely but unmistakably, at the bosom, the stomach, and the hips, in a way no real boy's ever was...she strode like a boy, and stood like one, with her feet apart and her hands thrust carelessly into her trouser pockets, and her head at an arrogant angle. (*TTVB*:13)

Nancy examines Kitty's appearance, dress and physical attributes in such minute detail that she sees a combination of feminine features, such as the shape of the hips and chest,

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.187 (emphasis in original).

joining seamlessly with the masculine swagger of her demeanour. It is this amalgamation of female physiognomy synthesised with the aggressive deportment of the masculine performance that Nancy finds utterly irresistible, both in terms of sexual attraction and of the world of possibilities which such coalescence produces. For the first time in her life she becomes aware of her own sexuality, but more importantly, she realises, like Elizabeth Cree in Ackroyd's novel, that the rigid gendered dress codes of Victorian society can in fact be mutable and interchangeable. However, when Walter has the idea of Nan and Kitty becoming a double act and Nan dresses in one of Kitty's costumes, they find that 'there's something – *unpleasing* - about it' (TTVB:118). Mrs Dendy, the landlady, points out the problem when she notices that it looks 'too real. She looks like a boy. Which I know she is supposed to – but, if you follow me, she looks like a *real* boy. Her face and figure and her bearing on her feet. And that ain't quite the idea now, is it?' (TTVB:118). The mutability of gender explodes as Nan discovers that in men's clothing she looks exactly like the male she is meant to be impersonating. The entire concept of parodic performance and drag relies heavily on the audience being aware that impersonation is being performed. Appearing too much like a man could result in the subversive and transgressive nature of the act becoming nullified. Interestingly, though, Nan begins to question her own gendered self and is startled to discover that when clothed in her masculine costume she is 'clad not exactly as a boy but, rather confusingly, as the boy I would have been, had I been more of a girl' (TTVB:120). Nan's own physical attributes are devoid of the feminine curves she witnesses in Kitty's costume, thus culminating in a crisis for the proposed double act. It is only through having extra stitches put into the male costume to create the desired 'womanly' shape, so that 'the jacket flared a little, above and below the waist, quite as if [she] had hips and a bosom' (TTVB:119), that Nan appears to be a female dressed in masculine attire. Her slender 'boy-like figure' emphasises the constructedness of

gendered dress, but also highlights the male impersonator's need to appear masculine in behaviour with a semblance of feminine shape in order for the 'drag' in the drag act to be visible to the audience.

The audience of the male impersonation act in Waters's *Tipping The Velvet* is able to enjoy Kitty's performance quite comfortably as her 'womanly' shape is obvious for all to see, yet there is still a hint of subversion in the male impersonator act and songs for Nan when she finds that 'it was peculiarly thrilling to have them sung to us, not by a gent, but by a girl, in neck-tie and trousers' (*TTVB*:13). The neck-tie, trousers and other apparel worn by Kitty become an eroticised site of transgression that reaches beyond mere lesbian desire. In the male costume Nan views the possibility of freedom; a freedom of expression and of identity. Nan longs to escape the restrictive confines of her home town, her rigidly structured family life and the repressive heterosexuality that is expected of her. In her desiring glances at Kitty and her costume on the stage she sees the sexual, gendered and economic liberty she craves. So when she is adopted into the act in London she embraces the cross-dressed venture wholeheartedly. She proudly declares that 'the truth was this: that whatever successes I might achieve as a girl, they would be nothing compared to the triumphs I should enjoy clad, however girlishly, as a boy. I had, in short, found my vocation. Next day, rather appropriately, I got my hair cut off, and changed my name' (*TTVB*:123). Indeed, the on-stage double act of Kitty and Nan becomes lauded throughout the London music hall world and both enjoy the adoration and applause of admirers and audiences alike, similar to the successes of Elizabeth Cree and Dan Leno.

Nan and Kitty's success is due, in part, to the novelty of 'the sight of a *pair* of girls in gentlemen's suits [which] was somehow more charming, more thrilling, more indefinably *saucy*, than that of a single girl in trousers and topper and spats' (*TTVB*:125-

6). But the fame and fortune which accompanies their success is also accountable to the fact that with two performers Kitty and Nan can adopt a more comic routine which incorporates further parodic elements that increase the subversive potential of male impersonation and drag. With two, rather than just one, male impersonators the sartorial satire multiplies. 'There is a subversive laughter', Butler contends, 'in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects....The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance'.³⁵ In the literal sense, and more importantly, in gendered terms, Kitty and Nan's 'doubling-up' transforms the act into a parody of a parody, thus revealing and simultaneously accentuating Butler's concept of mimicry, exposing the inauthentic in all performative genders and, by extension, all performances which emphasise, exaggerate, or parody the performativity of gender. The notion of 'doubling' applies through various connotations in their act. Initially, their manager Walter Bliss³⁶ views it as a fantastic and original idea when he exclaims, 'A *double* act! A soldier – and his comrade! A swell – together with his chum! Above all: *two* lovely girls in trousers, instead of one!' (*TTVB*:112). Nan and Kitty are a double act in the sense of two performers in one routine; they are a double act in terms of the doubling of genders when performing, and they incorporate a double act when their private sexual lives are then exposed on the music hall stage. Ultimately, the audience, whether it sees through the various double acts or not, still crave the male impersonation performance and performers. As Nan states, 'the crowd go mad for it!' (*TTVB*:165).

³⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.200.

³⁶ The name Walter Bliss implies a double pun consisting of 'Walter', being the name of music hall male impersonator Vesta Tilley's husband Walter de Frece, combined with ironic use of 'Bliss', alluding to the compulsive heterosexual imperative of clichéd marital bliss, which Kitty succumbs to, but Nan eschews in favour of a lesbian co-habitation and union.

Whilst most of the audiences which Nan and Kitty perform for are appreciative and adoring, there is an occasion where a drunken audience member sees not only through the double act, but actually glimpses the private sexual lives of Nan and Kitty too. Half-way into their number he stands up and loudly proclaims to the rest of the music hall auditorium that ‘they’re nothing but a couple of – a couple of *toms!*’ (*TTVB*:140). His heckle which disrupts the act also enables the rest of the audience to view the disruption of gender norms. They are given a glimpse into the transgression and subversion embodied by the male impersonation performance which, until that moment, had gone undetected, no matter how much it was implied. Their act comes to an abrupt halt, their lesbian desire for each other is exposed, and the blurring of gender boundaries dissolves, leaving Nan and Kitty appearing merely as ‘two girls in suits, their hair close-clipped, their arms entwined. *Toms!*’ (*TTVB*:141). Nan realises that once revealed and in open public their sexual desire, their acting and their cross-dressing become conflated, resulting in them becoming ‘freakish by association’ (*TTVB*:143), like the transgender act in the same music hall, ‘Paul or Pauline?’³⁷. The transvestism in their performance is the contested site of gender *and* of acceptability. A career in the music hall carried a particular stigma of being associated with the lower classes, vulgarity and indecency. Added to that, in Nan and Kitty’s performance, is the gender transgression of cross-dressing which is then compounded by the supposed deviance of homosexuality. Nan sees, and indeed relishes in, the various freedoms which are brought to bear with the male impersonation act and in particular the cutting short of female hair where ‘it was not like she was cutting hair, it was as if I had a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades, that the flesh had all grown over, and she was slicing

³⁷ Booked on to the same playbill as Nan and Kitty, ‘Paul or Pauline?’ is an American man, whose act consists of ‘dancing ‘in and out of an ebony cabinet, dressed now as a woman, now as a man, and singing soprano and baritone by turns’ (*TTVB*:143). Nan’s unease at the association with such an act appears to stem from the transsexual nature of the turn as opposed to the apparently more acceptable idea of a simple male impersonation performance.

free...’ (*TTVB*:405). However, she fails to take into account any consequences of her transvestite actions, until the incidence of a heckle from an audience member. It is only then that she begins to recognise that their male impersonation act condemns them to a life of social ostracism. The cutting of the hair symbolically represents the removal of the feminine gender, the breaking of ties from her old life at Whitstable, yet also connects them implicitly to the criminal (like Elizabeth Cree), the deviant and the insane. Nan recalls that when she had seen women with short hair in the past it was because ‘they had spent time in hospital or prison; or because they were mad’ (*TTVB*:12). In this respect, the male impersonation act, the wearing of male clothing, the short hair cut, and the lesbian desire Nan and Kitty feel, all become linked to deviance and degradation.

Nan soon begins to experience the degradation she associated with having short hair while walking out in the street as she realises that the looks she receives are from men who sexually desire the boy she appears to be. With no other thought for alternative employment or future prospects Nan thus embarks on a career which incorporates a distinctly performative aspect; she becomes a ‘male’ prostitute, a renter. She sees her move between such occupations almost as inevitable when she states that ‘as easily, and fatefully, as I had first begun my music-hall career – thus easily did I refine my new impersonations, and become a renter’ (*TTVB*:202). In fact her new lifestyle as a renter is portrayed as almost synonymous with the music hall employment she had previously enjoyed. As Nan makes clear, there are obvious similarities between the two professions:

it might seem a curious kind of leap to make, from music-hall masher to renter. In fact, the world of actors and artistes, and the gay world in which I now found myself working, are not so very different. Both have London as their proper country, the West End as their capital. Both are a curious mix of magic and necessity, glamour and sweat. Both have their types – their *ingénues* and

grandes dames, their rising stars, their falling stars, their bill-toppers, their hacks. (TTVB:203)

Clearly Waters is employing a clever pun on the word 'gay', which in the Victorian era equated to 'prostitute', whereas in contemporary parlance it carries queer connotations. In this way Waters is performing for the reader, just as Nan and Kitty are performing for their audience, therefore, the reader is implicated in this metafictional game of recognition and it simultaneously relates to Waters's own 'gay world' of the lesbian writer. Nevertheless, there is a clear correlation between the occupations of music hall male impersonator and renter. Both rely on being seen in the public eye, having an audience or customer to view the performance and both include a strong element of self-commodification, much as Sara Baartman practiced. However, success in either profession requires adopting an alternative persona and appropriate dress. The music hall provides a space for such transformations in the artiste's dressing room. Consequently, Nan discovers that she 'needed somewhere, away from Smithfield; [she] needed, in fact, a dressing room' (TTVB:193). A (dressing) room of her own.

Nan obtains her own dressing space for her changes into male clothing by renting a room in a lodging house. In this room she dresses for her evening forays on the streets and prepares herself for the dangerous underworld of prostitution which awaits her. This endeavour causes much confusion, for as Nan notes, the landlady of the boarding house 'was never quite sure if I were a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out of his frock. Sometimes, I was not sure myself' (TTVB:195). The transvestism that Nan undertakes for her new life not only perplexes the landlady but also Nan herself. The effect of her literal, and figurative, street-walking is the blurring of the distinction between her biological sex and her gender performance, thus complicating the issue of performative gender. As Jeannette King asserts, 'as a site where walking and watching are the main activities, the street

heightens this sense that all gender is performative. The “feminine” qualities, constructed with “lipstick and lavender”, that signal Nancy’s status as a rent boy are as false as her masculinity’.³⁸ On the streets of London Nan is merely surrounding her body in layer upon layer of artifice in the hope that the loss of Kitty and her music hall career can somehow be assuaged by hiding in full public view. The streets represent a place of gender ambiguity for Nan, albeit in a rather degrading way. She has literally and metaphorically hit the streets, and this is where she finds she can blend into the anonymity of the masses and lose her gender. In an interview with Abigail Dennis, Waters states that Nan ‘is often at street level in all sorts of ways, and actually because she’s cross-dressing has a freedom to wander the streets that none of my other female characters have ever had....my other Victorian characters were all in peril, ladies in peril’.³⁹

However, Nan’s so-called gender freedom on the London streets comes at a heavy price. Not only does she lose her gender identity, but she posits herself in a submissive position and lives in fear of discovery at every venture out into the darkness. Nan is concerned when she mentions the fact that ‘with every glance that came my way, I flinched; at any moment I expected the cry to be let up: “A girl! There is a girl, here, in boy’s clothing!”’ (*TTVB*:194). Her fear at being discovered to be an imposter, though, is soon put at ease when she is approached by a gentleman seeking her sexual services. In the belief that Nan is a young Army recruit, the gentleman asks Nan to ‘put your pretty arse-hole at my service – or your pretty lips, perhaps. Or simply your pretty white hand, through the slit in my breeches. Whatever, soldier, you prefer; only cease your teasing’ (*TTVB*:197). The dangers for the street walking cross-dresser become apparent; not only

³⁸ Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.149.

³⁹ Dennis, ‘Ladies in Peril’, p.49.

would the revelation of Nan's biological sex be a disaster, she is also subjecting herself to the voracious sexual appetites of her clients. She begins to lose her sense of identity *and* control over the situations she places herself in. Unlike the safe confines and relative decorum of the music hall stage, the streets of London are dangerous, and like other Waters characters she becomes yet another lady in peril. When compared to Ackroyd's novel Nan appears as nothing more than a sexual object and not nearly as 'free' to transgress further boundaries as Elizabeth Cree who is a 'lady' who puts others in peril. The best that Nan achieves is to reverse the gaze back at her punters.

The city of London with its punters, labyrinthine streets and alleyways becomes Nan's second stage and as Christian Gutleben contends, 'retro-Victorian fiction actually transforms the Victorian scene into a theatre, a place of exhibition where the reader is invited to discover the hidden side of a prudish tradition'.⁴⁰ Nan invites the gaze of her customers and openly 'wish[es] the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. I would long for just one eye – just one! – to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold knowing eye that saw how well I played my part' (*TTVB*:206). Still yearning for the adoration she once had in the music hall, Nan subjects herself to the degrading sexual acts in dank walkways wanting to be viewed and admired and to feel the gaze of an audience. The glances from her male clients and her returning of their gaze is not enough for her, she desperately needs to be seen, acknowledged as a performer and applauded for her sexual 'acts'.

Unbeknownst to Nan she *has* been viewed, admired and applauded during her street-walking performances. The wealthy Diana Lethaby has been Nan's audience during her sexual dalliances. One fateful evening Diana confronts Nan asking, "you don't care for that? - being looked at, I mean. I should never have guessed it." To which

⁴⁰ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* (New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.175.

Nan replies, “Well... It depends, of course on who’s doing the looking” (*TTVB*:235). Nan attempts to be nonchalant about her night time routines, but shows that she is actually conscious of her various audiences. What she does not expect is that Diana’s interest in her stems from a female sexual desire that has seen through the transvestite disguise. Diana subsequently takes Nan back to her home of Felicity Place, a residence devoted to Sapphic pleasure. Here Nan is kept as a sexual prisoner to be viewed and employed as a cross-dressed erotic performer. Nan’s third ‘stage’, then, is within the confines of Felicity Place, with its sexual atmosphere, implements and literature. It is a place that becomes ‘as unreal as a stage-set: a place of lamplight and shadows, and colours and scents of impossible brilliance, in which we had been given a licence to be not ourselves, or more than ourselves, as actors are’ (*TTVB*:246). For Nan it is just another place to perform, a routine to learn and an audience to please. Diana has Nan fitted at a gentlemen’s tailor’s, with personalised masculine suits and clothing and Nan exists as nothing more than a performing doll which is dressed and directed by the dominant aristocrat. However, Diana soon ‘grew tired of gentlemen’s suits; she took to displaying [Nan] in masquerade – had [her] set up, behind a little velvet curtain in the drawing-room’ (*TTVB*:280). The stage is set, curtain and all, and Nan receives the admiring audience she desires during the many Sapphic parties that Diana hosts, where she is paraded in a multitude of costumes, all of which involve cross-dressing and occasionally the wearing of a strap-on dildo as the ultimate act of male impersonation. The power relationship between Diana and Nan, though, becomes so one-sided and skewed that Diana, as King contends, ‘becomes Nancy’s only audience, so that she barely exists when Diana is not there’.⁴¹ Once again Nan has placed herself in a situation which relies heavily on the desiring gaze. Having not learnt from her months

⁴¹ King, *The Victorian Woman Question*, p. 151.

on the streets as a renter, Nan simply recreates the same unequal power balance in a relationship that has merely moved from outside to inside. Only this time Nan receives no payment, merely food, lodging and male clothing; at least on the city streets she was economically independent, whereas in Felicity Place she is completely reliant on the whims and desires of her audience, Diana.

When she eventually confronts Diana in an unusual display of courage, she is forcefully removed from Felicity Place and is left wandering the streets once more. This time, however, Nan seeks out the whereabouts of a previous acquaintance: the socialist reformer Florence, who works at a women's housing charity. Florence takes in the battered Nan. The next day, when Nan should have left, she sets the scene of her fourth 'stage', by making herself invaluable to the Banner household. Nan assigns herself the task of bringing order and domestic bliss to the house on Quilter Street by taking care of the baby which has been adopted by the Banners, cooking the evening meals and completing the household chores. During these endeavours Nan discovers that wearing male clothing has the advantage of being both comfortable and practical. She declares that

I kept my hair short. I wore my trousers, as I had planned, to do the housework in – at least, for a month or so I did: after that, the neighbours had all caught glimpse of me in them, and since I had become known in the district as something of a trouser-wearer, it seemed rather a fuss to take the trousers off at night and put a frock on. No one appeared to mind it. (*TTVB*:407)

In her performance as the 'angel of the house' in trousers, Nan finds that the admiring audience is not required after all. The community of Quilter Street and the Banners barely raises an eyebrow at Nan's male clothing. Indeed, 'the East End' according to King

is where she finds the freedom to take that masculinity into the streets, not as a 'renter', but as a worker. Poverty blurs the boundaries of the gendered dress code, trousers being more acceptable on women on Bethnal Green than in the more respectable parts of London. And at the Frigate, a meeting-place for lesbian women, Nancy is surrounded by women dressed in men's clothing.⁴²

In contrast to Elizabeth Cree, Nan finds the safety and comfort she had been longing for, but more importantly, she discovers that the freedom of expression, the freedom of movement, and the sense of identity she has been searching for on the music hall stage, the grimy back alleys of London, and the restrictive Sapphic pleasure house of Felicity Place, are to be had in the small house in Bethnal Green. The working-class community welcomes Nan into the fold as simply another person, cross-dressed or not, striving to survive and be happy.

It is in this working-class environment that Nan discards the performance and finds a sense of self. She and Florence are free to embark on a lesbian love affair and on their first time out in public together, dressed in 'feminine' clothes, they go to a rowdy East End public house which is frequented by a whole host of women dressed as men. Nan is astonished at this revelation because she 'had thought [she] was the only one...?' (*TTVB*:417). When word spreads in the pub that in their midst is the famous Nan King,⁴³ the community of cross-dressers plead for a rendition of a music hall turn, affording Nan the opportunity to bask in the glory of her previous life on the stage. Likewise, when Ralph Banner struggles with his speech at a socialist gathering, Nan steps up onto the stage, wearing a dress this time, and embraces the role of prompt for Ralph. Florence is astounded by both of these acts of bravado on Nan's part, until Nan points out that 'I was an actress of sorts, once. It's all the same, you know, whether it's

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.152-3.

⁴³ An obvious pun, by Waters, on the concept of the Drag King as opposed to the Drag Queen.

a stage or a platform' (*TTVB*:440). It is interesting to note, though, that on the occasions where Nan again takes to the stage she is wearing female clothing. Her transvestite persona has become the ordinary, the normal and the everyday, whilst the 'feminine' Nan is reserved for special public appearances, whether on stage or in the pub. Ultimately the male impersonation act leads Nan through a multitude of 'stages', in terms of development and by way of scene setting. In contrast to the real-life male impersonator Vesta Tilley, Nan has to suffer in order to realise that cross-dressing as a man is only safe for her within the confines of the music hall or the working-class community of Bethnal Green. Tilley underwent none of the obstacles which Nan experiences, because from an early age, when off the stage, she was resolutely and unwaveringly feminine.



Fig. 12, Vesta Tilley postcard.



Fig.13, Vesta Tilley in feminine garb.

Vesta Tilley (Lady Matilda Alice de Frece née Powles, 1864-1952) was one of the most successful male impersonators of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the age of five she was performing on the stage professionally and made her

London debut in 1874 aged ten.⁴⁴ She perfected the art of male impersonation and her routines included character portrayals of the swell, the soldier, the sailor, the coster, and the curate in many of London's leading music halls. During every performance, like Nan, Kitty and Elizabeth, she had to strike the balance of a fine line between acceptability and entertainment that avoided any connotations of vulgarity. As Sara Maitland contends, 'she established her fame with an act that in Victorian terms ran every risk of being seen as obscene; both because she mimicked and mocked the state of maleness, and because in order to do so she had to reveal an indecent amount of herself, to a society which still felt that the "sight of stocking was something shocking"'.⁴⁵ Tilley's mocking of maleness was acceptable to the Victorian audience because she imitated very distinct stereotypical behaviour, sending up the swell for being counterfeit or evincing sympathy for the soldier back home on leave. In her performances she often identified with the man she was parodying, thus appealing to the female contingent of the audience, by showing women an ideal of maleness that was desirable yet unobtainable. As Maitland points out, 'she presented a better man than men could ever be, and it was immensely attractive'.⁴⁶ Like Nan and Kitty in *Tipping The Velvet*, she also permitted women to witness an alternative to the restrictive femininity that in her off-stage life she conformed to. 'By casting Nan and Kitty as male impersonators – in the tradition of Nellie Power and Vesta Tilley', notes Cheryl A. Wilson, 'Waters draws on the sexual ambiguities and tensions implicit in this role and acknowledges yet another survival strategy adopted by Victorian women: the acquisition of various

⁴⁴ For biographical details see: Sara Maitland, 'Tilley, Vesta [*real name* Matilda Alice Powles; *married name* Matilda Alice de Frece, Lady de Frece] (1864–1952)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, available at (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36523>, [Accessed 31 Jan 2011]).

⁴⁵ Maitland, *Vesta Tilley*, p.13.

⁴⁶ Maitland, *Vesta Tilley*, p.129.

“masculine” attributes, such as independence and mobility’.⁴⁷ In this respect both Nan and Tilley, in their depictions of female cross-dressing, were effectively offering women the chance to imagine a life outside of the confines of the corset without upsetting the ‘natural order’ of gender divisions.

The male impersonation act on the music hall stage, whilst at first appearing subversive in the Victorian context, was received with appreciation and applause. Just as Nan and Kitty eventually ‘win over’ the audiences in London, Tilley too enjoyed enormous success. The reason why such an act, which openly mocked male appearance and behaviour, triumphed, is based solely on its context. As we saw with both Nan in *Tipping The Velvet* and Lizzie in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, when a male impersonator ventures off the stage, untold dangers await either the public at large or the transvestite herself. The threat that the cross-dresser poses to the general public is the obvious dissolution of gender boundaries, which can only be assuaged by placing the transvestite on a stage and within the safe confines of the music hall. As Elaine Aston declares, ‘if the immediate threat to the “order” is removed by an artificial framework, such as theatre, then temporary abolition of the “true sex” is granted. Only the voyeuristic pleasure of sexual ambiguity remains, and one sex, seen as two, is permitted to pass unpunished’.⁴⁸ The frame of the theatre, the hall and the stage enclose the transvestite within the comfortable world of fantasy and unreality. The walls, ceiling, and boards of the stage act as a box in which the cross-dresser can be placed and controlled. But the supposed threat that the cross-dresser appears to embody is situated not only in the transgression of gender boundaries but also in the homosexual implications, as we saw with Boulton and Park, for the audience which come to the fore

⁴⁷ Cheryl A. Wilson, ‘From the drawing room to the stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping The Velvet*’, *Women’s Studies*, Vol. 35, (2006), p.294.

⁴⁸ Elaine Aston, ‘Male Impersonation in the Music Hall: the Case of Vesta Tilley’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 4 (1988), p.248.

during the performance. ‘The male impersonator’, according to Martha Vicinus, ‘could represent both an eloquent and luxurious sexual undecidability *and* a threatening homosexual potential – depending not so much on the intentions of the impersonator herself, as those of her audience’.⁴⁹ When Vesta Tilley, and for that matter Nan and Kitty, identify with the male characters they are portraying, they allow the female patrons of the music hall a glimpse into a lesbian eroticism that otherwise would be impermissible in public view. Tilley managed to avoid any scandalous insinuations cast on her reputation by evoking a gender ambiguity which also appealed to the men in the audience. As Roy Busby points out, ‘she had a wonderfully light and graceful touch and despite her masculine dress never gave an aggressively “butch” performance. Even when smoking a cigar, singing “The Bold Militia-Man” or drilling with a regulation service rifle, she always managed to maintain her basic femininity’.⁵⁰ What Busby means by ‘basic femininity’ is left in doubt; however, what is clear is that Tilley kept just enough spirit of ‘femininity’ in her portrayal to mitigate her outward ‘masculinity’.

The femininity that Tilley employed to assuage her masculinity was therefore just as much a masquerade as her performance. This concept of all genders, whether performed or not, being performative is emphasised by the fact that the characters which she depicts are in themselves *ersatz* and exaggerated. As Peter Bailey asserts when discussing male impersonators, ‘their acts were in themselves parodies, but their specific impact came in the way they pressed home their mockery of the swell as counterfeit, charging not only that he was less than the real thing in terms of dress and

⁴⁹ Martha Vicinus, ‘Turn-of-the-century male impersonation: rewriting the romance plot’ in Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (eds), *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p.187.

⁵⁰ Roy Busby, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated Who’s Who From 1850 to the Present Day* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.169.

manner, but that crucially he was less than a man'.⁵¹ So we have layer upon layer of gender performativity, with a biological female whose femininity is performative, who then proceeds to masquerade as a swell, which in itself is an assumed act of masculinity. Tilley's performances afforded the audience an opportunity analytically to evaluate the so-called 'ideals' of maleness which affected street life outside the music hall. Her perfected routine relied on the audience identifying the gestures, manner, gait and false eloquence of the masculinity evinced by the foppish swell. As M. Willson Disher contends, 'we saw him not as we saw him in real life, or as he imagined himself, but as he appeared in the eyes of a clever, critically observant woman'.⁵² Tilley had the ability to mimic the slightest nuance of masculine traits, not only exaggerating and mocking the male stereotypes she parodied, but taking that parody beyond mere imitation into the realm of critical observation and satirical and sartorial perfection. Such astuteness and sophisticated invective often left the audience member in a complete confusion as to who, or what, she exactly was. Tilley's contemporary, the critic W.R. Titterton, exclaims, 'is it a dainty, flitting butterfly you are looking at or an affected fop? Perhaps from this proper distance, they are the same'.⁵³ The proper distance, whether in time or location, allows Titterton to appreciate Tilley's subtlety and flawless performances that he witnessed. On the stage Tilley had the incredible propensity for representing the (false) ideals of manhood, so much so that it left critics and audience astounded, admiring and amazed. However, the only way Tilley could qualify such complete performances was to balance her masculine on-stage presence and persona with a decidedly feminine off-stage appearance and behaviour.

⁵¹ Bailey, 'Champagne Charlie', p.64.

⁵² Disher, *Winkles and Champagne*, p.76.

⁵³ Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall*, p.148.

In contrast to her on-stage masculine performances in her real life Tilley, or rather Lady de Frece, epitomised the delicate and fragile ideal of Victorian femininity. ‘Vesta Tilley’, according to Aston, ‘drew very definite boundaries between her performance and her own lifestyle. In one she opened up the play on sexual ambiguity: in the other, she was always, unequivocally and irrevocably, a “lady”’.⁵⁴ Tilley perfected the art of male impersonation on the stages of the London music halls and at the same time cultivated an ultra-feminine public face when off-stage. Her ‘respectable’ self-presentation when outside of the music hall became another act to add to her repertoire, but, unlike Elizabeth and Nan, hers stayed most definitely separate from her on-stage performance. As Maitland declares, ‘she never wore drag off-stage, not even to theatrical fancy-dress parties; she demonstrated her love of feminine frills, and particularly for jewellery, whenever possible; she refused – at first sight an improbable lapse of her vaunted professionalism – to cut her hair’.⁵⁵ Unlike Nan and Kitty, who cut their hair short for their act and then wear a hair-piece for ‘respectable’ outings in public, Tilley refused to let her masculine performance impede on her feminine persona; instead, she wore a carefully crafted short-cut wig for her routine and let her long tresses loose for daily life. In fact Tilley took every precaution to detach her on-stage and off-stage performances. She especially sought to remove herself from any kind of impropriety associated with the male impersonation act. The homosexual and lesbian potential that Waters exploits in *Tipping The Velvet* was anathema to Tilley, who married Walter de Frece in 1890. As Maitland states, ‘she was already becoming the “good girl” of the halls, the nice one a boy could take home to mother. She always and deliberately distanced herself from the sexual vitality that [the] music hall was

⁵⁴ Aston, ‘Male Impersonation in the Music Hall’, p.248.

⁵⁵ Maitland, *Vesta Tilley*, p.73.

introducing into middle-class society'.⁵⁶ Even though a majority of Tilley's fans were female and she relied on their adoration for her fame and status, her flirtatious performances may well have been construed as real, thus necessitating that off-stage her act and her heterosexual marriage were emphasised at every opportunity. The homosexual implications of cross-dressing on the stage had to be contained within that arena; any slippage would have been an unmitigated disaster. 'Gender indeterminacy', as Vicinus declares, 'is possible only in the realm of fantasy – when recreated off the stage and on the streets it becomes sexual deviance'.⁵⁷

The real Victorian male impersonator had to walk a very fine line between respectable appeal and flirtatious masculinity, unlike the fictional character of Nan who embraces her masculine persona and her lesbian sexuality, but can only do so within the confines of the house on Quilter Street. In many ways the male impersonation act on the music hall stage is a complex phenomenon which has the ability to permeate the boundaries between masculine and feminine, reality and fantasy, heterosexual and homosexual, inside and outside. Indeed, in *Tipping The Velvet*, the London streets themselves metaphorically represent the conflicts faced by the transvestite. Nan exclaims that

London life was even stranger and more various than I had ever thought it; but I had learned too that not all its great variety was visible to the casual eye; that not all the pieces of the city sat together smoothly, or graciously, but rather rubbed and chafed and jostled one another, and overlapped; that some, out of fear, kept themselves hidden, and only exposed themselves to those upon whose sympathies they could be sure. (*TTVB*:201)

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.28.

⁵⁷ Vicinus, 'Turn-of-the-century male impersonation', p.190.

The streets and the lives that all rub, chafe, jostle and overlap are the metaphorical genders and sexualities that the act of male impersonation evokes. They are all competing and conflicting with each other and with the performer herself. Indeed, the act of cross-dressing promotes a ‘slippery sense of a mutable self’.⁵⁸ Nan, for instance, views herself as inhabiting the liminal space between the genders when she sees a sign in a boarding house window advertising for a tenant, which reads ‘Fe-male. I saw myself in it – in the hyphen’ (*TTVB*:211). The hyphen, the sign of confluence, enables Nan to identify herself; she embodies the intersection of feminine and masculine. Ultimately, though, her masculinity is only ‘safe’ on the stage. As Sarah Gamble notes, ‘her identity remains a “queer” one, unrecognized and unauthenticated by Victorian society in general and publicly articulated only within the artificial performative space of the music-hall’.⁵⁹ Like Tilley, the performance of gender transgression that Nan embodies with her cross-dressing can only be acknowledged as appropriate within the confines of the theatrical stage. Nan, however, also enjoys such freedom within the safe community of Bethnal Green. Tilley, on the other hand, had to conform to the normative heterosexual matrix as the price for her male impersonation act. Also, during her performance it was imperative that she did not eschew her femininity completely. Each of Tilley’s male critics emphasises her ability to ‘be’ the man whilst simultaneously retaining her ‘natural’ femininity. ‘It comes as no surprise’ Aston argues, ‘to find that her “true sex” is never out of sight, and what is registered is the success of the “illusion”’. If androgyny is discussed, it is with reference to the male ego taming the female, but the androgynous appeal of asexual masculinity for women is never explored, given that it links, threateningly and subversively, to the image of

⁵⁸ Ferris, ‘Introduction: Current Crossings’, p.9.

⁵⁹ Sarah Gamble, “‘You cannot impersonate what you are’: Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 20 (2009), p.136.

homosexuality'.⁶⁰ As we saw with the Boulton and Park case, as well as Nan and Kitty, the conflation of cross-dressing and sexuality thus produces the discomfort with which the general public responds to instances of transvestism, whether on or off the stage. So what happens when this subversive potential is then adapted and transposed onto the prime-time television screen?

'It's only human nature after all'⁶¹: *Tipping The Velvet* (2002) and Adaptation



Fig. 14, Gallery still from *Tipping The Velvet* (BBC DVD)

Linda Hutcheon remarks that 'although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double – or multilaminated works – that they can be theorized as adaptations'.⁶² Hutcheon makes clear that when an existing text or work is adapted in form or medium, it can only ever be conceptualised *as* an adaptation. No matter how much one would wish to analyse the result of the adaptation process as a stand-alone production, it will always be haunted by the 'original' text. Nevertheless,

⁶⁰ Aston, 'Male Impersonation in the Music Hall', p.255.

⁶¹ 'It's only human nature after all' is a lyric from the *Tipping the Velvet* BBC DVD theme tune.

⁶² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p.6.

when Waters's novel *Tipping The Velvet* (1998) was adapted for a BBC serialised film in 2002, the screenwriter Andrew Davies and the director Geoffrey Sax attempted to (re)create Waters's characters as the enigmatic and debonair cross-dressers they were on-stage in the novel. Sarah Waters, in an interview recorded for the extra features section of the DVD, declared that 'a big source of inspiration for me was images from the music hall of male impersonation. You can still get these fantastically glamorous images of people like Vesta Tilley and Hetty King looking very dapper in their sort of gentleman's suits'.⁶³ Such images of the female transvestite in Waters's novel are (re)presented in the form of Keeley Hawes as Kitty and Rachael Stirling as Nan in the television adaptation. During the filming process Hawes and Stirling literally embody the cross-dressed act of male impersonation, therefore, at the very outset of the production we have women dressed as men drawing attention to the processes involved in women dressing as men.⁶⁴

Although Davies states that 'it seemed to me that this book contained delightful elements of Victorian classic fiction and also the kind of underworld of fiction and memorising of the period and I just thought it was great',⁶⁵ the palimpsestuous⁶⁶ nature of adaptation cannot be avoided. In the very act of (re)forming Waters's text for the screen the actors themselves have to don multiple layers of gender

⁶³ Sarah Waters interview on *Tipping The Velvet* DVD extra features (2002).

⁶⁴ Interestingly, Vesta Tilley herself starred in various films during her career which spanned the decline of the music hall and the rise of cinema. As Maitland notes, she 'made a full-length feature with G.B. Samuelson. The scenario was based on her own song "Jolly Good Luck to the Girl who Loves a Soldier", and was filmed at Isleworth Studios. The film was intended to play with images of her male impersonations, so she acted all the parts, both the hero soldier and the heroine'. See Maitland, *Vesta Tilley*, p.44. According to Paul Matthew St. Pierre she also appeared in *The Midnight Son* (November, 1900), *Algy the Piccadilly Johnny* (November, 1900), and *Louisiana* (November, 1900). See Paul Matthew St. Pierre, *Music Hall Mimesis in British Film 1895 – 1960: On the Halls on the Screen* (Madison, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p.25. There is also a contemporary biopic of Tilley entitled *After the Ball* (Dir. Compton Bennett: Romulus Films, 1957).

⁶⁵ Andrew Davies interview on *Tipping The Velvet* DVD extra features (2002).

⁶⁶ As Waters was also involved (in a minor cameo role and on the DVD extras) with the filmic adaptation I have linked the concepts of palimpsests (overwriting) with 'incestuous' working practices.

meaning. It is through such layers, though, that the ‘original’ concept of male impersonation, as perfected by Vesta Tilley, is brought to life. However, Davies’s and Sax’s source text for the adaptation remains like a shadow behind the filmic version.

According to Heilmann and Llewellyn,

Davies’s adaptations of Waters’s neo-Victorian novels might be read as a bridgeless segueing between the Victorian text and the neo-Victorian revision of that text. Importantly, such compounding of adaptive sites also acts as a potential indicator of the ways in which Davies’s and Waters’s works are in dialogue with each other rather than the Victorian period or a precursor text.⁶⁷

The collaboration between Waters and Davies produces a film which, whilst originally influenced by the male impersonation act, has become distanced from that motivation to the point where the figures of Vesta Tilley and Hetty King have all but disappeared and the resulting film is more of a refracted copy that reflects Waters’s novel rather than the primary act of male impersonation.

The ‘dialogue’ between Waters’s novel and Davies’s film to which Heilmann and Llewellyn refer reveals the popular appeal of neo-Victorian film adaptations. Such ‘adaptations’, argues Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, ‘serve a particular function: to stand as an oasis of art within the wasteland of popular culture, understood as mass-produced entertainment designed first and foremost with market considerations in mind’.⁶⁸ The seemingly unending desire for cinematic adaptations of Victorian fiction is thus supported by the demand for neo-Victorian revisions of the nineteenth century. Out of the top ten most popular period dramas, seven are set in the nineteenth century, and the

⁶⁷ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.242.

⁶⁸ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, ‘More Stories About Clothing and Furniture: Realism and Bad Commodities’, in Christine L. Kruger (Ed.) *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p.54.

other three actually bracket the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ The current craving for adaptation speaks not only of the desire to (re)turn to nineteenth-century social and political ideological concerns but also suggests that such a return should indirectly reference our post-modern condition. The conceptualisations of race, class, and gender in neo-Victorian fiction and culture are just one way of exploring our social assumptions and categories in the twenty-first century through a prism of the neo-Victorian lens, almost as if we were effectively ‘cross-dressing’ as Victorians ourselves. Such a postmodern return to the Victorian period, though, inevitably includes a process of adaptation. Therefore, it is imperative that this analysis of the *Tipping The Velvet* (2002) filmic adaptation includes examinations of that adaptation process, alongside the act of cross-dressing both on and off the stage and screen, and also the implications that transvestism has on the audience regarding sexuality. Just as the screenwriter and director of *Tipping The Velvet* adapt Waters’s novel for the televisual viewer, so too does the male impersonator adapt his or her gender for the music hall audience.

The process of adaptation has strong similarities with the act of cross-dressing. Both embrace the idea of playing with the concepts of identity and authenticity. In order to accomplish this play, the transvestite loses or, at the very least, tones down his or her performative gender, the first layer of artifice, to let the succeeding performative layer of gender masquerade become apparent. Likewise, in the process of adaptation parts of the original text or influence are contracted, omitted or conflated. When Victorian texts are (re)produced for the twentieth and twenty-first century televisual audience, such inevitable contraction is unavoidable. However, the costume department of each period

⁶⁹ At the time of writing the top ten stands as follows: 1) *North and South* (2004), 2) *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), 3) *Downton Abbey* (2010), 4) *Jane Eyre* (2006), 5) *Little Dorrit* (2008), 6) *Sense and Sensibility* (1995 film), 7) *Cranford* (2007), 8) *Lark Rise to Candleford* (2008), 9) *The Young Victoria* (2009), 10) *Sense and Sensibility* (2008 miniseries). Information available at www.perioddramas.com [Accessed 26/2/11].

drama is under close scrutiny to (re)create the appropriate dress styles and to prevent any anachronistic slippages in wardrobe ensembles. ‘In such productions’, notes Bayuk Rosenman, ‘objects [and dress] are sacred; they stand for history. If the physical world of the period has been faithfully (or better yet, obsessively) re-created, the integrity of the past has been fully realized’.⁷⁰ The viewer of the costume or period drama relies heavily on the correct, or rather seemingly correct, dress and appearance of the characters, otherwise the fantasy of the return to the past is destroyed. In period dramas clothes also have a very important function with regard to signifying social and sexual differences. As Lenuta Guikin points out, ‘costumes play an important role in cinema because of their semiotic function as cultural and social identifiers’.⁷¹ The dress of the character in a period drama, in its most basic form, is the outward sign to the audience of the gender and class position of that character.⁷² So when a character adopts the dress of the opposite gender, such as Nan in *Tipping The Velvet*, those social signifiers begin to alter as the adaptation of gender is propelled on a transformative voyage.

Nan’s journey from one gender to another is symbolic of the human condition of constant revision and evolution. Her adoption of the masculine gender represents the breaking away of a tradition which assumes that the future generation will be ‘following in father’s footsteps’. The song ‘Following in Father’s Footsteps’ sung by both Nan and Kitty in the film was originally performed by Vesta Tilley and was written in 1902.⁷³ The slight anachronism aside, the use of the song in the filmic adaptation of Waters’s

⁷⁰ Bayuk Rosenman, ‘More Stories About Clothing and Furniture’, p.54.

⁷¹ Lenuta Giukin, ‘Boy-Girls: Gender, Body, and Popular Culture in Hong Kong Action Movies’, in Murray Pomerance (Ed.), *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.55.

⁷² For example, in the 1968 cinematic musical version of *Oliver!*, Oliver’s change in social status from street-urchin to aristocratic ward is accompanied and emphasised by the change of costume from rags to smart tailoring.

⁷³ The song ‘Following in Father’s Footsteps’ was written by E.W. Rogers in 1902, published by Francis, Day and Hunter of London, and recorded by Vesta Tilley in 1906. Information obtained from <http://www.songfacts.com> [Accessed 26 February 2011].

novel suggests that not only is Waters following in the footsteps of her literary forebears and influences, but also that Davies and Sax are literally following in Waters's footsteps by further adapting and disseminating the transvestite tale of Nan Astley. However, the male screenwriter and male director have the privileged position of controlling the adaptation that has been previously adapted and reconfigured by Vesta Tilley and Sarah Waters. Such a position of power by Davies and Sax affords them the ultimate ability to define and (re)conceptualise the transvestite story. The tripartite act of adaptation from stage to novel to screen resonates with Hutcheon's concept that adaptation occurs in triplicate. Her definitions of adaptation are: as a '*formal entity or product*; an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works'⁷⁴, as '*a process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation',⁷⁵ and '*a process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality'.⁷⁶ In this sense, the film version of *Tipping The Velvet* encompasses all three categories. It is a 'formal entity' as it is adapted *from* the original text by Waters. It is a 'process of creation' because many of the songs which are performed in the film Davies had to invent and write himself. Yet, it is also a 'process of reception' as it incorporates the elements, such as the 'Following in Father's Footsteps' song, which directly relate to Waters's own source material on Vesta Tilley.

The theme of three continues throughout the adaptation as Nan adopts a triple narrative. She is the first-person narrator of the film, she is Nancy Astley the character, and she also adopts the alternative persona and voice of Tommy Atkins. Through the three perspectives of narrator, female character and transvestite character Nan progresses psychologically from outside of the plot, to being the central protagonist and

⁷⁴ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p.7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

then to a cross-gendered psychological voice. Such multiple narrations effectively represent the three genders she performs. She is biologically female, performing her femininity, who then performs masculinity both on and off the music hall stage. Similarly, Nan in triplicate form is reflected in the very production of the film. Separated into three instalments, the original airing of *Tipping The Velvet* in 2002 replicates the Victorian format of the triple-decker novel. As Heilmann and Llewellyn state, ‘through a Davies adaptation not only do Victorian texts come to life on the screen, but also the contemporary filmic techniques seek to mimic the Victorian format of the serialized novel’.⁷⁷ Indeed, even when released on DVD in the same year, the three episodes on the DVD menu appear on the screen in the form of a music hall play bill. Thus, in the film adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet*, we are shown three genders, a three-fold adaptation, in a triple-decker form. However the theme of three continues as the cross-dresser appears in the three distinct arenas of off stage, on stage, and on screen.

When off stage, as was discussed in the previous analysis of Waters’s novel, the transvestite faces many challenges and dangers, or, as in the case of Boulton and Park and Elizabeth Cree, actually presents ‘dangers’. Nan, though, originally turns to cross-dressing off the music hall stage when she believes that life in feminine garb was ‘a cruel joke – that I who had swaggered across the stages of London should be afraid to walk upon the streets’ (*TTVF*). The vulnerability Nan experiences when walking the streets dressed as a woman is only removed when she again takes up her male clothing and embarks on her gender masquerade in public. When working as a renter Nan finds that it is ‘not so very different from acting on the stage’ (*TTVF*). Certainly when the screen shows Nan on her knees performing a sexual act on a male customer, the camera angle is looking directly out at Nan’s face with the gentleman’s trouser flies appearing

⁷⁷ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.237.

almost like the curtains upon a stage. Her many performances are enhanced by the assumption of the various roles she creates. In a similar displacement tactic to Elizabeth Cree's alter ego as the Little Brother Nan declares that 'I told myself it wasn't Nan Astley who took men's spunk in my mouth or in my hand, but Tommy Atkins, or Eton Bertie, or Able Seaman Simms, or Bobby Brown from Bermondsey' (*TTVF*). The act of transvestism allows Nan to separate her inner self from the actions her body is performing and the many characters she portrays during her time as a renter on the London streets are synonymous with the characters she played when on the music hall stage.

It is interesting to note that when on stage, in her gentleman's suit, Kitty declares to the audience that she thinks she looks 'pretty smart' (*TTVF*). Here the male impersonator act is described perfectly. In just two words the conflation embodied by the transvestite is apparent. Kitty, and Nan for that matter, are both 'pretty' in the feminine sense and 'smart' in their male suits, but are also 'pretty', meaning very and 'smart' representing clever. Nan and Kitty personify the very clever combination of masculine and feminine. Likewise, Kitty states to the music hall audience that her own appearance is 'not arf bad, I should say' (*TTVF*). Kitty emphasises that the male impersonator lives in the half (arf) world between binary gender formations. She lives in the third space between the accepted categories of masculine and feminine. This space of possibility, whilst offering financial security for performances and freedom and strength when on the streets, is not always a place that offers comfort and support.

When Nan returns home after her first season on the music hall stage, she undresses for bed. Having to remove the hair-piece she wears in public, her short-cropped hair is obvious to see. Her sister Alice who shares her bedroom is appalled at the sight of the short hair-cut and states to Nan, 'I don't how you can show yourself like

that' (*TTVF*). Alice voices her disgust at seeing her sister looking like either a man, or worse, a deviant. In the first instance a similar criticism of deviancy was levelled at the film version of *Tipping The Velvet*. The *Guardian* ran the headline 'Davies Boasts of "Filthy" Lesbian Drama',⁷⁸ and the *Mail Online* stated that the 'BBC Faces Obscenity Row Over "Shocking" New Lesbian Drama'.⁷⁹ However, the adaptation may have censored the more explicit and disturbing scenes from the novel. As Cora Kaplan points out, the novel's darker aspects 'were cleaned up or passed over in Andrew Davies's excellent television adaptation, which exploited the music hall setting of part of the novel to great advantage, but drew the line at depicting the heroine's seamiest down-and-out-in-London moments'.⁸⁰ The sensationalism that surrounded the adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet* is itself almost Victorian in its emphasis on the supposedly 'shocking' nature of lesbianism and cross-dressing. Such a concern over the screening of a neo-Victorian period drama tends to suggest that the twenty-first century is not nearly as enlightened, with regard to lesbianism and cross-dressing, as was previously thought. In this sense the censorship that was adopted and applied in the process of adaptation was an attempt to gauge the contemporary boundaries of acceptability rather than speak of the Victorian social mores. 'Potentially', Heilmann and Llewellyn assert, 'this makes the adaptations far more concerned with the contemporary (the double influence of the now in the collaboration, for example, rather than the collective influence of then and now) than it does with the refraction of the nineteenth century through the lens of the contemporary camera'.⁸¹ The twenty-first century concern over gender categories and the conflation of gender and sexuality become paramount in

⁷⁸ Claire Cozens, 'Davies Boasts of "Filthy" Lesbian Drama', *The Guardian* (29 September 2002, available at www.guardian.co.uk [Accessed 20 October 2010]).

⁷⁹ Tara Conlan, 'BBC Faces Obscenity Row Over "Shocking" New Lesbian Drama', *Daily Mail*, Mail Online (No date, available at <http://dailymail.co.uk>, [Accessed 20 October 2010]).

⁸⁰ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana, Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.111.

⁸¹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.242.

Tipping The Velvet. The *bildungsroman* tale of Nan Astley seeking out a new life, negotiating her gender identity, and exploring her sexuality speaks more of our current (mis)understandings of gender and sexuality than it does of the Victorian conceptions of such categories.

Lesbian sexuality is dealt with very frankly in the film, with explicit scenes centred on Nan and her many sexual dalliances. In the first instance, the title of both the novel and the film *Tipping The Velvet* refers to a euphemism for cunnilingus. Yet, the title also incorporates the male impersonation act and the procedure of taking off the top hat to bow to the audience, whilst simultaneously emphasising the fact that such a top hat is essentially a masculine accessory. In the three simple words of the title we see sexuality, performance and transvestism neatly encapsulated and conceptualised. Nan falls in love with Kitty from the moment she first views her on the music hall stage and their relationship develops further when Nan tries on Kitty's male costume. Kitty reciprocates Nan's lesbian desire when she exclaims to Nan, 'You are the very thing. You look more like a boy than I do. I could quite fall for a boy like you. Come here and give me a kiss. What a handsome fellow, I can't resist him' (*TTVF*). Even though Kitty shows her attraction to Nan before this cross-dressing incident, it is Nan's appearance as a boy that allows Kitty to act upon her desire and demand a kiss from such a 'handsome fellow'. It is almost as if the semblance of heterosexual desire, with Nan dressed as a boy and Kitty in feminine attire, permits a lesbian attraction to be expressed. This is similar to the sexological debates of the late nineteenth century which explained lesbianism, or sexual 'inversion', as a gendered soul trapped in the wrong biological body. Nan and Kitty embark on an erotic journey which is then reflected in their act upon the stage. Davies's adaptation, notes Cheryl A. Wilson, emphasises the

‘connection between the act and “the act” by interweaving scenes of Nan and Kitty’s first sexual liaison with clips from their various theatrical performances’.⁸² The sex act and the male impersonation act become inseparable. Both ‘acts’ are performed for audiences, be it the music hall audience inside the film, or the televisual audience outside of the film.

It is clear that for Waters and Davies the lesbian desire that is experienced by Nan is best represented through the act of transvestism. Some films which employ cross-dressing as a trope conflate transvestism and sexuality,⁸³ others, however, will subdue any insinuation of sexual transgression in relation to gender disguise.⁸⁴ As Annette Kuhn declares, ‘while films in which sexual disguise is explained as performance may downplay outward connotations of sexual perversion, other cross-dressing films bring such associations to the centre of the story’.⁸⁵ In relation to this analysis of *Tipping The Velvet*, the filmic adaptation most definitely fits into the latter category, in that the cross-dressing of the protagonists is employed as a bridge to enable lesbian desire to be expressed, yet at the same time is also integral to that very lesbian desire. Both Nan and Kitty realise their sexual attraction to each other through the lens of the heterosexual matrix. Such a film, though, does allow both the audience inside the film and the viewer outside the film an opportunity to view alternative sexualities and gender expressions with the comfort of the distance that the very act of male impersonation creates. As Chris Straayer notes, these films ‘offer spectators a momentary trespassing of society’s accepted boundaries for gender and sexual

⁸² Wilson, ‘From the Drawing Room to the Stage’, p.296.

⁸³ The most obvious example of which is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) which explicitly links transvestism to overt sexual practices.

⁸⁴ Such as *Victor Victoria* (1982) which depicts Julie Andrews as a struggling actress who resorts to both male and female impersonation in order to gain employment.

⁸⁵ Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (1985; London: Routledge, 1992), p.58.

behaviour'.⁸⁶ As in the case of Vesta Tilley, the viewer is excused from any implication of sexual deviancy because the action and sexual act are produced through the medium of performance and therefore can be assimilated into the realm of fantasy.

The scenes and performances themselves depict the explicit relations of gender and sexuality, but so too does the musical score of the film which highlights and underpins the *mis-en-scène*. The opening and closing credits of each episode are complemented by the song 'Human Nature', which was written by Andrew Davies and sung by John Bowe, who plays Walter Bliss (Kitty's husband and manager). The song, in the very upbeat tempo of a music hall tune, portrays the various sexual desires and machinations of men and women, but never explicitly declares whether the supposed suitor in the song is male or female. The chorus, with its rousing rendition of 'It's only human nature after all' (*TTVF*), suggests that whatever sexual proclivities a person has, ultimately that desire is merely an expression of the human condition, thereby refusing any implication of sexual deviancy in the actual film. This again is a metatextual performance for the audience which references the contemporary notion of sexual desire as an innate and 'natural' occurrence.⁸⁷ Likewise, when Nan and Kitty perform the song 'Following in Father's Footsteps', they are dressed and pretending to be men, which then elicits lesbian connotations from the line that says the 'Father' in the tune is 'just in front with a fine big gal, and I thought I'd have one as well' (*TTVF*). Both Nan and Kitty are singing to the audience the truth of their own relationship. Their fathers each had, or have, a girl, and they are merely following in his footsteps by having one to love as well.

⁸⁶ Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.42.

⁸⁷ This concept is often delineated in contemporary society such as in Lady Gaga's popular music song 'Born This Way' (2011)

In Diana Lethaby's establishment this is taken further with the starring role in Nan and Diana's affair being the sex toy which Diana keeps locked up in a chest containing other sexually explicit material. The strap-on dildo which is shown peaking round the corner of the doorway takes centre stage as the instrument of both pleasure and power. In the process of screenwriting Davies was concerned that the BBC might deem the sight of a dildo on prime-time television as inappropriate. He states that 'when I first read the book and came to the bit with the dildo, I thought, will the BBC let us do it? I'd be dreadfully disappointed if I had to cut it'.⁸⁸ The dildo, which in one scene is painted gold to match Nan's costume as Antinous, is posited as such an important feature of the sexual congresses between Nan and Diana that it begins to appear as though all the women in Diana's household are merely worshippers of the phallus. Such privileging of the male phallus in a very obviously female-orientated household is certainly fraught with difficulties. As Heilmann and Llewellyn point out, 'the fact that Davies's adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet* (BBC 2002) will be remembered as much for the golden phallus/dildo as anything about the narrative of women's rights presented in the novel is surely problematic'.⁸⁹ Even though Waters includes the scenes with the dildo in her novel, the sex toy is displayed as the ultimate source of enjoyment and authority in a household that requires no male master. All of the women at Felicity Place have eschewed male company and male dependence, so the prominence of this obvious phallic symbol literally intrudes onto the scenes of female sex.

The phallic symbol of power represented by the dildo is synonymous with the power that Davies and Sax hold over the adaptation process. They have control over the televisual production of Waters's text and in such a position have the editorial authority

⁸⁸ Davies interview on DVD extra features.

⁸⁹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.243.

to adapt, omit, and contract as they see fit. As Mel Kohlke argues, ‘the public stage of music hall, tavern and city streets is replaced by the peepshow of red-blooded male fantasy: a girl’s twosome.’⁹⁰ Thus, the lesbian sexual act is appropriated for a male heterosexual audience by configuring Nan, Kitty, and the other females involved in the sex scene as the objects of desire. The screenwriter Davies claims that the film is ‘like *Pride and Prejudice* with dirty bits’,⁹¹ and significantly, that ‘*men* are going to love it’.⁹² In this sense it seems as though Davies, as Waters’s punter who openly admits an interest in Victorian erotica and pornography, is attempting to depict a tale of cross-dressed lesbian love as a pornographic male fantasy of females displayed for heterosexual male erotic pleasure. ‘The determining male gaze’, asserts Laura Mulvey, ‘projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle’.⁹³ Davies and Sax’s *Tipping The Velvet* subsumes the lesbian gaze into such a ‘*leitmotif* of erotic spectacle’ for the heterosexual male viewer. Whilst the fantasy of lesbian sexual desire is still apparent, it becomes diluted by the male screenwriter and male director.

However, the film also permits, or opens up spaces for, other ‘forbidden’ erotic gratifications. As Mulvey goes on to argue, ‘the cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking). There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure

⁹⁰ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Review’ of *Tipping The Velvet* (Waters, 1998) and *Tipping The Velvet* (Davies and Sax, 2002), in *Women’s Studies Network Association Newsletter*, Vol. 42 (February 2003), p.42.

⁹¹ Davies interview on DVD extra features.

⁹² Cozens, ‘Davies Boasts of “Filthy” Lesbian Drama’, *The Guardian* (29 September 2002), no pagination.

⁹³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1989), p.19.

in being looked at'.⁹⁴ Both Nan and Kitty take enjoyment from gazing at each other, as well as displaying themselves for the music hall audiences. Yet the actors who play Nan (Rachael Stirling) and Kitty (Keeley Hawes) also display themselves for the televisual spectator. Waters, when writing the novel, wondered if the act of cross-dressing for the music hall stage carried 'any sort of queer or erotic charge for anyone in the audience'.⁹⁵ Judging by Davies's response and the sensationalism which surrounded the airing of the film, the answer is clearly in the affirmative, and although queered, this queering is undermined by the heteronormative privileging. The transvestite act, though, has the ability to appeal to a wide-ranging demographic. As Straayer notes, 'films in which characters cross-dress for sexual disguise are consistently popular with gay and lesbian audiences, despite requisite romantic endings with homosexual couplings'.⁹⁶ *Tipping The Velvet*, whilst appropriated for the male gaze, does still hold some appeal to female viewers. Although criticised by Miranda Suit (spokesperson for the lobby group Mediamarch), for 'catering for a minority audience when the BBC is supposed to be catering for the mainstream audience that pays the licence fee',⁹⁷ there is still an element of sexual eroticism for the heterosexual male *and* the heterosexual female viewer. Indeed, even Waters herself found the filming of the adaptation a queer and erotic viewing pleasure. Waters was invited to play a small cameo role, as a member of the music hall audience, and during the incident involving Kitty throwing her rose to the prettiest girl in the audience Waters experienced the same desire as her character Nan. Waters declares, 'there was I in the audience, dressed in a sort of bonnet and a wig and gloves looking at this moment which had actually been a seminal moment for me in forming the book, this gorgeous male impersonator on stage and Keeley [Hawes] really

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.16.

⁹⁵ Waters interview on DVD extra features.

⁹⁶ Straayer, *Deviant Eyes*, p.42.

⁹⁷ Conlan, 'BBC Faces Obscenity Row Over "Shocking" New Lesbian Drama'.

is jaw-droppingly gorgeous in her boy's suit and there was I wanting her to throw her rose at me'.⁹⁸ In that curious moment, Waters the author became both the audience member in the music hall and the desiring, yet distanced, viewer of the male impersonator, like those watching the act on screen.

The sacrifice that Waters has to pay for the benefit of seeing her novel being adapted and brought to a primetime, mainstream audience is that the very explicitly lesbian drama is appropriated for the heterosexual male gaze. Likewise, Waters also notes that 'the drama, the TV adaptation is more sort of bam, bam, bam, bam and that was quite a shock in a way for me. I wanted to hang on, sort of, to particular moments and draw them out'.⁹⁹ The subtlety and nuanced inflection of cross-dressed lesbian desire that the novel elicits is abandoned in favour of the more unequivocal and blatant display of female sexuality on the screen. Such a requisition and editing of literary material in the adaptation process is an unfortunate and frequent consequence of reducing a four hundred and seventy page novel into a three hour film. The reward for Waters surrendering her characters' lingering looks and descriptive passages is that her novel was brought to a much larger audience, who may be inspired, after watching the adaptation, to then purchase her literary works. Yet, such an emphasis on the financial gain which is achieved by adapting a novel is somewhat unsettling. As Hutcheon notes, 'even in our postmodern age of cultural recycling, something – perhaps the commercial success of adaptations – would appear to make us uneasy'.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps it is the fact that in the novel Nan and Kitty are clearly (cross-)dressing for the stage, but in the adaptation the undressing for the screen which occurs in the sex scenes suggests a more exploitative endeavour.

⁹⁸ Waters interview on DVD extra features.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p.3.

Just as Waters had to sacrifice overall control of her text when it was adapted, so too does Nan also have to forfeit her autonomy as an individual. In her pursuit of identity, gender expression and lesbian lust she succumbs to the machinations of her host and keeper at Felicity Place, Diana Lethaby. Nan declares that ‘for the most part she kept me close and displayed me at home. The boy they called me. She contrived tableaux so they could feast their eyes on me’ (*TTVF*). Nan becomes the exhibition of flesh for the Sapphic house guests who take erotic delight in gazing upon her naked form. She has effectively been manufactured and moulded into a living work of art, to be admired, lusted over, and sacrificed for the scopophilic gratification of the viewing women and the televisual audience, to the point where she loses any sense of herself and ‘couldn’t imagine a life beyond [Diana’s] shaping’ (*TTVF*). The concept of ‘living art’ and ‘creating’ a lover, is discussed in more detail in the following chapter of this thesis with regard to Rachilde’s *Monsieur Venus* (1884).

Conclusion: ‘All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players’¹⁰¹

From the Victorian music hall stage to the city streets of London the cross-dresser demands attention, provokes debate, and occasionally creates unease. The stage is the space in which the transvestite can safely explore the boundaries of performative gender. A theatrical world, and particularly the stage in the music hall, opens up such an arena for comprehending our society, our ideologies, our assumptions (both positive and negative), and our fears. The ‘theatre’, according to Baker, ‘is central to our understanding of the world around us; it absorbs, analyses, presents, sometimes dictates,

¹⁰¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Sc. 7, l.139-40.

re-interprets and often disturbs'.¹⁰² The transvestite, in a similar fashion, enables us to explore, 're-interpret', 'present' and 'disturb' our concepts of gender. But once taken off the stage it becomes dangerous to the general public, as in the example of Elizabeth Cree and her murderous 'acts'. The Boulton and Park case similarly emphasises the fact that gender masquerade is also a *perceived* danger to the moral fabric of society due the homosexual potential which is often implied. Significantly, Boulton and Park were arrested inside a theatre, but were not at the time involved in a performance on the actual stage, they were merely patrons. The media sensationalism which surrounded the airing of *Tipping The Velvet* on BBC television also tends to suggest that when on-screen the cross-dresser is *still* a threat to public decency in the twenty-first century, once again due to the rather more explicit scenes of lesbian sexuality. Likewise, the cross-dresser him/herself is also vulnerable to peril when venturing on to the streets. In Waters's *Tipping The Velvet* Nan's urban soliciting for customers as a 'renter' place her in the path of sexual predators, be they male or female. The implicit threat that cross-dressing poses to the transvestite or to the public at large can only ever be assuaged by physical confinement within the controlled environment of the stage or, in Nan's case, the working-class community which views dress as a practicality rather than a shaping of the self. The only cross-dresser analysed in this chapter who is able to avoid any kind of danger or derogation is Vesta Tilley, who carefully constructed and rigidly adhered to a distinctly 'feminine' persona when not on the music hall stage.

The implied threat that the cross-dresser symbolises is largely due to the ideological assumptions of gender and sexual expectations, behaviour and codes which the transvestite undermines. 'The male impersonator', Vicinus states, 'can never be a boy, however skilled she might be in representing one, but she can draw attention to the

¹⁰² Baker, *Drag*, p.14.

follies of the male order – and provide an opening for fantasies of empowerment, sexual and otherwise'.¹⁰³ Such 'fantasies' do indeed become embodied by the transvestite; Elizabeth Cree dominates the inhabitants of London, Nan, Kitty and Vesta Tilley enjoy enormous success in their careers, and the televisual adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet* permitted audiences to fantasize about gender and sexual alternatives. The stage, the novel, and the screen all show the ability of gender masquerade to subvert the ideological bastion of the gender binary. The liminal space of the transvestite between genders resonates with the phantasmagorical space of the theatrical stage and the realm of illusion that is film. Notions of truth and appearance are replaced by concepts of authenticity and artifice.

The adaptation of gender from female to male and vice versa, such as performed by the male/female impersonator, is equivalent to the adaptation process from music hall stage, to the annals of history, to the neo-Victorian novel, and ultimately resulting in filmic production on the twenty-first-century television screen. Gender adaptation is thus synonymous with the neo-Victorian project of (re)vision and (re)presentation. The music hall and the gender impersonation act are adapted and adopted into historical research, which is then utilised as inspiration for neo-Victorian adaptation in fiction and film. Music hall, Bailey notes, is 'an institution which for much of its history has been represented as an agent of moral and cultural degeneration [and] became part of the World We Have Lost, by a kind of reverse Whiggery in which the past becomes authentic and the present embattled with the hybrid, the artificial, and the alien'.¹⁰⁴ The 'hybrid, the artificial, and the alien' which Bailey refers to are all epithets that could quite easily be levelled at the male or female impersonator. The process of adaptation

¹⁰³ Vicinus, 'Turn-of-the-Century Male Impersonation', p.195.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Bailey, 'Introduction' to Bailey, Peter (ed.) *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p.xiv.

and the act of gender impersonation is in constant conflict with societal assumptions regarding the established and often patriarchal value of verisimilitude. Just as the cross-dresser can alter his/her gender, so too can (re)productions of the 'Victorian' period be remodelled. Likewise, while Waters's paratextual cover image depicts a pair of feminine shoes, on the DVD of the film there is an explicit picture of Hawes and Stirling, not in dapper suits but wearing 'Victorian' underwear and corsets and seemingly about to embark in another bout of lesbian passion. Unfortunately, the Davies and Sax filmic adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet* fails to convert the disruptive potential of Waters's novel, ultimately regressing to the simplistic concept of a cross-dressed lesbian desire appropriated as a heterosexual male fantasy. As Kohlke asserts, 'the filmmakers' alterations re-affirm traditional patriarchal binaries (Madonna/angel of the house versus madwoman/whore) that Waters subverts through complex textual/sexual politics'.¹⁰⁵ Thus, by eschewing the sexual politics that are implicit in Waters's novel, Davies and Sax effectively disregard the crisis of sexuality which is foregrounded by the act of gender impersonation.

Whilst for Waters the concept of cross-dressing on and off the music hall stage represents lesbian sexual desire, gender masquerade is not always synonymous with homosexuality. In the film the majority of scenes depicting lesbian physical affection and explicit sexual contact are portrayed inside the confines of a closed space, be it the music hall itself, the Sapphic house of Diana Lethaby, or the liberal home environment of the Banner household. 'Nancy and Florence's kiss', Kohlke points out, 'stands as the only undisguised public demonstration of lesbian desire in the film, with all others articulated through the masquerade of professional acting or cross-dressing'.¹⁰⁶ In this

¹⁰⁵ Kohlke, 'Review', p.42

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.42.

sense the cross-dressing of Nan allows the lesbian potential to be expressed, but not openly and publicly. Although the lesbian is no longer ‘apparitional’,¹⁰⁷ she is still hidden from view, that is, unless she appears dressed as a man. However, in other literary instances of transvestism the act of wearing the clothing of the opposite gender can result in a variety of responses and crises. Such crises, namely those of sexuality, resulting from the act of cross-dressing are the subject of the following chapter which examines Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), and Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune* (2005).

¹⁰⁷ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Chapter 4: Cross-Dressing and the Crisis of Sexuality



Fig. 15, Aubrey Beardsley, 'Mademoiselle de Maupin' (1898)

How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts? (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*).¹

As the opening quotation to this chapter asks, is it possible to understand, unpack and effectively define sexual identity when gender can be so easily queered by the transvestite figure? Just as Nancy Astley in *Tipping the Velvet* has to negotiate her sexuality through her various relationships and gender masquerades, so too do the transvestite figures in Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2002), and Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus* (1884) embark on sexual identity quests. This chapter, however, attempts to investigate the crises of sexuality by exploding the frame of strict neo-Victorianism and comparing two nineteenth-century

¹ Judith Butler, 'Preface, 1999', *Gender Trouble* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2006), p.xi.

French texts with a contemporary American novel that is set in early nineteenth-century Britain. The main reason for this stems from the fact that, while there are instances of gender subversion in nineteenth-century British literature, there are very few texts which depict cross-dressers experiencing a crisis of sexuality; therefore, it has been necessary to turn to contemporaneous French literature in order to explore this topic. In a similar way, this chapter is concerned with the queering of gender and sexuality and also breaking through the boundaries of the research approach to neo-Victorianism, by examining texts which sit at the very margins of the genre. *Misfortune*, in many ways, evidences the Baudrillardian concern with simulacra and simulation, as detailed in the introduction to this thesis. Unlike *Tipping the Velvet*, *James Miranda Barry*, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* which engage directly with (neo-)Victorianism, Stace's novel represents a pastiche of a pastiche which results in the past being depicted as a mere notional or arbitrary option while the act of transvestism is foregrounded as the ultimate contemporary concern. All three texts indeed are connected by this over-arching theme and demonstrate that gender expressions and sexuality have *always* troubled, challenged and interested society.

The first section, which analyses the sexual crises provoked by the cross-dressing antics of the eponymous Madeleine de Maupin, contains a *mise en abyme* with the Shakespearean play *As You Like It* being performed by the main protagonists and has the effect of both emphasising, and simultaneously undermining, the performance of gender performativity. Just as in Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*, 'it was a sort of play within a play, an unseen drama unknown to the rest of the audience, which we were acting out for our own benefit and which symbolically told the story of our lives and expressed our most secret desires' (*MdeM*:244). However, the similarities between nineteenth-century texts and their contemporary neo-Victorian counterparts do not end there. In both *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and *Monsieur Venus* there are numerous

references to the human body as a sculpture. Whereas Nan, acting as a living work of art in the Sapphic house of Diana Lethaby, portrays Antinous, these texts frame their human/sculpture depictions with implied symbolic connections to the Pygmalion myth but, as in Nan's performance, the sculpted figure is crucially linked to sexual desire.² As d'Albert in Gautier's text suggests, 'a sculpture contains all the reality which something false can possess. It can be viewed from many different sides; it casts a shadow and can be touched. The only difference between your sculptured mistress and a real one is that she is a bit harder and does not speak, two quite unimportant defects!' (*MdeM*:232). This raises the issue of a non-reciprocal relationship between an admirer and an inanimate object because the sculpture cannot return the desire. The body as a work of art, though, is a common theme in transvestite narratives as the cross-dressers are constantly aware of appearance, self-image and desire, whether that is a desire to be the opposite gender, or sexual desire, as was the specific case with Nan.

In many ways the social construction of gender is mirrored in the construction of sexual identities and categories. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the sexologists in the late nineteenth century began to examine, define and classify sexual proclivities. For example, as Matthew Sweet points out, 'in Britain during the 1880s and 1890s, before the H-word [homosexual] caught on, same-sex lovers were known as Uranians, Satodists, Inverts, Urnings and persons of "contrary sexual instinct"'.³ However, the various sexualities that were categorised by these sexologists become complicated when the transvestite is involved. Is a man dressed as a woman, or a woman dressed as a man, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or asexual? Does the act of gender masquerade influence, alter, or determine sexuality and desire? Or conversely,

² Martha Vicinus links sexual desire and the use of classical myths when she states that 'in addition to literary precedents, fin-de-siècle writers refashioned classical myths and historical figures...They also compared their fictional characters to such well-known boy lovers as Hyacinth, Ganymede, and Antinous, alerting an inner circle to the implicit sexual message.' Martha Vicinus, 'The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (1994), p.94.

³ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.197.

does the sexuality of a person affect, or create, their identification with a specific gender? As Alan Sinfield declares,

two distinct aspects of the sex/gender system are in play, then. One is structured in gender identity...the other is structured in object-choice...To be sure, they are bound to become tangled together, nonetheless, they are analytically separate, and by no means necessarily either homologous or in a permanent relation.⁴

In other words, there need not necessarily be any profound association between gender and sexual desire, but there is clearly some link between the two, otherwise both gender and sexuality would be permanently fluid, in perpetual motion, and utterly undefinable. The most obvious connection between gender and sexual desire is clothing. We dress to express who we are, who we wish to be, to communicate our gender (or not, as the case may be) and also to attract a prospective lover. 'To decode this vestimentary language', Valerie Steele asserts, 'it is necessary to realize that layers of meaning are woven into every article of dress. And, although it is unlikely that your clothing "says" anything very specific about your sexual attitudes and behaviour, at the deepest level the message is sexual'.⁵ Clothing, whether masculine, feminine, unisex, a uniform, casual wear, or even costume, ultimately conveys the message we want the world to understand about ourselves.

While clothing can 'say' many things about us it is, on the most profound level, only ever a covering and a superficial message that it is often changed depending on the context and/or environment of the wearer and, as shown by the cross-dressers in this thesis, it can be employed as a disguise, an expression of gender identification, a means of access to a previously prohibited realm, and also as a way of negotiating individual sexuality. As Patricia Duncker points out with regard to the clothing of Madeleine de Maupin, 'gender identities become ambiguous and unstable and heterosexuality is

⁴ Alan Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p.86.

⁵ Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.39.

displaced as the prevailing norm of social and sexual behaviour'.⁶ The clothes we wear, as was the case for the Victorians before us, have the ability to disrupt simple conclusions regarding the gender/sexuality matrix. If nothing else the transvestite can teach us that dress as a symbol of gender, and/or sexual identity, is a slippery, and often confusing, notion. However, even though the garments themselves can carry ambiguous messages concerning the individual wearing them, they are an extremely personal part of our everyday lives. As Steele also notes, 'because clothing is intimately connected to the physical self and expresses a particular "body image," the study of fashion may offer the historian "a good index to attitudes about the body," and about sexuality'.⁷ One of the important aspects of transvestism that this chapter examines is the idea of cross-dressing opening up sexual options, both for the transvestite him/herself and also their potential and actual lovers. Does gender masquerade necessarily allow for a bisexual identity? For 'one of the difficulties encountered in the analysis of bisexuality', Dorothy Kelly declares, 'stems from its very nature as a heterogeneous concept. Since bisexuality undermines the traditional definitions of male and female, one can no longer speak coherently about those concepts'.⁸ If cross-dressing creates a liminal 'third' space of gender, does bisexuality offer an analogous 'third' option to the heterosexual and homosexual binary? And if this is the case, do nineteenth-century texts and contemporary neo-Victorian novels deal with these issues in a similar fashion? Or is it simply the case that, as Sarah Gamble argues, 'what fascinates us most about the Victorians is our view of the period as one of extreme sexual rectitude and moral

⁶ Patricia Duncker, 'Introduction' to Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835; London: Penguin, 2005), p.xiii.

⁷ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, p.85.

⁸ Dorothy Kelly, *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p.4.

hypocrisy’,⁹ and the neo-Victorian texts are then performing acts of necrophilia and appropriating the titillation factor for today’s readership?

‘Your costume does not lend itself to verbal declarations’ (MdeM:289): *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and the confusion of sexuality

Théophile Gautier’s 1835 novel depicts Madeleine de Maupin, a female cross-dressed in masculine clothing, as the eponymous hero/ine. The novel revolves around the crises in both gender and sexual expression that are lived through and exhibited by the transvestite. In many ways the title of this section reveals the confusion between dress and sexual identity, for the gender transgressor as well as the other characters, d’Albert and Rosette, who desire or are desired by Madeleine de Maupin; one can wear clothing of a particular gender, but ‘verbal declarations’, actions, or sexual desire may prove to be contrary to those very garments. When Madeleine dresses as Théodore, her costume defies articulation with regard to the gender and sexual categories that proliferate in nineteenth-century French society. Gautier’s original inspiration for the character of Madeleine stems from the historical persona of Madeleine de Maupin who, according to Duncker, ‘lived in the seventeenth century. She was a professional singer who cross-dressed, took lovers of both sexes, had a formidable reputation as a swordsman and was involved in sexual scandals and plots’.¹⁰ Gautier draws on the sexual and gendered connotations and complexities which are produced by the act of cross-dressing.

The novel, in a mixture of epistolary entries and intrusive, but not always omniscient, narration begins with the character of d’Albert searching for his ideal of feminine beauty. He embarks on a love affair with the experienced Rosette but during a country-house visit to his lover, d’Albert discovers that she is also being courted by an

⁹ Sarah Gamble, “‘You cannot impersonate what you are’: Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel”, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 20 (2009), p.128.

¹⁰ Duncker, ‘Introduction’, p.xiii.

enigmatic young man named Théodore. Théodore is, in fact, Madeleine de Maupin in gender disguise, but this does not stop d'Albert falling in love with what he perceives to be a man, resulting in a personal crisis of gender and sexuality. Madeleine's reasoning for dressing as Théodore and effectively infiltrating the male realm is to choose a lover from a position which allows her to view men as they naturally are rather than believe the superficial acts of politeness, bravery and charm that they usually perform when in female company.¹¹ D'Albert's courtship of Rosette reveals the obsession with superficiality that Madeline is hoping to avoid in her search for a partner. The love triangle between the three main protagonists becomes even more complicated when they decide to stage a production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The play-within-the-novel, in which Madeleine, as Théodore, takes on the role of Rosalind, who also cross-dresses as Ganymede, aids in the confounding and eliding of gender and sexual boundaries. In Gautier's novel homosexuality and gender subversion are treated very sympathetically. The narrator appears to condone Madeleine's actions whilst simultaneously d'Albert is portrayed as narrow-minded and superficial. The multi-layered acts of Madeleine's transvestism disclose to d'Albert a femininity that eases his anxiety. The culmination of the novel sees Madeleine/Théodore/Rosalind engage in both heterosexual and lesbian sexual intercourse with first d'Albert and then Rosette. Eventually Madeleine leaves the lovers, hoping that the memory of their separate liaisons will bring d'Albert and Rosette together and reinforce their love for each other.

In many ways, as Marlene Barsoum asserts, 'Gautier is in feminine disguise, figuratively, in the same way that Madeleine/Théodore is in masculine attire; the author

¹¹ For a similar instance of a female cross-dressing in order to witness men 'as they really are', see 'The Interlude' in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), where Angelica dresses as a young man and also seeks male company.

and his characters seem to want to “impersonate” or incorporate the opposite sex’.¹² *Mademoiselle de Maupin* itself is a hybrid novel which, like the transvestite, alters in form and utilises both masculine and feminine narratives interchangeably and without warning. The narrative technique of intertwining d’Albert’s epistolary discussions with a confidante, which are mirrored with Madeleine’s similar letters, are often undermined or, at the very least, challenged by the narrator’s occasional interjections. This not only highlights the many facets of gender and sexuality but also offers explorations into these very subjects from differing perspectives. Given that the novel was originally published in French, ‘it is no mean feat’, Christopher Robinson points out, ‘in a gender-conscious language to manipulate the pronouns for an entire chapter in such a way that elision always disguises the vital him/her or some periphrasis helps to avoid the issue’.¹³ The edition employed in this chapter, though, is the English translation of the text, but it still manages to portray the various complexities, confusions, and subversions of both gender and sexuality which Gautier was exploring in his original. One of the main themes apparent throughout the novel is the query of how sexuality is experienced and negotiated. This appears to pre-empt and address Butler’s question: ‘how do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?’.¹⁴ Gautier’s text, 150 years before Butler’s question, ultimately explores the relationship between gender and sexuality, whilst simultaneously undermining the very categories of definition regarding gender, biological sex and sexuality, namely: masculine/transgender/feminine, male/hermaphrodite/female, and heterosexual/bisexual/homosexual.

¹² Marlene Barsoum, *Théophile Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin: Towards a Definition of the “Androgynous Discourse”* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p.21.

¹³ Christopher Robinson, *French Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (London: David & Charles, 1978), p.162.

¹⁴ Butler, ‘Preface’, p.xi.

The transvestite, often unwittingly, has the ability to emphasise or even undermine the gender ideals that proliferate in society. In order for a cross-dresser to ‘pass’ convincingly as the opposite gender, such ideals and gender-normative behaviours must be utilised, adhered to and re-enacted. However, as we saw in the previous chapter concerning the performance of the performativity of gender, the act of drag or gender impersonation relies heavily on the exaggeration of these models. Either way, the transvestite must understand the ideals which s/he is imitating or parodying. In many ways, it seems that the female-to-male cross-dresser, such as Madeleine de Maupin, often has a cultural image which she can emulate; for example, in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* d’Albert declares that ‘people did not feminize the gods or heroes they wanted to make attractive. They conformed to a type, strong but delicate at the same time, and always male’ (*MdeM*:181). Although this speech by d’Albert appears as a pre-emptive justification for his love of Théodore, it also suggests that in nineteenth-century France, the epitome of the ideal was often found in the classical Greek masculine form. D’Albert’s detailed description of his feminine ideal, though, also reveals some important aspects of gender mores and the perception of ideal beauty. D’Albert declares that his *imagined* ideal woman

is twenty-six years old...She is not uneducated but is not yet a woman of the world...She is of middling height...plump rather than thin...Blonde with black eyes, a fair complexion...and a rosy, sparkling smile...a small rounded bosom, thin wrists...mobile hips, [and] wide shoulders. (*MdeM*:50-51)

Barsoum refers to d’Albert’s list of beauty expectations as a ‘compendium of material characteristics’,¹⁵ and rightly so. D’Albert places his entire concept of ideal beauty on the superficial features which are apparently appealing to heterosexual men. As Barsoum goes on further, d’Albert’s ‘desire, which is mediated by art, is rooted in the

¹⁵ Barsoum, *Théophile Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin*, p.23.

impassioned subject rather than in the “nature” of the object of desire since it is mediated by a fixed model’.¹⁶ D’Albert is obsessed by outward appearances, but only in so far as they live up to his *idea* of the ideal; his desire is thus formed from an imagined woman, who could not possibly exist in any real sense because the moment a woman matching his criteria shows herself, she becomes *too real* and therefore fails to be an *idea* any longer. A conflict, therefore, occurs between the perception of ideal beauty and the bodily appearance of that beauty. It can never exist, only ever be imagined. Even Gautier himself appears to be rather sceptical about the idea of the ideal feminine. In his famous Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, aged twenty-six, he writes that ‘it would seem quite normal, especially when you are twenty, to prefer some immoral, pert, coquettish and feminine little thing, with tumbling curls and a skirt somewhat on the short side, with provocative eyes and feet, a flush on her cheek, laughter on her lips and her heart on her sleeve’ (*MdeM*:3). Yet, Gautier’s description is laden with irony and disdain and, unlike his character d’Albert, he appears to understand that superficial beauty and behavioural ideals are purely imagined and created rather than existent in reality. D’Albert, on the other hand, fails to grasp the fact that desire, and particularly sexual desire, can often be said to be a psychological drive and fantasy, which is then transferred and mapped onto a corporeal entity. The transvestite, though, and by extension all cross-dressing narratives, possess the ability to disrupt, undermine, or even explode, such ideals of beauty perception and sexual desire.

When Madeleine, in the guise of Théodore, is first described, sexual attraction and gender ambiguity collide. The narrator relays that

the two or three buttons on his jerkin which had been undone to allow him to breathe more freely afforded you a glimpse of a delightful white patch of soft, round flesh through the gap in his fine holland chemise, and the beginning of a certain curve difficult to explain on the chest of a young boy; if you looked very

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20.

carefully, you might also have seen that his hips were a little too developed.
(*MdeM*:134)

The gap between the chemise and the flesh represents the gap between the binary genders that Madeleine, as a cross-dresser, inhabits. Simultaneously, the voyeuristic and sensuous glimpse pertaining to the ‘curve’ of that very flesh depicts the erotic desire that both Rosette and d’Albert experience when in Madeleine’s presence. Although Madeleine herself is intent on ‘passing’ as a man, the narrator undermines her endeavour by informing the reader of the female shape underneath the masculine clothing. This suspicion is reiterated by d’Albert when, unsure of Madeleine’s sex, he stipulates that ‘the manner in which he dressed made you sense that underneath these manly garments lay something feminine. There was something wider about the hips and fuller in the bosom, and something about the graceful hang of the cloth that you did not see on a man, and it left you in not much doubt as to the person’s sex’ (*MdeM*:236). Even though d’Albert had previously imagined his ideal beauty as ultra feminine, his sexual desire for what appears to be a man thus disrupts this ideal. This is partly to do with the fact that Madeleine presents a particularly convincing male persona in Théodore, but more importantly it is concerned with d’Albert’s, and indeed society’s, strict definitions of what female and male beauty actually are. As Madeleine herself points out, ‘many men are more female than I am. All that is female about me is my bosom, a few more curves and more delicate hands. The skirt is round my waist, not my mind. It is often the case that the sex of the soul does not correspond to that of the body and that is a contradiction which invariably creates dreadful confusion’ (*MdeM*:260). Madeleine notes that concepts of masculinity and femininity are very slippery and are often subject to alteration or even elision, yet more importantly she also highlights the division between the gender of the mind and the gender of the body, which are not always synonymous and are often in conflict or opposition.

Likewise d'Albert freely admits, with regard to his concept of the masculine ideal, that

I have heard that many of them have bitterly criticised my dress, saying that my style is too effeminate; that my hair is curled and greased more carefully than it should be; and, given the fact that I don't have a beard either, that it makes me look like a ridiculous dandy of the worst kind. They say that I dress in rich, gaudy clothes like you see in the theatre and am more actor than man. (*MdeM*:77)

D'Albert is being openly 'criticised' by others for his effete dress style and a careful attention to his dandified appearance: d'Albert too provides the reader with evidence of gender ambiguity and in many ways mirrors Madeleine's cross-dressing. It is significant, though, that initially he fails to see Madeleine's blurring of the gender boundary when he himself is exhibiting similar slippages and uncertainties regarding the distinction between masculine and feminine ideals. As I mentioned earlier, the transvestite must have a clear understanding of the gender s/he is imitating and Madeleine certainly has a firm grasp of the masculine ideal she is attempting to portray. She writes to her confidante Graciosa that when they were young girls at boarding school the ideal male was 'a daring, dashing young man with black hair and a moustache, big spurs, feathers, sword, a sort of lover-cum-matamore,¹⁷ and you were greatly taken with the idea of a conquering hero. You dreamed only of a man who would fight duels, scale heights and be miraculously devoted to you' (*MdeM*:187). In contrast to d'Albert's lifestyle of foppish frivolity and vacuous inaction, Madeleine views the ideal male as a man of daring deeds, and equipped with the all-important facial hair that d'Albert so obviously lacks. Madeleine thus provides the perfect foil to d'Albert's lengthy description of female beauty; she exhibits all of the traits (facial hair excepting) of her own masculine ideal whilst her actual flesh, beneath the clothing and behaviour, simultaneously hint at the desirable female hidden within. Once d'Albert

¹⁷ A matamore is braggart or show off.

views Madeleine as Rosalind, he immediately sees the female body, but it is interesting to note that he found Madeleine as Théodore desirable too but for very different reasons. D'Albert's desire for Théodore is founded upon the external behaviour and Théodore's apparent grace and beauty, rather than the actual biological sex of Madeleine. Madeleine's clothing, both as Rosalind and as Théodore, belie and confuse the sexual identity of her person. As Duncker asserts, 'we know the colour, style and texture of each character's clothes, but although clothes signal class and social identity, they do not reveal the truth about the wearer's erotic identity, nor the core of their imagined self. Whenever we wear clothes we are indulging in a complex act of self-fashioning'.¹⁸ Such 'self-fashioning' is surely the transvestite's privilege and aim, to fashion not only the social identity but also the gender which the outside world views, translates and accepts as 'reality' when in fact that very self-creation undermines the act of translating and understanding the gender code.

The 'self-fashioning' that Madeleine undertakes is multiple and complex. The layer upon layer of gender meaning evinced by her various masquerades ultimately complicate her own sexual identity and also problematise how other characters view her as a desirable/desiring object/subject. For a multitude of reasons the cross-dresser is forced to repress his/her sexual desire, whether that be to avoid detection; to remain unmolested; or even simply to avoid the sexual confusion which often ensues when gender ambiguity and sexual relations collide. As Marjorie Garber maintains, 'the bed is overstuffed with too many personae: 1) the naïve or innocent partner; 2) the cross-dresser in his or her assumed persona, and 3) the man or woman inside the cross-dressed disguise, who both fears and desires exposure, both fears to express, and

¹⁸ Duncker, 'Introduction', p.xix.

expresses, desire'.¹⁹ Madeleine herself is both confused and restricted when she ponders how she can manage Rosette's sexual advances as well as her own sexual desire. She states,

I was racking my brains for some honourable way out of this difficult situation, but couldn't find one; I was cornered and it seemed that Rosette was determined not to leave my bedroom in the same state as she had entered it. Her dress was alarmingly informal, which did not bode well. I myself only had on an unbuttoned robe which would not have afforded my identity adequate protection, so I was exceedingly anxious as to the outcome of this confrontation. (*MdeM*:291)

Madeleine is not only literally 'cornered' by Rosette in her attempts to seduce Théodore, but she is also 'cornered' psychologically by her gender disguise: dressed as a man she should be able to enjoy the sexual dalliance, but remains restricted by her femaleness which she views as an obstacle to sexual relations with another woman. Her lack of knowledge concerning same-sex sexuality effectively traps her in a conundrum that conflicts with the supposed freedom that gender transvestism affords many other characters such as James Barry, Elizabeth Cree, Nancy Astley and Kitty Butler. 'Given the equivocal situation created by her transvestism', notes Christopher Rivers, 'Madeleine must try simultaneously to respond to and rebuff her partner's advances, all the while carefully noting the signs of the other woman's sensations'.²⁰ Madeleine's sexuality becomes, like her gender, confused, liminal and, eventually, polymorphous.

While Madeleine struggles to comprehend her sexuality, Rosette has no such qualms. Although initially she embarks on what the reader can guess at as a multitude of heterosexual relationships, she later enjoys a lesbian dalliance with Madeleine who

¹⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.203.

²⁰ Christopher Rivers, 'Intelligibles pour une Femme Honnête: Sexuality, Textuality and Knowledge in Diderot's "*La Religieuse*" and Gautier's "*Mademoiselle de Maupin*"', *Romantic Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (1995), p.7.

enters her boudoir significantly dressed as Rosalind, and not as either Théodore or Ganymede. The scene in which Madeleine and Rosette consummate their love and desire is only ever implied by the narrator and, contrary to the detailed description of the sex scene between Madeleine and d'Albert, it is largely left to the reader's imagination. Madeleine's previous ignorance and confusion regarding lesbian sexuality is assuaged by Rosette and becomes a knowing exploration of same-sex desire. In many ways the lesbian sexual desire exhibited by both Madeleine and Rosette portrays the often unrepresentable nature of female homosexuality in literature. This reflects Terry Castle's statement that 'the lesbian is never with us...but always somewhere else; in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night'.²¹ In *Mademoiselle de Maupin* the character of Rosette depicts a double-layered transition between female heterosexuality and female homosexuality. The character of d'Albert, though, proves more complicated when the subject of sexuality is closely examined.

D'Albert embodies a triple-layered evolution in his sexual desire. At the start of the novel he is resolutely heterosexual and obsessed with finding his ideal female, and feminine, partner. However, just as the lesbian sex act between Madeleine and Rosette is not explicitly narrated, d'Albert's sexual liaison with Rosette is represented as a row of dots across the page, '.....' (*MdeM*:103), therefore it too is merely imagined by the reader. Yet, d'Albert's own confusion and bafflement regarding his sexual feelings for Théodore are explained and relayed in much more elaborate detail. The signifier of d'Albert's complex sexual proclivities lies in his exclamation that he is 'being dragged violently off-centre. My nature is not one of those which others seek out, one of those fixed stars to which other bodies gravitate. I wander aimlessly across

²¹ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.2.

the fields of heaven like a meteor off-course, waiting to meet the planet whose satellite I must become' (*MdeM*:117). D'Albert's sexuality is a Shakespearean 'wandering bark'²² and is most certainly 'off-centre'. If the centre is configured as the normative heterosexual matrix, then off-centre represents any other sexual combination, which in fact all of the protagonists in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* can be said to embrace. D'Albert's hesitancy and turmoil regarding his sexuality is borne out of the heteronormativity that exists in society, both in nineteenth-century Europe and indeed in contemporary society today. However, even before the appearance of Théodore, d'Albert seeks his perfectly beautiful and idealised sexual partner in the figure of the gender (and therefore sexually) ambiguous hermaphrodite. D'Albert declares, 'I have never desired anything so much as to meet, like the seer Tiresias²³ on the mountain, those serpents that make you change your sex. And what I envy the monstrous bizarre deities of India most for are their constant avatars and their numerous transformations' (*MdeM*:87). As a strictly heterosexual man seeking his idea of perfection d'Albert realises that the gender-ambiguous hermaphrodite has a wider scope of choice by effectively doubling the opportunity to find a mate if both sexes are available.

D'Albert eventually does find his ideal, but it happens to be in the form of Madeleine dressed as Théodore. D'Albert describes the moment of first seeing Théodore:

in all this provincial throng, the one I like most is a young horseman who arrived two or three days ago. I liked him straight away, and just seeing him climb down from his horse made me take a fancy to him. He is gracefulness itself. He is not very tall, but he is slim and neat-waisted. There is something smooth and sinuous in the way he walks and moves which is really lovely. (*MdeM*:130)

²² William Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 116' discusses love, stating in line 7 that 'It is the star to every wandering bark'.

²³ In Greek mythology Tiresias was a blind prophet who was turned into a woman for seven years for killing a pair of snakes. See www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/596811/Tiresias [accessed 22/1/12].

From the very outset of Théodore's appearance d'Albert becomes utterly besotted, but his obvious sexual attraction for the 'man' with the neat waist and the 'smooth and sinuous' movements then forces him to question his own sexuality, which he can only view in heterosexual terms: 'what a shame he's a man, or what a shame I am not a woman' (*MdeM*:130).²⁴ The very thought of homosexual desire is anathema to d'Albert, who, from very early in the novel, expresses his fear by pre-empting a descent 'into monstrous and unnatural ways through my dreams and aberrations' (*MdeM*:75). This initial anxiety concerning a 'monstrous' and 'unnatural' desire for a supposedly same-sex object of attraction is compounded when, later in the novel, d'Albert assumes that he has fallen completely in love with another man. Upon this realisation he embarks on a tirade of unbridled vehemence and confusion which is worth quoting at length. D'Albert declares

what a lunatic, sinful, odious passion it is that has possessed me! The shame of it will make me red forever more. It is the most deplorable of all my aberrations; there is no sense in it; I don't understand it; everything is mixed up inside me and turned topsy-turvy. I no longer know who I am or who others are. I'm uncertain whether I am man or woman. I have a horror of myself, I have peculiar, inexplicable urges and at times it seems as if I am losing my mind [...] I have tried to unravel the confused tangle in my soul. Finally, through all its veils I have uncovered the awful truth...Silvio, I am in love with...Oh no, I shall never be able to say it...I am in love with a man! (*MdeM*:166)

Clearly d'Albert's animosity towards male homosexuality is rooted in his cultural association of same-sex relations being viewed as sinful, unnatural and against societal expectations, but his confusion is borne out of his assumption that his own sexuality is determined by his sexual object choice of Théodore. It is interesting that the tirade itself includes descriptions of an 'awful' 'horror' at his 'peculiar, inexplicable urges', which he obviously feels he has no control over. D'Albert even struggles to actually name his

²⁴ A similar complication and questioning of gender roles occurs in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), when the eponymous hero first views the gender-ambiguous Sasha.

love for another man; his language falters and is punctuated with ellipses that represent his inability not only to comprehend his apparent homosexuality, but also emphasise that male homosexual desire is as marginalised and ghost-like as lesbianism appears to be in the text. The anxiety that d'Albert undergoes in his understanding of sexuality is a common phenomenon, though. Butler refers to 'the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in "becoming gay," the fear of losing one's place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly "same" gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology at the level of both sexuality and language'.²⁵ That what he perceives as homosexual desire seems inexpressible to d'Albert thus conforms to Butler's theory that, like gender, sexuality also enters a crisis of definition and representation. Likewise, such a crisis in d'Albert's perception of his own gender suggests that when the transvestite-as-love-object is desired, the categories of gender, biological sex, and sexuality become conflated, blurred, and ultimately elided. As Duncker purports, it culminates in

that unsettling moment when desire overwhelms its victim and flows in unfamiliar channels. It is also the famous moment, unprecedented and unparalleled in the history of modern literature, when a man comes out to himself, his confidante and his reader. Gautier suggests that no man can ever know his sexual self, because sexuality is slippery and unstable. And that no one is safe.²⁶

D'Albert's crisis, though, is only temporary. During the intertextual *mise en abyme*, Madeleine, d'Albert and Rosette's performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the sexual and gendered layers of the novel's protagonists appear to multiply exponentially. Rosette remains in the feminine gender role of Phoebe, d'Albert takes on the masculine role of Orlando, but Madeleine plays the part of Rosalind, who in the course of the play disguises herself as Ganymede: therefore we are presented with a

²⁵ Butler, 'Preface', p.xi-xii.

²⁶ Duncker, 'Introduction', p.xix.

woman (Madeleine), masquerading as a man (Théodore), playing the part of a woman (Rosalind), who is disguised as a man (Ganymede). Thus, layer upon layer of gender, and for that matter sexual transgression and perplexity should ensue. However, for d'Albert Madeleine's portrayal of Rosalind reveals the femininity he has so desperately longed for. He states that Madeleine as Rosalind is 'not in an empty disguise, but in a real costume. No longer in the ridiculous form of a young man, but with the features of the most enchanting of women' (*MdeM*:231). Although d'Albert's superficial opinion and concerns regarding beauty have already been discussed, it is clear that even when he eventually finds his ideal he still perceives only the external features which directly appeal to him. Madeleine, now in female dress, emphasises d'Albert's obsession with surface details and thus renders his remonstrations against his homosexual quandary null and void. His apprehension and distress soon return, though, when Madeleine, as Rosalind, is disguised as Ganymede, and is once more in masculine dress. D'Albert explains that 'when Théodore reappeared in the costume of a man, I once more fell into a state of gloom, worse than before' (*MdeM*:235). He is utterly unable to see past the outer clothing of his love-object. The clothes, it seems, maketh the man; they maketh the woman; and they maketh the sexual desire. This is partly due to the fact that d'Albert can never truly relinquish his idea of the ideal; he can never really appreciate the *real* over the *imagined*. Indeed, 'the sexual ambiguities of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*', notes Robinson, 'are used to symbolise the self yearning for a completion in love which is not attainable because reality is never totally transcended'.²⁷ D'Albert's confidence in his own concept of personal sexuality is shaken and undermined by the figure of the transvestite, yet even at the novel's conclusion he fails to understand that sexuality and desire are not a product of some mythical ideal, but rather the tangible and the real psychological, behavioural and physical traits that exist in either/both genders.

²⁷ Robinson, *French Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, p.114.

Madeleine, through her various investigations into gender and sexual mores, appreciates what d'Albert ignores, but she too undertakes an exploratory journey of sexual enlightenment and sensual education. During this process she undergoes four stages of transition from heterosexual (feelings and desires but not acted upon), to lesbian (desires similarly not acted upon), to heterosexual (intercourse with d'Albert), and then lesbian (intercourse with Rosette). As Rivers explains, Madeleine de Maupin is 'an erotic being prone to seduction and the strong pull of her own sexual feelings. However, it is important to note that the first sexual feelings [Gautier] has Madeleine experience are heterosexual, when she (in her male persona as Théodore) is sharing a bed in an inn with a drunken man'.²⁸ From this initiation into her own sexual identity, Madeleine does not immediately embark on a heterosexual relationship, but rather proceeds to court the attentions of Rosette. Yet Madeleine does not allow herself fully to experience a sexual relationship with another woman. Still in the guise of Théodore she declares to Rosette that 'I have often wanted to be able to love you, at least in the way that you wish; but between us lies an insurmountable obstacle, which I cannot tell you about' (*MdeM*:136). The 'obstacle' that appears to be so obstructive to her expression of desire is clearly her cross-dressed persona and clothing, even though that should, in the heterosexual matrix, be the enabler for such desires to be acted upon. Castle argues that 'lest Rosette or her would-be-lover bring into being some giddy new embodiment of love, the *amor impossibilia* must remain just that – a phantom or shadow in the comic narrative of desire'.²⁹ However, the added complication in the relationship between Madeleine and Rosette is the transvestite act. Although Madeleine looks, acts, and often feels like a man, she views her female body as the prohibiting tangible entity to her obvious desire. She bemoans that 'if I had been a young man, how

²⁸ Rivers, 'Intelligibles pour une Femme Honnête', p.5-6.

²⁹ Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, p.36.

I would have loved Rosette! How I would have adored her! Our souls really were made for one another, two pearls destined to melt into one! I should have made her ideas of love come true! Her character suited me perfectly, and I loved her kind of beauty' (*MdeM*:310). Even though Rosette seems to be Madeleine's ideal partner, it is not until she has experienced heterosexual sexual intercourse with d'Albert that she feels she can move on to a physical expression of lesbian desire with Rosette.

The narrator avoids a detailed description of the lesbian love scene and leaves it up to the reader's imagination to envision the act that took place, thus while the transvestite subversion of gender norms does not necessarily lead to a subversion of sexuality that can be openly declared, it remains, much like the act cross-dressing, marginalised, implied and inexpressible. The reader is told by the narrator that Rosette's maidservant found that 'the bed was rumpled and untidy and carried the imprint of two bodies. What is more, she showed me two pearls exactly like the ones Théodore was wearing in his hair when he played Rosalind. She found them in the bed as she was making it' (*MdeM*:333). The 'two pearls' found in the bed can obviously be interpreted as female clitorises which have been aroused in sensuous passion between the women. But, more importantly, it is significant that Madeleine, as Théodore, as Rosalind, chooses to experience heterosexual love, and is then knowledgeable enough, or fails to be fully satiated, and so embarks on a night of lesbian sexual delight. As Garber asserts, "truths" about gender and sexuality in cross-dressing narratives are likely to be revealed in bed, which is one reason why bed scenes occur so frequently as moments of discovery – or near-discovery'.³⁰ Madeleine is not only discovering her gendered options in society, she is also exploring her sexual self, and ultimately this personal epiphany of sexual choice that is available to the cross-dresser finds a third space in

³⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.202.

bisexuality. ‘As her desire for men weakens’, Rivers notes, ‘her aesthetic appreciation of women’s bodies blossoms and comes to the fore. This clearly suggests to the reader (if perhaps not to her) that Madeleine’s true orientation may in fact be “at least” bisexual’.³¹

In many respects, bisexuality is an obvious and convenient answer to the sexual enigma that the transvestite poses, for bisexuality, like cross-dressing, has the ability to defy binary understandings of sexual desire and expression. As Duncker declares, ‘the transvestite cannot simply be placed in the category of lesbian or homosexual man. The sign is more fluid in its meanings; the “third” presence is the element which brings the artificial binary structures of division crashing down’.³² Indeed, the act of gender masquerade and the dissolution of the sexual binary can not only undermine the strict concepts of hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality, but is also able to explode these altogether. Madeleine stresses that during her many guises and dalliances she experiences ‘a good many unspoken desires all jumbled up together and seething about in me [which] give birth to others which then devour them’ (*MdeM*:145). Rather than any specific label or category of sexual orientation Madeleine views her proclivities as ‘jumbled up together’; they are a mixture and, like the transvestite him/herself, a hybrid of feelings – each new experience or moment of desire literally ‘devours’ the previous one. In this respect, Madeleine proves that sexuality can be just as polymorphous and slippery as gender is. The transvestite lover and beloved as both subject and object of desire has the ability to choose genders and sexualities at any given moment. As Madeleine herself declares, ‘if I had a lover, the female in me would no doubt dominate for a while over the male, but it would not last long, and I feel I should only be half content [...] So I

³¹ Rivers, ‘Intelligibles pour une Femme Honnête’, p.6.

³² Duncker, ‘Introduction’, p.xxii.

don't know which way to turn and am constantly drifting from one to another' (*MdeM*:318).

Mademoiselle de Maupin offers the reader a veritable smorgasbord of gender and sexual expressions. Masculine and feminine become interchangeable and effectively dissolve in the character of Madeleine, while sexuality undergoes so many crises that sexual desires and categories also seem to 'drift' into each other. What the text does emphasise, though, is the fact that sexual desire is not founded in or on the external clothing of the desired object and, according to Duncker, 'lies not in the genitals nor even in the drapery, but in those untouchable, invisible places, the mind and the heart'.³³ In Gautier's novel it appears that 'love is naked' (*MdeM*:57). Likewise, as well as clothing becoming an ambiguous indication of gender and sexuality, the novel suggests that the bodily signifiers of biological sex are not an indication of sexual orientation. Sexuality, according to Rivers, 'truly exists only as an object of knowledge and discourse and not merely as a set of anatomical and physiological experiences'.³⁴ In other words, sexuality is a discursive endeavour that can only be articulated through language, but to understand that language, society has to have the knowledge, or at least attempt some form of translation, in order to comprehend the definitions and categories that are said to exist. Madeleine states that she is

of a third, separate sex which does not yet have a name; higher or lower than them, inferior or superior. I have the body and soul of a woman, the mind and strength of a man, and I have too much or not enough of one or the other to be able to pair up with either. (*MdeM*:318)

Such an amalgamation of gendered traits thus leads the transvestite to exist in the 'third' gender category but also carries with it the implication that sexuality too requires a 'third' space of verbalisation, which is nominally referred to as bisexuality. As Duncker

³³ Ibid., p.xxii.

³⁴ Rivers, 'Intelligibles pour une Femme Honnête', p.13.

confirms, ‘the third element, the lover who is both man and woman, which remains the impossible referent, impossible in that apart from the hermaphrodite there is no being in nature which embodies both sexes, here represents the articulation of ideal desire’.³⁵ D’Albert’s desire for the ideal of sexual desire and beauty has been found and it exists in the form of the ever changing, ever drifting, yet unarticulated, bisexual cross-dresser. Therefore, the conclusion of the novel which sees Madeleine leave d’Albert and Rosette in search of future sexual conquests is important: it implies that the transvestite must keep moving in order to maintain the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

‘My first beau and my first belle’ (M:119): *Misfortune* and the Transvestite Option of Bisexuality

Just as Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* situates the transvestite and sexual desire in alternative spaces to the traditional gender binary and normative heterosexual matrix, Wesley Stace’s neo-Regency/neo-Victorian novel *Misfortune* likewise attempts to dislodge the long-held assumption that there is a causal link between gender expression, anatomical sex and sexuality. The sheer volume of gender and sexual concerns in many instances of historical fiction that is set in and/or influenced by the nineteenth century demonstrates how prolific these topics are in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Sarah Gamble asserts, gender and ‘sexuality may be the “leitmotif[s]” of contemporary neo-Victorianism’.³⁶ *Misfortune* in particular engages in and, in fact, prolifically portrays the variety of gender and sexual combinations that are available and existent in modern society. The novel implicitly and explicitly reveals the postmodern concern with categorising and labelling the body, clothing choice, and personal desire. It also tackles what Jonathan Loesberg proclaims as ‘Foucault’s argument against both

³⁵ Duncker, ‘Introduction’, p.xxvii.

³⁶ Gamble, “You cannot impersonate what you are”, p.127.

authenticity and contemporary notions of open sexuality [whereby] one as much as the other created identities to trap us rather than to liberate us. And one symptom of the entrapment was the creation of the homosexual as an identity in the nineteenth century'.³⁷ In other words, the nineteenth-century sexological categories of sexual identity, rather than allowing for fluid options regarding sexual proclivities, in actual fact restrict our contemporary notions to those very labels and identities.

Misfortune opens with an abandoned baby on a rubbish heap being rescued by the effeminate Lord Geoffrey Loveall, a wealthy aristocrat who has lost his adored sister in an accident during childhood. The infant, though a boy, is named Rose and brought up as a girl almost as a surrogate sister-figure. It is in the idyllic landscape of luxury and joyful ignorance with the servants' children, Sarah and Stephen Hamilton, as innocent (and sexual) playmates, when Rose begins to question 'her' biology, her gender, and her sexuality. When Geoffrey dies, Rose is left under the guardianship and tutorship of Geoffrey's wife and librarian, Anonyma, and the close household retinue: Hood, Anonyma, Hamilton and Anstace - nicknamed the HaHas. Rose thus becomes the Lady of the Love Hall estate, but it is at this point that the disgruntled relatives of the Loveall line descend and oust Rose from her sanctuary of gender and sexual ambiguity. Distraught, bereft, destitute and psychologically confused as to her body, her dress and her sexuality,³⁸ and after being inspired by a painting of Salamacis and Hermaphroditus, Rose decides to run away in order to travel to the pool at Salamacis in Turkey (named for the mythical figure herself), where, according to Greek myth, Hermaphroditus was created. However, throughout her travels Rose finds that her liberal upbringing at Love

³⁷ Jonathan Loesberg, 'The Afterlife of Victorian Sexuality: Foucault and Neo-Victorian Historical Fiction', *Clio*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2007), accessed online, no pagination given.

³⁸ While it may be clear to the reader that Rose is actually male, Rose herself suffers a crisis of gender identity and despairs of her male body, therefore, just as real-life transsexuals and transvestites prefer to be referred to by their 'adopted' gender, I have chosen to use the feminine pronoun in reference to Rose throughout this thesis.

Hall has not prepared her for an independent life as a transvestite. During her lengthy travels Rose has a multitude of sexual experiences with both the sailors that offer her passage aboard their vessels and also with women, one of whom, Frances Cooper, attempts to show Rose that sexual intercourse need not necessarily be the submissive and abusive act she had previously endured. During this physical and mental journey of self-awareness Rose learns, like Nan Astley in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*, that she is 'a consummate role-player, having been brought up in a world that is entirely dedicated to performance, masquerade, and transformations of all kinds'.³⁹ With this new-found confidence she returns, in frilly feminine dress, supplemented with an opulent moustache, to reclaim Love Hall and embarks on a love affair with Sarah Hamilton that appears to end happily ever after.

Throughout her upbringing, travels and return to Love Hall Rose endures various instances of ill-treatment, psychological anxiety and confusion over her gender and sexuality. She points out that 'everything I read about girls applied to my outer layers only: my clothing, my upbringing, my surface. I was perfect on the outside, but beneath I was a different person, a grotesque. I sat on the floor in agony, crying. I was a failure, a secret kept even from myself' (*M*:225). This self-abjection results in a crisis of sexuality that is synonymous with the neo-Victorian crisis of representation regarding anachronistic depictions of the past and present. While it may *appear* that many neo-Victorian texts recreate the nineteenth century accurately, there will always be a deliberate schism between the reality of the past and the nineteenth century as it is viewed through contemporary research and writing. This surely provokes a crisis, of sorts, between authenticity and (re)presentation, which, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Jean Baudrillard refers to in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).

³⁹ Gamble, "“You cannot impersonate what you are”", p.137.

Just as Rose finds that her ‘surface’ presentation as a girl is merely a superficial covering which conceals the ‘grotesque’ reality of her anatomical sex, so too does neo-Victorian literature attempt to disguise and play with its underlying contemporariness. *Misfortune* in particular, though, like Rose’s gender, fails to produce any semblance of *bona fide* nineteenth-century society and ideology; it becomes an *ersatz* pastiche and a barely veiled copy of a copy.

In many ways Rose’s gender masquerade and its subsequent confusion causes her much suffering. She persistently experienced anxiety at ‘that empty moment of waking up and dreading the day, of being a stranger, an imposter inside my own skin, scared of my surroundings, sad that I had woken up’ (*M*:136). The discontinuity between her biological sex and her transvestite gendered expression are synonymous with the psychological angst which the real-life hermaphrodite Herculine ‘Alexina’ Barbin endured.⁴⁰ Stace refers, in a ‘Further Reading’ section at the back of the novel, to the memoirs of Barbin, and the links between his character Rose and the case of Barbin are apparent. Both appear to reject the masculine gender which is eventually imposed on them in favour of a more feminine persona that is more in keeping with their ‘internal’ concept of gendered identity. For Rose in particular this dislocation between body and dress reaches its climax with the onset of puberty. ‘Things’, Rose notes, ‘got worse the year I learned to shave’ (*M*:185). The constant daily reminder that the body is male, while simultaneously believing that the frilly dresses, petticoats and feminine garb are the ‘true’ reflection of an ‘inner’ gendered self, results in Rose struggling to comprehend her gender identity. She laments,

⁴⁰ In his introduction to Herculine Barbin’s memoir Michel Foucault states that s/he was ‘brought up as a poor and deserving girl in a milieu that was almost exclusively feminine and strongly religious, Herculine Barbin, who was called Alexina by her familiars, was finally recognized as being “truly” a young man. Obligated to make a legal change of sex after judicial proceedings and a modification of his civil status, he was incapable of adapting himself to a new identity and ultimately committed suicide’. Michel Foucault, ‘Introduction’ to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p.xi.

I longed to understand about myself [...] I didn't even like to think about my physique, so I tried never to touch or look below. Sometimes it brought attention to itself in humiliating ways, but panic overwhelmed me when I tried to reach any conclusion about what was happening, and I became adept at concealment. (M:185-6)

Rose feels that her male biology runs counter to her sense of feminine self. The unwanted, yet apparently uncontrollable erections literally 'flag up' the body beneath her clothing resulting in utter embarrassment and a psychological uncertainty that forces her to become a master, or rather mistress, of subterfuge and deceit. When the conspiring relatives, like the judicial system for Barbin, insist on Rose adopting a masculine outward appearance as a definitive marker of her supposedly 'true' gender, not only do they conflate the concepts of biological sex and the social construction of gender, but they also entrap Rose in a persona which she regards as unsuitable and unattractive. She declares that she 'underwent [a] metamorphosis from [her] old self to [her] new self, from butterfly to grub' (M:228). The metamorphosis from feminine to masculine, in Rose's view, reverses the 'natural' order of things; the safe cocoon of transvestism has dissolved into ugly masculine garb, causing Rose to confront her biological body and, at the same time, to question the upbringing she has experienced.

Although Rose's feminine-centred childhood was instigated by her father, Anonyma and the rest of the Love Hall household also had their reasons for maintaining the deceit; all of them resolutely fail to see the impact of such eccentric formative years on Rose herself. Rose bemoans that she 'had been everyone's victim: [her] father's replacement for Dolores, [her] mother's experiment, Mary's theory made flesh, Anstace's means for advancement, [and] a pawn in the HaHa's fight for survival' (M:228). After confronting what she believes is a profound betrayal by her own body, she also feels that the ultimate betrayal has been committed by her family and its representatives. Her father's overwhelming, if psychologically disturbed, desire to bring

Rose up as a girl, in replacement for the sister he lost, is unconventional, but understandable. Anonyma, though, has a more political motive for encouraging the transformation. As Abigail Nussbaum notes, her ‘motives for ignoring the child’s true sex are largely experimental – her head full of neo-Platonic theories about the unity of the sexes. Anonyma believes that combining male sexuality with female socialisation will lead to the creation of the perfect human being, combining within itself the best qualities of both genders’.⁴¹ Inspired by the poetic works of Mary Day, Anonyma assumes that Rose’s biological maleness, conjoined to a feminine disposition and gender expression, will embody the ideal hermaphroditic amalgamation of the sexes.

What she does not foresee, however, is that such social conditioning in feminine clothing and mannerisms will render Rose incapable of coping in the world outside of Love Hall. A factual correspondent to the *Society* newspaper who self-identified as ‘Martyr’, and had been forced to wear feminine clothing, similarly suffered when he no longer wore his corset. He states that ‘I had to endure three years of this bondage, and became so soft and effeminate that, when the death of the lady who adopted me made me independent, I went back to the garb and habits of my own sex with reluctance and difficulty’.⁴² Like Martyr, Rose finds that the male clothing she must now wear is effectively a ‘strait-jacket’ (*M*:256). Rather than enjoying the freedom of expression and benefits which Anonyma presumes she will gain by bridging the genders, Rose views herself as ‘a monstrous caricature’ (*M*:243); she does not feel safe and comfortable in the hybrid space of the transvestite, but ‘felt mocked, as far away from perfection as [she] had ever been, lost and alone’ (*M*:228). The idyllic childhood in Love Hall has

⁴¹ Abigail Nussbaum, ‘*Misfortune* by Wesley Stace’, available at <http://wrongquestions.blogspot.com/2006/05/misfortune> [Accessed 15 November 2011].

⁴² Martyr, ‘Tight Lacing’, *Society*, 21 April 1900, p.263, in Peter Farrer (Ed.) *Men in Petticoats* (Liverpool: Karn), p.42.

become a living nightmare for Rose and her uncontrollable body. She goes on to relate that

I wasn't fit for the world. I was sickened by the fact that I was a man, in my razor-blade collar that dug deep into my Adam's apple. Why did I need a cock, this mistake? It was so alienated from me and I from it that neither could sympathize with the other, communicate, or respond in an appropriate manner in any situation. (*M*:345)

Rose no longer feels connected to her own body and in fact views her penis as an abject body part, an unwanted and dislocated appendage that is alien to her psychological understanding of desire, and her comprehension of self-identity. Her sexual desire, not necessarily indicated by an erection, becomes a confusion of hetero-, homo- and bisexuality. Rose's sexuality, as a transvestite, is not simplistic. Virginia 'Charles' Prince, herself a heterosexual male cross-dresser, believes that 'the femmiphile adopts feminine garb as a matter of personal internal expression – the homosexual "Queen" does so for external effect'.⁴³ The 'femmiphile' is a biological male who retains a normative heterosexuality, but also derives sexual excitement and femininity from the clothing. Rose, on the other hand, undergoes various formations of sexuality including heterosexuality (with Sarah and Franny), homosexuality (with numerous sailors),⁴⁴ bisexuality (with Sarah and Stephen), and even asexuality where she avoids sexual contact with anyone.

Born out of the gender-swap, the crisis of sexuality which Rose experiences is reminiscent of the crisis of desire that d'Albert feels when he is faced with the prospect of homosexual relations with Théodore (Madeleine de Maupin). Whilst d'Albert's confusion is from an outside perspective toward the transvestite, Rose's anxiety is very

⁴³ Virginia 'Charles' Prince, *The Transvestite and His Wife*, p.17, quoted in Califia, *Sex Changes*, p.200.

⁴⁴ In the text it is implied that Rose initially is sexually abused or even raped by the sailors, especially when it is discovered she is not a biological woman. However, she later uses her transvestite appearance and turns to prostitution in order to gain passage on the various vessels.

much from within. Transvestism and cross-dressing, as discussed in the thesis introduction, have often been associated with sexual perversion, or at least sexual inversion, yet contrary to that Peter Farrer declares that the correspondents engaging in debate through nineteenth-century newspapers viewed the ‘men who wished to dress like women [as] mad, criminal, idiotic, frivolous, vain or effeminate [...] What they did not say was that such men were “sexual perverts”’.⁴⁵ In *Misfortune*, Rose’s father Geoffrey is often suspected of being ‘a bit of a Lady Skimmington’ (*M*:24), a euphemism for male homosexuality, thus conflating effeminacy with a gay identity. Although Farrer attempts to distance cross-dressing from any deviant sexual behaviour, Stace suggests that transvestism is equated with alternative or non-normative sexuality.

The first hint in the novel towards non-normative sexuality is given when Rose presents the Hamilton children, Sarah and Stephen, as ‘my first beau and my first belle’ (*M*:119). Rose’s initiation into the sexual realm, therefore, revolves around both Sarah and Stephen, offering the transvestite ‘the best of both worlds’. The pirate role-playing games allow Rose to adopt the masculine persona of Lord Ose and ‘these scenarios often ended with my carrying Sarah off to my bedroom, where, still in character and as dictated not only by *our scripts* but by romance itself, I claimed her with a victorious kiss’ (*M*:175, emphasis added). Not only are Rose, Sarah, and Stephen reciting the scripts of their performance, they are also enacting the scripts of normative gender and sexual roles; the (male) hero rescues the (female) damsel and is rewarded with a kiss. However, their later games result in the subversion of normative heterosexuality when Rose adopts the character of an eighteenth-century female dressing in male clothing to embark on a life of adventure; like Anne Bonny and Mary Read,⁴⁶ we witness a (biological) male dressing in feminine clothing and pretending to be a female dressed as

⁴⁵ Farrer, *Men in Petticoats*, p.44.

⁴⁶ See Elizabeth Krimmer, *In the Company of Men: Cross-dressed Women Around 1800* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

a male. In contradistinction to Madeleine de Maupin's multi-layered performance in *As You Like It*, which incorporates a combination of female-feminine-masculine-feminine-masculine identities, Rose effectively collapses the definitions by portraying an exaggerated blend of male-feminine-feminine-masculine attributes. The result is that Rose embarks on a homoerotically charged scene of rescue because 'this time, it was Stephen I saved. The loving kiss was less natural to him, until I took off the topmost layer of my disguise, the easily removed brown tunic, to reveal – ta da! – my dress beneath!' (*M*:175). Stephen, apparently, finds that sexuality is linked to Rose's dress, but for her bisexuality appears to be the appropriate option as she fails to distinguish between the respective sexes and gendered dress styles of Sarah and Stephen. 'The boundaries between any sexual minority and the larger society', asserts Patricia Califia, 'are not set out in brick and mortar. They are much more permeable, and there will always be people who float in and out of deviance or propriety, who belong in both places, and neither one, at the same time'.⁴⁷ The cross-dresser, therefore, not only embodies the 'third' space between the genders but also has the opportunity to embrace a 'third' alternative to normative hetero- or homosexuality by engaging in bisexual relationships.

Rose's sexual experiences up to this point, however, merely involve desire, kissing and minimal physical contact. When her night-time liaisons with Sarah develop into more intimate encounters, Rose becomes frightened: she states that 'Sarah seemed to be telling me that I had found somewhere good, somewhere we both would be happy, but I was horrified' (*M*:219). Likewise, when Rose's uncle makes (incestuous) sexual advances, Rose once again feels 'horrified'. Her uncle pleads, "Ah! Let me inside you Rose. Let me inside." Inside? Inside? What? That tiny hole? No, no! This was a rude

⁴⁷ Califia, *Sex Changes*, p.xiv.

awakening. Nothing could go in there. Was that what this was all about? Or the other one? The back hole? I could hardly believe that, either' (*M*:206). Having little understanding of her own biology and body, Rose cannot even contemplate the mechanics of sexual intercourse. The lack of comprehension regarding bodily and sexual function complete with an abject horror of intimacy renders the potentially bisexual Rose utterly destitute and ignorant in the realm of love and sex.

Such inexperience is altered dramatically when Rose is ousted from the idyllic safety of Love Hall by the scheming relatives. Like Nan Astley in Waters's *Tipping*, Rose, having no other financial recourse, is forced to become a male prostitute (in feminine clothing), but this time among numerous sailors. In a semi-conscious state after being beaten, battered and shipwrecked from the *Venus*, Rose recounts to Frances Cooper that she had been accosted by a gang of Brigands and 'afterwards, they took my money and left me by the side of the canal, sticky' (*M*:312). After being raped, Rose has little respect for herself, and simultaneously decries her upbringing. She notes that she is 'weak and muddled, used up and abused, the sad evidence of the stupidity of their fantastic idea. I would rather live among the wretched, as I had during my travels, in the gutter, traded for sailors' favours in the hold of the *Stafford*' (*M*:333). The emphasis on male prostitution in both neo-Victorian texts suggests that, though previously a taboo subject, it has most definitely entered discursive and popular arenas, thereby reducing its subversive potential and, therefore, rendering the titillation as predictable and conservative. This breaking-down of sexual prohibitions regarding the commodification of the male body is related to Loesberg's argument that 'the turn toward the Victorian period occurs in contemporary historical fiction when the theme of a certain kind of freedom demands the story of Victorian sexuality as the image of constraint against

which that freedom is measured'.⁴⁸ In palimpsestically overlaying the Victorian period with open declarations and instances of male prostitution, neo-Victorian historical fiction, such as *Misfortune* and *Tipping the Velvet*, are contrasting supposed Victorian sexual repressiveness with apparently contemporary liberal attitudes towards sexuality and especially the concept of the 'renter', the 'rent boy', the gigolo, the male escort or the transsexual prostitute.⁴⁹ Although prostitution is by no means liberating, the open discussion and reference to male prostitution in contemporary fiction can be seen as a 'progressive' move to *name*, not only 'the love, that dare not speak its name', but to confront the reality of a 'love' that is obtained through a financial transaction.

Eventually, after the various sexual uses and abuses which Rose experiences, she concludes that the only real safe place for the transvestite in terms of sexuality is, in fact, asexuality; not only avoiding all forms of intimacy and physicality, but also abstaining from any kind of sexual thought and desire. Rose states that 'I had used to pleasure myself in bed with thoughts of Sarah and Stephen, but now I was unable, wanting no part of the filth and the heavy breathing. I knew where it led. I had no urges, no physical needs. I missed nothing' (*M*:283). According to Emily Jeremiah, Rose's utter revulsion at sexual contact and her inability to 'experience pleasure' are a result of her 'being alienated from h[er] own body',⁵⁰ but the sexual desire that Rose previously felt for the Hamilton siblings returns when she is once again able to don luxurious feminine garb. Just as Nan in *Tipping the Velvet* experiences fetishistic sexual arousal when handling Kitty's male costumes,⁵¹ so too does Rose become sexually excited by a

⁴⁸ Loesberg, 'The Afterlife of Victorian Sexuality' (n.p.)

⁴⁹ In the twenty-first-century, terms such as 'Ladyboy' and 'Shemale' are commonplace to describe transsexual prostitutes in Thailand and Brazil.

⁵⁰ Emily Jeremiah, 'The "I" inside "her": Queer Narration in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune*', *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2007), p.138.

⁵¹ Nan declares that each item of Kitty's male impersonation costume 'came to me warm from her body, and with its own particular scent; each seemed charged with a strange kind of power, and tingled or glowed (or so I imagined) beneath my hand. Her petticoats and dresses were cold and did not tingle' (*TTVB*:36).

particularly sumptuous red velvet dress. She notes that ‘I put on the red dress...and I felt it around me, swimming on me, the velvet kissing my sides’ (*M*:346). The actual clothing itself is what arouses Rose. The feeling of the tactile (velvet) and symbolically passionate (red) material literally ‘kissing’ a body that Rose mourns has the ability to reignite her sense of the sexual, and by extension psychological, correlation between desire, sexuality, dress and the body. It does not require a human partner to initiate the desire that Rose experiences but rather it exists because that partner is absent – it is a fetish for the dress only. A similar example of sexual arousal from clothing is depicted in Graham Moore’s *The Sherlockian*. In the 2010 novel Arthur Conan Doyle initially masquerades as a woman to infiltrate a suffragette league, but later

a strange image appeared in his head. It was of his own wedding day. Except that Arthur was not wearing his black tuxedo. Rather he was wearing a sparkling white wedding dress. He imagined himself stitched all in white silk, a flowing train following behind him as he walked blushing down the aisle toward his betrothed.⁵²

Doyle’s sexual excitement, derived from the corporeal touch of sparkling ‘white silk’, corresponds with the red velvet kissing which Rose enjoys. It is significant, then, that whilst discussing the concept of the female phallus, Sigmund Freud notes that

the inquisitive boy peered at the woman’s genitals from below, from her legs up; fur and velvet – as has long been suspected - are a fixation of the sight of the pubic hair, which should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member.⁵³

In this respect, the sexual fetish elicited from the touch of red velvet cloth can be related to Rose’s simultaneous psycho-sexual and unconscious desire for her unknown mother, and also her wish to symbolically castrate herself. The nineteenth-century categorisation

⁵² Graham Moore, *The Sherlockian* (New York: Twelve, 2010), p.310.

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1927; London: Hogarth Press, 1961), Volume 21, p.155.

of fetishistic desire thus places Rose outside of the normative heterosexual imperative and relegates her sexual arousal to the realm of the ‘abnormal’ and the Other.

For today’s readership, and on the surface, such sexual proclivities may seem like another anomaly which, to use Steven Marcus’s term, the ‘Other Victorians’ may have enjoyed. After all, ‘when we look at the Victorians’, Sarah Gamble points out, ‘we see a world whose sexual and social mores are both quaint and titillating’.⁵⁴ However, being formulated and portrayed in neo-Victorian fiction, these texts actually posit us, in the twenty-first century, as ‘the Other Victorians’. We see ourselves as sexually progressive and liberated but in many ways we are just as reticent about many areas of sexuality as we like to think the Victorians were. As Marie-Luise Kohlke notes, ‘we enjoy neo-Victorian fiction in part to feel debased or outraged, to revel in degradation, *reading for defilement*. By projecting illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress’.⁵⁵

Stace’s novel has been criticised for its inability to (re)create the nineteenth century in any convincing way. Colin Greenland writes that ‘*Misfortune* is no kind of 19th-century novel, not even a pastiche. Conversant with the scientific principles of psychology, from unconscious sabotage through “gender roles” all the way to “conflicted feelings”, Lord Rose is a creation as anachronistic as he is anomalous’.⁵⁶ Concentrating on how neo-Victorian texts portray certain anachronisms, however, can lead to some rather reductionist and simplistic arguments. What is more interesting and important is *why* such anachronisms are present in the first place. As Jeremiah makes

⁵⁴ Gamble, ““You cannot impersonate what you are””, p127.

⁵⁵ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic’, *Papers Presented at the Third Global Conference on Sex and Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford Interdisciplinary Press, 2008), p.346.

⁵⁶ Colin Greenland, ‘Skirting the Issues’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2005, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/may/28/featuresreviews> [Accessed 15 November 2011].

clear, ‘while the anachronisms in the text might be grounds for criticism, they are also interesting, for they encourage linkages between past and present and expose the contingent and partial nature of “theory” which [...] does not necessarily keep time with historical reality’.⁵⁷ In the case of *Misfortune* the anachronisms convey the twentieth and twenty-first century concerns with theories regarding gender, sex and sexuality. The paratextual employment of the concept of ‘Misfortune’, for example, denotes the character of Rose who is also referred to as ‘Miss Fortune’ and carries with it various connotations. The ‘Miss’ implies an unmarried girl, a miss(ing) gender, or even a longing for (missing) a space of gender expression, while ‘Fortune’ implies wealth (the heir/her to a fortune) or luck. Together, ‘Misfortune’ signifies both the eponymous hero/ine and the possible mishap or accident that led to the discovery of the baby Rose.⁵⁸ The complex title, like *Tipping the Velvet* as discussed in the previous chapter, thus evidences a sophisticated euphemism that is able symbolically to represent the thematic tropes of the text as a whole. Similarly, the ‘glorious facsimile dustjacket’,⁵⁹ which depicts Rose in a Freddy Mercury-esque exaggeration of drag, is utilised to both comic and, on a more profound level, gender subversive effect.

⁵⁷ Jeremiah, ‘The “I” inside “her”’, p.134.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, Stace, who is also a musician, notes that he was inspired to write the novel after having written and performed a song entitled ‘Miss Fortune’ with his band The Love Hall Tryst. See Suzanne Mantell, ‘Misfortune – Wesley Stace, First Impressions’, *Publisher’s Weekly*, 24 January 2005, p.113. Also, Marc Schultz, ‘One Man, Two Wesleys’, *Publisher’s Weekly*, 18 June, 2007, p.28.

⁵⁹ Greenland ‘Skirting the Issues’, no pagination.

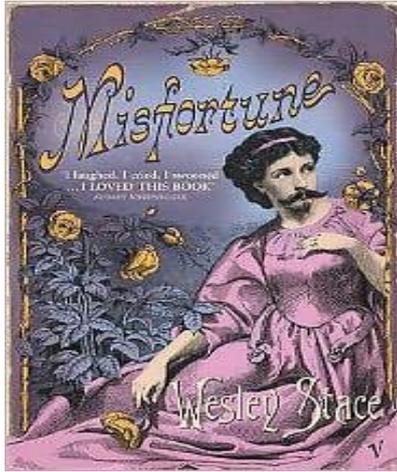


Fig. 16, Cover of *Misfortune*.



Fig. 17, Freddie Mercury in 'I Want to Break Free'.

The ornate climbing roses on the cover are an obvious metaphor for Rose's picaresque journey and also herself (as both the feminine 'flower' and the masculine 'thorn'), but the juxtaposition of the very pink, over-abundant dress and the *über*-masculine, elaborate moustache and goatee beard are a calculated strategy (to draw attention to the novel on the over-laden shelves in bookshops) and as a tongue-in-cheek parody of the romantic novels published by Mills & Boon; the heroine in this novel, the cover says, is the hero as well.

The parody also continues at the conclusion of the novel where, in a faux appendix that is just as fictional as the rest of the text, we find a contemporary guidebook to Love Hall, published by '© 2000 The Love Hall Trust and The English Heritage Committee' (M:521). The guide describes the grounds and points of interest at the 'historical' estate, and lists the details of portraits situated in the Long Gallery where sits a particular painting numbered 533 entitled '*Rose Old* by an unnamed painter. One half of the subject's body is dressed in male clothes, and the other half in female clothes. This is a copy of a portrait of the Chevalier d'Eon, a small engraving of which is displayed next to the picture of Rose Old' (M:523). The blatant satire on the Heritage Trust and other charitable preservation societies parodies 'common ways of packaging

the past, [and] defamiliarizing the conventions of the heritage industry’,⁶⁰ yet, it also references our postmodern condition of attempting to keep hold of the past in the nostalgically driven enterprise of appropriation and dissemination. The painting itself is an intertextual reference to the Chevalier d’Eon, a gender-ambiguous individual who was notorious during the eighteenth century.⁶¹ The emphasis on the correlation between the Chevalier d’Eon’s transvestism and Rose’s cross-dressing is another example of how gender confusion and elision are linked to the segueing between the past and the present.

Misfortune abounds with instances of implied ambiguity. When, during her childhood, Rose is playing with the Hamilton siblings, they each sit at either end of the (gender) seesaw while Rose would ‘ride only in the middle’ (*M*:136). Likewise, Rose is described by the village locals as ‘amphibious’ (*M*:180); possibly a pun on the term hermaphrodite,⁶² or a more sophisticated meaning of an organism that is comfortable living in ‘two worlds’. But as Rose herself later declares, ‘the question was one of gender, not one of sex. I was naturally male, but I could be whichever gender I chose. I had all the tools and weapons of character and intellect at my disposal’ (*M*:240), the most pertinent of which is ‘adaptability’ (*M*:260). The ability to choose and to adapt to a gender, and a sexuality for that matter, suggests that Rose lives simultaneously outside the confines of gender and sexual definition with her subversive and polymorphous appearance and desire yet also within its bastion walls in her dogmatic assumption of the very gendered and sexual expectations she is apparently undermining. Thus, according to Gamble, ‘Stace’s text [...] places itself even beyond a “trans”

⁶⁰ Jeremiah, ‘The “I” inside “her”’, p.134.

⁶¹ The Chevalier d’Eon (1728-1810), as Gary Kates notes, ‘for over thirty-two years, from age forty-nine until his death at eighty-one, [...] succeeded in living every day as a woman among the same public that previously had known him as a male diplomat and military hero’, Gary Kates, *Monsieur d’Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), p.xv.

⁶² In *Tipping the Velvet* Nan’s father describes an oyster as ‘a real queer fish – now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite in fact!’, (*TTVB*:49).

categorization, ambitiously asserting Rose's viability as an entirely new category of being in terms of gender'.⁶³ Whether intentional or not, Stace employs contemporary gender theory rather liberally throughout the novel. Given this is a fictional, if focused, exploration of gender, sex and sexuality, this would of course be expected, but Stace's subtlety of theory application has mostly been overlooked. He includes references to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of gender being a construction rather than biological essentialism⁶⁴ when Rose states that 'boys and girls were therefore made and not born, and I would be made' (M:98). He refers to Joan Riviere's notion of 'Womanliness as Masquerade'⁶⁵ when Rose notes that 'it is not men but women who are the great female impersonators, and growing ever more so!' (M:384). Of particular relevance is his employment of Judith Butler's idea that there is no internal core of gender, as developed in her seminal text *Gender Trouble*: thus Rose ponders the question: 'what did I call myself? What would my name be? From now on, I could refer to myself only in the third person – was there even an "I" to speak from?' (M:225). Stace's engagement with contemporary gender theory thus evidences, promotes and, indeed, propagates the argument that neo-Victorian fiction is concerned with contemporary issues which are then superimposed on the nineteenth century. 'The neo-Victorian novel', Gamble purports, 'has flowered alongside developments in gender theory, particularly the inception of debates concerned with queerness and performativity'.⁶⁶

The utilisation of theories, in *Misfortune*, that emphasise gender and sexual performativity, therefore, has the ability simultaneously to undermine and to draw attention to both the neo-Victorian pretence of historical authenticity and the imaginary permanence of gender and sexual definitions. Stace's queering of sexual difference,

⁶³ Gamble, "You cannot impersonate what you are", p.138.

⁶⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

⁶⁵ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10 (1929), pp.303-313.

⁶⁶ Gamble, "You cannot impersonate what you are", p.128.

identity and desire, like Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, explodes the strict categories of gender and sexuality. As Richard J. Corker and Stephen Valocchi explain, queer definitions and identities

foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexual desire. Such identities and practices have the potential to expose the widely held belief that sex, gender and sexuality have a causal or necessary relationship to each other as an ideological fiction that works to stabilise heterosexuality.⁶⁷

The subversion of, or at least challenge to, normative gender roles, heterosexuality, and historical accuracy that *Misfortune* posits is linked to Gautier's similar thematic perspective and intertextual employment of Shakespearean references in the performance of *As You Like It*. Stace also refers to Shakespearean gender masquerade in the form of Viola's disguise as Caesario (*M*:313) from *Twelve Night*. Yet a more understated pun can be seen in Rose's name. In the archetypal (heterosexual) romance of *Romeo and Juliet* the eponymous hero notes 'what's in a name? A [R]ose [Bi] any other name would smell as sweet'.⁶⁸ While the obvious link of Shakespeare using male players to perform female roles who then dress in masculine attire is evident in both *Misfortune* and *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Stace's novel in particular invites the reader to question Rose's gender identity, sexual desire and simultaneously emphasises that when portraying a transvestite 'pronouns are problematic' (*M*:82).

In summary, just like the obscure picture that Geoffrey and Dolores attempt to solve in the puzzlebook, the theme of gender subterfuge, the depiction of alternative sexuality and the neo-Victorian project as a whole have the ability to queer, skew and intertwine male and female, masculine and feminine, hetero-, homo-, bi-, and asexuality, past and present. As the narrator of *Misfortune* asserts,

⁶⁷ Robert J. Corker and Stephen Valocchi (Eds.), 'Introduction' to *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), p.1.

⁶⁸ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene ii, l.43-44.

when viewed from one particular perspective, the picture would not only be ‘perfect in all respects’ but would also, and most marvellously, stand out from the page in three dimensions [....] They looked at the page every way they could imagine, at eye level, in mirrors, at strange angles, twisted and bent, but still it would not yield its mystery [....] The picture defied them and remained a mess on the page. (*M*:52)

The transvestite has the opportunity to embody a three-dimensional gendered ‘perfection in all respects’ whilst at the same time appearing to be a ‘mess on the page’. The various representations of queer sexualities are shown as ‘twisted and bent’ and history will never ‘yield its mystery’. Stace’s numerous anachronisms, whether intentional or not, make interesting points about assumptions of authenticity regarding gender categories, sexual proclivities, and neo-Victorian fiction. As Gamble further notes, ‘there’s an intriguing vacillation here between authenticity and performativity’.⁶⁹ In a notable self-reflexive example that perfectly illustrates this line of argument, Rose claims that ‘people can play fast and loose with the facts – sometimes they have to [....] time has afforded us perspective – things have changed. My world has changed. The world has changed. Novels have changed’ (*M*:78). Ultimately, Stace’s endeavour to create a historical novel in which the main protagonist embraces a queered amalgamation of feminine gender and male biology, and then embarks on a multitude of sexual experiences, portrays the postmodern and definitively neo-Victorian condition of approaching literature as ‘a jumble of past and present’ (*M*:455), being ‘in both places at once [and where] time folded in upon itself’ (*M*:356). The concept of time folding in on itself is directly linked to the transvestite act which demonstrates how gender can also fold in on itself. In *Monsieur Venus* we see how both gender and sexuality not only fold but effectively collapse to produce the ultimate crises in gender and sexual configurations.

⁶⁹ Gamble, “‘You cannot impersonate what you are’”, p.138.

'He exists my friend, and he is not even a hermaphrodite' (MV:74): *Monsieur Venus* and the Model Male

When Rachilde (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery, 1860-1953) first published *Monsieur Venus* (1884) in Belgium,⁷⁰ it was immediately condemned as obscene and its author prosecuted, while in Paris copies of the book were seized.⁷¹ The text is a decadent novel which explores, and even breaches the boundaries of, gender expression, human relationships and sexual desire. Rachilde herself was occasionally viewed as a controversial figure who courted (often fictional) sexual scandal, routinely dressed in male clothing, and as Diana Holmes points out, 'as a writer, she insisted on her transcendence of her sex ("Rachilde, *Man of Letters*" said her visiting card)'.⁷² Rachilde, although much ignored or overlooked for many decades, produced, in *Monsieur Venus*, a novel which in the twenty-first century still excites interrogation. Like Gautier before her, Rachilde was interested in the entanglement of gender and sexuality. Both *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and *Monsieur Venus* have protagonists that adopt a gender masquerade which leads to various sexual crises, both for themselves and their potential lovers. Therefore, as Rita Felski declares,

Rachilde is the ideal figure through whom to approach [the] complicated question of the politics of perversion and the mutual entanglement of literary and medical discourses of sexuality. Her work comprises an extensive and exhaustive register of erotic deviations that surpassed the efforts of even her more outré colleagues, containing descriptions of necrophilia, bestiality, male masochism, female sadism, autoeroticism, homosexuality, transvestism, fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and so on.⁷³

Monsieur Venus is a novel which is primarily concerned with the dissolution of all kinds of boundaries. From the outset, the young, aristocratic female protagonist,

⁷⁰ The text was originally published in French and the first English translation was not published until 1929.

⁷¹ Diana Holmes, *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p.42.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁷³ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.178.

Raoule de Vénérande, is depicted as an independent woman with ‘a face like the most beautiful Diana the huntress’ (MV:68). At the beginning of the text she is seeking a seamstress in order to procure a dress for a ball. Instead of meeting Marie Silvert, the seamstress-cum-prostitute, however, she finds herself confronted with Jacques Silvert, Marie’s brother. Jacques is a poor, uneducated young artist, who, due to his sister’s often languid and, it is implied, drug-induced, stupor, has to endure the ignominy of sewing and producing the embroidered flowers as a way of earning a living. Gradually Raoule seduces Jacques and moves him into an apartment replete with luxurious furnishings and artists’ paraphernalia. Their love affair becomes increasingly experimental as Raoule insists upon usurping the masculine role in dress and behaviour while she simultaneously encourages the feminisation of her lover. Raoule also has another lover, the Baron Raittolbe, who progressively becomes more jealous of, as well as attracted to, Jacques and, at Raoule’s instigation, challenges him to a duel. The result of the duel sees Jacques fatally wounded, yet the ever-resourceful Raoule then has his hair, nails and teeth implanted into a wax-figure made to resemble Jacques so she can continue her nightly and now necrophilic visits to her lover.

Throughout the text Jacques is consistently rendered feminine. The first appearance of him, as a seamstress, indicates that ‘around his body, over his loose smock, ran a spiralling garland of roses, very big roses of fleshy satin with velvety grenadine tracings. They slipped between his legs, threaded their way right up to his shoulders, and came curling around his neck’ (MV:8). There is the obvious feminine association with the flowers, and roses in particular as we saw with Rose in *Misfortune*, which ‘between his legs’, are soft, tactile and are produced from the inviting fabrics of velvet and satin. As Masha Belenky notes, ‘visually, the flowers signal gender ambiguity (especially because it is what one finds between his legs), which is then

reinforced by the first verbal exchange between Jacques and Raoule'.⁷⁴ Jacques identifies himself to Raoule 'for the time being, [as] Marie Silvert' (*MV*:9). However, the 'branches of defective flowers' (*MV*:9) hint towards the disorder and crisis that is to follow along with the eventually broken, in all senses of the word, Jacques. As a foil and mirror to the feminised Jacques, Raoule embraces what Katherine Gantz terms a "butch-femme" dynamic'.⁷⁵ Even Raoule's forename signifies her gender transgression; it is, as Belenky points out, 'a man's name marked with a feminine "e" ending, a difference apparent only visually'.⁷⁶ Similarly, Raoule's surname, according to Holmes, 'appropriately connotes both hunting (*la vénerie*) and the unholy *vénération* she inspires in men',⁷⁷ as well as conjuring the image of the goddess Venus and ideas concerning venereal disease. In many ways, though, Raoule is depicted variously as a huntress, the dominant male, and a vampiric sexual seducer of Jacques, both alive and dead. Her switching between genders comes to the fore after Jacques's death. When, at night, she visits the tomb/shrine that houses the wax effigy of her dead lover, she is sometimes 'a woman dressed in mourning, sometimes a young man in evening dress' (*MV*:209). However, Raoule's dream is to incorporate both genders, if not in her lover Jacques, then within herself. 'Although she appears to move between genders with relative ease, following first one set of conventions then another according to her whim', M. Jean Anderson convincingly argues that 'it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that neither gender is ever fully assumed by the heroine, an interpretation further supported by the duality of the title, *Monsieur Venus*, which may be applied to

⁷⁴ Masha Belenky, 'Gender Reversals: Reading Balzac with Rachilde', in Nigel Harkness, Paul Rowe, Tim Unwin and Jennifer Yee, *Visions/Revisions: Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), p.283.

⁷⁵ Katherine Gantz, 'The Difficult Guest: French Queer Theory Makes Room for Rachilde', *South Central Review*, Vol.22, No.3 (2005), p.120.

⁷⁶ Belenky, 'Gender Reversals', p.283.

⁷⁷ Holmes, *Rachilde*, p.116.

either of the main characters'.⁷⁸ Indeed, both protagonists adopt masculine and feminine clothing and behaviour and act as sexual polar opposites, consistently shifting, altering, and changing.

The gender transgressions and sexual role-swapping which both Raoule and Jacques undertake, thus, create obvious crises with regard to sexuality and object choice. By re-configuring their relationship in terms of active and passive performances, which are opposed to the supposed binary heteronormativity of active male and passive female, Raoule and Jacques effectively disavow such 'straight'forward associations with regard to sexual desire. In *Monsieur Venus*, as Dorothy Kelly notes, 'so many reversals take place, so many roles are exchanged, that after a while, one can no longer tell what is being reversed, which gender is which, whether one should be scandalized or not, whether the subject of the text is a woman's love for a man, a man's love for a woman, a woman's love for herself or for another woman, or a man's love for himself or for another man'.⁷⁹ Therefore, the permutations of sexual desire multiply exponentially when both protagonists cross-dress and engage in relationships with both sexes. This confusion, though, is not simply limited to other human beings. Jacques finds himself almost infatuated with the inanimate objects in his newly acquired love-nest-cum-studio. He 'had been itching with desire for the silk, that thick bushy silk that covered most of the furniture in the studio. He sprawled about, kissing the tassels and the padding, hugging the backs of chairs...even licking the casters, through their multicolored fringes' (*MV*:34).⁸⁰ Jacques embarks on a clearly sexual appreciation of the sumptuous fabrics and furnishings of the room. His 'hugging', 'kissing' and 'licking' of these items prefigure the necrophilic relationship that Raoule has with the

⁷⁸ M. Jean Anderson, 'Writing the Non-Conforming Body: Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus* (1884) and *Madame Adonis* (1888)', *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, Vol.21, No.1 (2000), p.9.

⁷⁹ Kelly, *Fictional Genders*, p.151.

⁸⁰ As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Hannah Cullwick enjoyed the fetishistic act of licking Arthur Munby's boots to display her love for him; Jacques too, takes his appreciation to a more explicit level.

his wax effigy later in the novel. It is in this room of artistic creation and appreciation that Raoule begins her domination of Jacques. While he may literally and figuratively ‘desire’ the objects in the room, for Raoule he becomes the only object worthy of attention. Voyeuristically and thereby fetishistically, she peers at him whilst he is bathing, and Jacques, referring to Raoule as ‘*Monsieur de Vénérande*’, coyly states that ‘even between men that’s not proper...You’re peeking! I wonder whether you’d be pleased to be in my shoes’ (*MV*:39). As the object of Raoule’s gaze, Jacques becomes self-conscious, yet simultaneously self-aware. He begins to realise that as a young and virile male, he can attract other people and subsequently attempts to seduce Raittolbe. Aside from the obvious penetration of Jacques by Raittolbe in the swordfight duel, Jacques’ understanding of sexual desire is predicated on his own gender identification. The more Raoule feminises and dominates Jacques, the more he becomes a ‘woman’ and sexually desires men, yet this in turn attracts Raittolbe. As Felski argues,

unable to distinguish between the facsimile and the real, Jacques-as-a-woman begins to desire men and as a result himself becomes the object of homosexual desire. Rarely have the complex entanglements of gender identity and sexual object choice been plotted so adeptly as in Rachilde’s novel, which resembles a hall of mirrors in its dazzling choreography of the proliferations and mutations of modern erotic relations.⁸¹

These ‘proliferations and mutations’ of sexuality not only refer to Jacques and his ever-diminishing masculinity but also extend to incorporate Raoule’s many manifestations of desire. She sees lesbianism, or the nineteenth-century equivalent, as a simple label that cannot possibly delineate her complex view of sexual relations and rejects the epithet, outright stating that ‘if I were like Sappho, I would be like everybody else! My upbringing bars me from the crime of schoolgirls and the failings of prostitutes’ (*MV*:69). Ultimately it would be incorrect to assign any kind of sexual

⁸¹ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 200.

‘category’ or label to Raoule. She variously indulges in voyeurism, fetishism, sadomasochism, necrophilia, and autoeroticism. As Lisa Downing asserts,

Raoule rejects the label of ‘lesbian’ [...] this is not simply because [she] finds the term inaccurate (i.e. she doesn’t identify as a woman loving another woman). Rather, emphasis is being placed on the inadequacy of such categories as ‘lesbian’ to convey the individuality of desire. While ‘lesbian’ is an understood identity, Raoule [...] proclaims herself as a sexual innovator, a pioneer in territories of perversion as yet uncharted.⁸²

Raoule de Vénérande thus becomes ‘the Christopher Columbus of modern love’ (MV:72). She explores not only her own sexual boundaries, but also the landscape of Jacques’ body and Raittolbe’s commitment. She ventures into the ‘new world’ of the fetish and dominatrix. That is not to say that such proclivities had not been experienced before, but rather that for Raoule, and Rachilde for that matter, the intention is to discover a fluidity of sexuality that allows all sexual activities to be enjoyed, regardless of label and categorisation, and new ones to be discovered. The problem lies not with Raoule’s experimentations, some would say depravities, but more with our perceived notions of what is heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. When Raoule states that she is ‘*a man in love with a man, not with a woman*’ (MV:73), this automatically identifies her as a male homosexual, but how can a woman be a gay man? In fact, Raoule’s sexual desires defy definition. She views herself as both a man and woman and her sexuality as an unwritten book. She notes that ‘I’ve had lovers. Lovers in my life, like books in my library, to learn, to study...But I’ve never had passion, I haven’t written my own book yet! I always found myself alone, when in fact I was two’ (MV:69-70). Later on in the novel Raoule’s ideas concerning gender develop and become increasingly more fluid, however, she views her desire as simply a text, a book that can be read forwards in a linear fashion, read backwards in an inverted method, yet also diachronically, sideways

⁸² Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p.96.

and even upside-down. As she goes on to declare, 'I wanted the impossible...It's mine...That's to say, no, really...it'll never be mine!' (MV:73). The 'impossibility' that Raoule requires in order to express her innermost sexual desires is founded in a polymorphous concept. As Holmes asserts, 'Raoule's project demands that gender and desire remain fluid rather than simply being inverted'.⁸³ The role exchanges between masculine and feminine are not enough. Raoule must have a constantly shifting sexuality that incorporates both male and female roles, masculine and feminine behaviours and a whole array of object choices.

Her choice of Jacques is particularly pertinent with regard to her wanting a gender and sexual fluidity in her sexual experiences. He is configured as the feminine counterpart to her masculine demeanour and the perfect willing victim to her masochistic games of submission and domination. As Raoule professes, 'let him disgust me before pleasing me! Let him be what others have been, an instrument that I can smash before becoming the echo of its vibrations!' (MV:41). She ultimately desires a partner that can be broken and then moulded into the ideal slave: 'you'll be my slave, Jacques, if one can call the delightful abandonment of your body to me slavery' (MV:87). The various psychological and physical trials that Raoule forces Jacques to submit include: dressing him as a woman, biting him, scratching him, beating him and an implied sexual depravity that knows no bounds. Yet, this violent behaviour extends beyond the confines of the boudoir that Raoule and Jacques share as Raittolbe also engages in beating Jacques. As Holmes points out, 'violence is everywhere: characters express their desire, anger or frustration not just verbally but on the bodies of others, so that the effeminate Jacques (Monsieur Venus) is first scarred and bruised by Raittolbe who beats him in an attempt to repress his own homo-erotic desire, then has his wounds

⁸³ Holmes, *Rachilde*, p.118.

re-opened and overlaid by the jealous violence of Raoule'.⁸⁴ The wounds that Raittolbe inflicts on Jacques are indeed, as Holmes declares, a vehement declaration of frustration, coupled with self-denial, at his own homosexual feelings towards Jacques. The injuries are then re-opened by Raoule when she discovers the abuse 'written' all over her lover's body. She begins to tear, scratch and effectively palimpsestically 're-write' the book of sexual desire and the novel of Jacques, with him 'writhing [and] bleeding from veritable slashes that Raoule was opening deeper with an ever more refined sadistic pleasure' (*MV*:131). These acts of apparent 'loving' violence and re-writing are simultaneously what Michael R. Finn terms as 'semi-penetrative stand-ins',⁸⁵ and more importantly, are also displays of ownership and authorship. The sadomasochism which Jacques submits to, Raittolbe executes and Raoule relishes in all combine to depict a sexual world of pain and pleasure, of dominance and submission and of writing and re-writing. However, Raoule's sexual proclivities and desires extend beyond mere bodily violence and become necrophilic in their expression. As Downing makes clear, 'Rachilde's self-deconstructing narratives and myths demonstrate the desire for death that subtends human coupling and goes beyond the "rational" sadomasochistic dynamic'.⁸⁶

Raoule, on occasion, does not even require a partner to experience sexual climax. In the carriage, after meeting Jacques for the first time, she engages in an autoeroticism that seems to stem from merely thinking about her future lover rather than any physical contact. Indeed, 'her entire delicately nervous being tensed in an extraordinary spasm, a terrible vibration; then, with the immediacy of a cerebral shock, the reaction came and she felt better' (*MV*:18). However, the experience of sexual desire

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.110.

⁸⁵ Michael R. Finn, *Hysteria, Hypnotism, the Spirits, and Pornography: Fin-de-Siècle Cultural Discourses in the Decadent Rachilde* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p.208.

⁸⁶ Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, p.116.

and especially orgasm have often been linked to death. As Downing declares, ‘this commonplace is illustrated by the French expression for “orgasm” – *la petit mort* – which has been imported wholesale into most European languages, such is its effective resonance’.⁸⁷ *Monsieur Venus* addresses this deep-rooted connection between sexual climax and mortality, but does so through the depiction of necrophilia which Raoule appears to engage in.⁸⁸

Throughout the text Jacques is frequently characterised as a statue, an inanimate object, or even an *objet d’art*, yet this is fundamentally linked to his feminisation, in that ‘Jacques Silvert gave up his power as a man in love and became her thing, a sort of lifeless object who let himself be loved’ (*MV*:92). Such depictions of Jacques are common and they culminate in the final wax-doll effigy which Raoule uses for sexual gratification. It has been argued, by Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, that during Raoule’s evening visits to the Jacques-doll ‘there is nothing phallic about her embraces’.⁸⁹ However, the text implies that something penetrative does occur. The narrator, seeing Raoule’s masculine and feminine personas as two people, states that ‘they kneel beside the bed, and, after contemplating at length the marvellous lines of the wax statue, they embrace it, kiss it on the lips. A spring hidden inside the flanks connects with the mouth and animates it at the same time that it spreads apart the thighs’ (*MV*:210). The fact that the hidden spring ‘spreads apart the thighs’ suggests less a dildo-type contraption and more of submissive posture. As Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable have convincingly argued,

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁸⁸ Downing notes that other contemporaneous French literature also includes evidence of necrophilia: the ‘*Contes Cruels*’ of 1883 by Villiers de L’Isle-Adam (1838-89) contains “Vera”...[which] tells of a husband’s desire to have his wife alive again, and the counter-desire to unite with her dead body, which is presented as a forbidden and unspoken fetish object. Also, *L’Eve Future* (1886) is an experiment in science-fiction writing in which the figure of a female automaton provides a lifeless object of sexual desire – perhaps the first example of cyber-necrophilia’, *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁸⁹ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, ‘Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic’, *Yale French Studies*, No.75 (1988), p.122.

Raoule is not only kissing the effigy but also performing a more explicitly sexual act. The hidden spring spreads Jacques's legs apart; it does not give him an erection. The suppressed phrase makes it clear that Raoule's relationship with the effigy involves her penetration of him...[thus] explicitly challeng[ing] the gender hierarchy that the male role is dominant because penetrative. Raoule penetrates yet remains a woman and asserts heterosexuality while reconfiguring body parts to mimic sameness.⁹⁰

Hawthorne and Constable make some salient points; the main 'challenge' to the gender and sex role subversion is the act of penetration by a female, and this penetration, which inverts the heterosexual matrix (a female penetrating a male), simultaneously reinstates heteronormative desire (a sexual relationship between a male and a female). Although Raoule dresses and acts like a man, she is nevertheless still a woman. Likewise, this also reinforces the association of necrophilia as a male perversion. As Downing notes, 'the repeated focus on penetration of the corpse implicitly relegates necrophilia to the realms of male perversion'.⁹¹ The whole episode of necrophilia finally allows Raoule the fluidity she had so desired. She is able to have, literally, 'the best of both worlds'; in the masculine and feminine realms, in the heterosexual and homosexual arenas and in the spheres of life and death.

Raoule's masculine persona as the model male is also mirrored in Jacques as the male model. Both characters strip away the layers of gender artifice; as Paul Valéry points out, with regard to anatomical models, 'man is only thus on the surface. Take away his skin, dissect him: there the machinery begins'.⁹² Although Raittolbe questions the validity of the existence of an ideal male, pondering 'can such a man exist?' (*MV*:74), Raoule assures him that 'he exists, my friend, and he is not even a hermaphrodite, not even impotent, he is a beautiful twenty-one-year-old male, whose

⁹⁰ Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable, 'Introduction' to *Monsieur Venus*, p.xxix.

⁹¹ Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, p.3.

⁹² Paul Valéry, "Cahier B", in *Cahiers* (1910; Paris: Gallimard, 1970) no pagination, quoted in Francesco Paolo De Ceglia, 'Rotten Corpses, a Disembowelled Woman, a Flayed Man. Images of the Body from the End of the 17th to the Beginning of the 19th Century. Florentine Wax Models in the First-hand Accounts of Visitors', *Perspectives on Science*, Vol. 14, No.4 (2006), p.428.

instinctively feminine soul has mistaken its envelope' (MV:74). Unlike the hermaphroditic figure of Barbin, from the outset of the novel *Raoule*, and for that matter Rachilde, have configured Jacques as the ultimate text on which to transcribe the perfected male: the feminised man. The important factor for both Raoule and Rachilde, much like D'Albert in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, lies in the external formation of beauty; it is 'the envelope, the epidermis, the palpable being' (MV:19), that is the attracting feature of Jacques, much like the 'Hottentot Venus' discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Saartjie Baartman, too, was employed, or rather enslaved, for her external appearance. In fact, *Monsieur Venus* has even stronger links to the 'Hottentot Venus' apart from the use of the word 'Venus'. In a voyeuristic scene the narrator states that Jacques' body is 'worthy of the Venus Callipyge, this curve of his back where his spine ended in a voluptuous plane and rose firm and plump in two adorable contours' (MV:39). In note number 15 of the translated text, Hawthorne and Constable go on to mention that '*Callipyge*, from the Greek *Kallipygos*, means "beautiful buttocks"' (MV:39, n.15). Here, we see a clear connection between Raoule's desire for the external body of Jacques and the craze for 'bestial' buttocks in nineteenth-century London and Paris. Baartman's 'beautiful buttocks' were similarly admired, gawped at, and sexualised as Jacques's are by Raoule.

The use of the name 'Venus', likewise, references the anatomical Venuses which Valéry speaks of. Anatomical Venuses were moulded mannequins that had removable body parts, sometimes real human hair, and were displayed in suggestive poses, inviting the viewer or trainee doctor to explore and penetrate their interior. Francesco Paolo De Ceglia, referring to these models, declares that 'the *Venus* emanates a contagious sensuality; she is the specimen that provides the conceptual tools for

reading every body in a pan-erotic key'.⁹³ As we saw with Baartman, the Venus figure is depicted as over-sexed, voracious and always ready to please, and it is in this vein that the anatomical Venuses were viewed and deployed, like Raoule's voyeuristic peering at Jacques, as can be seen on the book cover image of *Monsieur Venus* below.

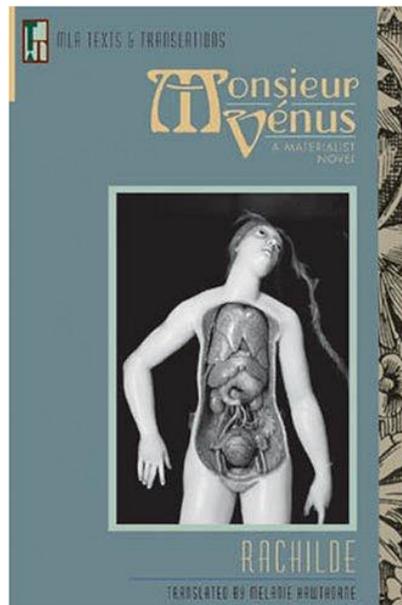


Fig. 18, Cover of *Monsieur Vénus*

However, De Ceglia also notes further with regard to the models that 'unlike the female figures, the male figures do not show any particular emotion... [and] are without skin, hair or any other trimmings, and so, in contrast to the female figures, they allow for a greater idealisation of the subjects'.⁹⁴ Although I would take issue with the argument that a lack of skin, hair or trimmings permits a 'greater idealisation', the main point is that in contrast to Jacques-as-male-model, these male Venuses are not given a suggestive pose, whereas Raoule's sexual plaything incorporates his real hair, nails and teeth and is clearly configured as an inviting, lascivious, and eternally feminised toy. As Maryline Lukacher argues, 'these Venuses, displayed in glass cases simultaneously evoked an abstract femininity and a woman's reproductive destiny. *Monsieur Venus*

⁹³ De Ceglia, 'Rotten Corpses', p.438.

⁹⁴ De Ceglia, 'Rotten Corpses', p.442.

uses this anatomical tradition in order to create a range of distressing, and slightly terroristic, affects'.⁹⁵

In many ways the model of Jacques pushes the feminisation of a male protagonist to its logical extreme by evoking a combination of the Hottentot Venus and the Goddess Venus, as rendered by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). In a secret tomb-cum-shrine, 'on the bed shaped like a seashell, guarded by an Eros of marble, rests a wax figure covered with transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that ornament the mouth, the nails on the hands and feet were torn from a corpse. The enamelled eyes have an adorable look' (MV:208). Jacques has thus become an anatomical Venus that is used solely for Raoule's pleasure, but it is also the final work of art that Jacques becomes; he is the ultimate, yet mechanically animated, *objet d'art*. For Raoule he is now the unattainable object she desired, the fluid being that bridges the corporeal and ethereal worlds. As Downing asserts, 'promising more than it can offer, seeming to be what it is not, ripe with association and empty of definite meaning or identity, it seems to epitomize the nature of the ideal sexual object. Between life and death, reality and unreality, it is a liminal site on which desire may be exercised'.⁹⁶ Like the transvestite figure that he previously was, Jacques, along with Raoule, transgresses the boundaries of acceptability; they both inhabit the 'third' option and thus expose and explode any rigid binary concepts of gender and of sexuality.

To conclude the novel with a necrophilic love affair and a male model may come as a surprise to some readers, but throughout the text Jacques is consistently portrayed as a statue-like figure who often 'remained motionless, openmouthed'

⁹⁵ Maryline Lukacher, *Maternal Fictions: Stendahl, Sand, Rachilde and Bataille* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p.127.

⁹⁶ Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, p.99.

(*MV*:15). Jacques is also viewed by Raittolbe as having been ‘created’; Raittolbe ‘ran his eyes over the *sculptured* outlines of this flesh that was spreading warm emanations of desire’ (*MV*:115, my emphasis). Jacques is sculptured into the perfected image of male beauty and sexual desire and ‘remained superb in his shamelessness like an antique marble’ (*MV*:116). Jacques is the human work of art, his body is the raw material that Raoule, as sculptress and artist extraordinaire, moulds, shapes, breaks and (re)forms into the exquisite and gendered and sexually fluid perfection she desires. Raoule, according to Felski, ‘does not just interpret Jacques’s body but ultimately helps to create it, training, schooling, and transforming an uncouth working-class youth into a much admired figure of feminine elegance. Through her pedagogic formation of another subject, this female Pygmalion even threatens to usurp the ultimate prerogative’.⁹⁷ Raoule as Pygmalion⁹⁸ effectively ‘constructing’ Jacques is like Arthur J. Munby’s initial ‘creation’ of Hannah Cullwick as a slave, Kitty, Walter and Diana Lethaby’s persuading Nan Astley to dress and perform in various guises, Hendrik Caesar’s promotion and staging of Saartjie Baartman as the Hottentot Venus and, of course, Geoffrey Loveall’s unorthodox and feminised upbringing of Rose. All of these characters and historical personas have an architect or director moulding their appearance and behaviour. The transvestite figure can often become the archetypal *tabula rasa* on which a new, highly sexualised identity can be painted and penned. This kind of Frankenstein-esque ‘creation’, though, often leads to unforeseen consequences: Cullwick takes a definitively leading role in her relationship with Munby; Nan, after many degradations, uses her final ‘disguise’ as herself to gain independence; Baartman dies and becomes a museum display model like Jacques; Rose becomes a sailor’s

⁹⁷ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p.197.

⁹⁸ With regard to Raoule as a Pygmalion figure, Hawthorne and Constable state that ‘*Monsieur Venus* is a powerful rewriting, and inversion, of Ovid’s myth of Pygmalion, the misogynist sculptor who, disappointed and disillusioned with mortal women, falls in love with his own creation – the ideal female beauty embodied in his work of art – and who brings his statue to life with the intervention of the goddess Venus’, Hawthorne and Constable, ‘Introduction’, p.xxii.

plaything, and Jacques's feminisation leads him to homosexual desires 'confusing Raoule with men, and men with Raoule' (MV:191), resulting eventually in his death and resurrection as an anatomical Venus.

In many ways 'nature has made these victims naked, and society gives them only clothes' (MV:107). Although many of the cross-dressers discussed above choose an alternative gendered, social, or racial persona, they are also encouraged to exaggerate that performance by their lover or their employer. Just as Nan is configured by Diana Lethaby as the historical Antinous, who, as Hawthorne and Constable note, is 'both a paragon of male beauty and a coded reference in some texts to male homosexuality',⁹⁹ so too is Jacques compared to this ideal; as Raoule remarks, 'Antinous must have been one of your ancestors' (MV:42). Rachilde's many intertextual references to Greek mythology, classical antiquity, and contemporaneous French literature, including *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, appear to be emulated in neo-Victorian fiction.¹⁰⁰ 'Rachilde's propensity for subverted myths (biblical stories, fairy tales, et cetera)', Katherine Gantz makes clear, 'is far from unique in her era; similarly, intertextuality and parody are often cited as defining characteristics of such intertextual postmodern literature'.¹⁰¹ In other words Rachilde's self-reflexive employment of literary and historical sources appears to prefigure the neo-Victorian project of (re)claiming past culture as a method of explaining and examining the present. In fact, one could argue that Rachilde is an arch 'creator' and portrays 'Raoule as the modern Frankenstein'.¹⁰² In her female protagonist Rachilde prefigures a hybrid *par excellence* of Dracula (she preys on and penetrates unsuspecting young men), Frankenstein (forming an automaton from human

⁹⁹ Hawthorne and Constable, 'Introduction and Notes', p.42: n.17.

¹⁰⁰ See Waters's use of Antinous in *Tipping the Velvet*, Stace's employment of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁰¹ Gantz, 'The Difficult Guest', p.116.

¹⁰² Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.262.

body parts), and Jekyll and Hyde (Raoule switches persona, albeit a gendered one and wreaks havoc in the process).

Likewise, *Monsieur Venus* itself has also been incorporated into later texts. As Daniel Gerould points out, ‘Oscar Wilde, who had received ideas for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from *Monsieur Venus*, went to the *Mercure de France* to meet Rachilde...At his trial in London four years later, Wilde’s liking for *Monsieur Venus* was cited as evidence of his depravity’.¹⁰³ In the climate of homophobia which the Criminal Law Labouchere Amendment Act 1885 provoked, the spectre of depravity and fear of non-reproductive sexual congress determined that male homosexuality was the worst kind of deviance and degradation of societal norms. Like the Boulton and Park case discussed in the previous chapter, Oscar Wilde’s trial proved sensational and it was not until the Sexual Offences Act 1967 that homosexual relations between men were finally decriminalised in England and Wales (although acts of buggery and indecency were still illegal); and that it was only in 1986 that homosexuality was removed from the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Revision) as a behavioural and mental abnormality.¹⁰⁴

It seems that Raittolbe’s violent beating of Jacques, as an act of repression of his own homosexual desire, was merely another vehement reaction, born out of fear, towards a sexual minority. After this beating, though, it is significant that Raoule overlays his wounds with her sadomasochistic scratches, bites and bruises, as ‘she bit his marbled flesh, squeezed it tightly in both hands, scratched it with her pointed nails’ (*MV*:130-131). Jacques is thus depicted as a palimpsest,¹⁰⁵ but all the way through the

¹⁰³ Daniel Gerould, ‘Madame Rachilde: “Man” of Letters’, *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1983), p.119.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory M. Herek, ‘Facts About Homosexuality and Mental Health’, available at <http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html> [accessed 21 June 2012].

¹⁰⁵ Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies*, p.253.

text Jacques and his body have been sculptured and written: ‘Jacques, whose body was a poem, knew that his poem would always be read more attentively than any letter from such a vulgar writer as he’ (*MV*:124). He is Raoule’s blank slate and dream of the impossible because he is so malleable and pliant. As Janet Beizer remarks, ‘Jacques’ body traverses a semiotic spectrum in this novel, alternately becoming a poem, a text, a painting, a sculpture: in short, a semiotic object to be read, deciphered, interpreted, viewed, written, painted, and molded’.¹⁰⁶ Yet, Jacques’ body is metaphorically displayed and of paramount importance also paratextually on the cover of the translated text. The anatomical Venus presented on the cover pre-empts Raoule’s first meeting of the male florist when she literally peruses his body that is barely covered by ‘his artist’s smock, which was gaping open on his chest’ (*MV*:10). This parallels the shirt of Théodore in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which simultaneously conceals and reveals Madeleine’s breast underneath her masculine clothing. Raoule’s transgressive desire for Jacques as a text to be written, a body to be sculptured, or even a necrophilic sex toy to be enjoyed suggests that sexual yearning itself, like (trans)gender expression, is a subjective and often shifting concept. Necrophilia is not simply a sexual term; it can mean any obsession or desire for the dead. As Downing asserts, ‘necrophilia hints at the imaginative collusion between life and death, an ambitious leap between the physical and the metaphysical. The obscure spark of desire in necrophilia lies precisely in the gap between the living erotic imagination and the object that is beyond desire’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.250.

¹⁰⁷ Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, p.2.

Conclusion: Perverting the Course of Gender

All three novels discussed in this chapter explode myths concerning the links between gender, dress, sex and sexuality. In their individual ways *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, *Misfortune*, and *Monsieur Venus* all refute the notion that sexual desire is rooted in the gender/sex of the desired object. In other words these novels obliterate the binary notion that Butler explains as ‘the heterosexualisation of desire [which] requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female”’.¹⁰⁸ When the cross-dresser enters the frame, the apparently fixed rules of gender and sexuality are discarded. Instead sexual desire and sexual expression become polymorphous and fluid, allowing for heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual relationships to be explored and experienced. However, Garber asks, ‘where is the place of bisexuality, which, despite or perhaps because of the “bi” in its name, presents itself in the popular imagination as a third choice? Gay, straight, or bi?’¹⁰⁹ The novels in this chapter indicate that sexuality in all its forms was in the nineteenth century and still remains in the twenty-first century a subject that is highly subjective and slippery. This is particularly the case with the transvestite figure, who pushes sexual distinctions beyond their logical extreme to encompass all possible combinations and proclivities. As Butler maintains,

The performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact. Thus no correlation can be drawn, for instance, between drag or transgender and sexual practice, and the distribution of

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.24.

¹⁰⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (1995; London: Penguin, 1997), p.14.

hetero-, bi-, and homo- inclinations cannot be predictably mapped onto the travels of gender bending or changing.¹¹⁰

Butler explains that there need not necessarily be a link between gender and sexuality at all, particularly between the act of cross-dressing and sexual desire, even though in the twenty-first century transvestites, such as the comedian Eddie Izzard, still have to ‘come out’ as heterosexual.

Although sexuality cannot be confidently ‘mapped’ onto the transvestite, the act of gender masquerade as shown by Madeleine, Rose, Raoule and Jacques *can* offer a multitude of sexual options and configurations. Indeed, the nineteenth-century transvestite and the neo-Victorian cross-dresser most of all exhibit what Felski terms ‘the ubiquity and interchangeability of “desire” and “transgression” as redemptive categories of contemporary cultural criticism as well as the increasing attention devoted to previously taboo sexual practices, such as S and M, in the mainstream media. The frisson of erotic transgression has, it seems, become a key moment in the formation of modern subjectivity’.¹¹¹ The act of gender masquerade, already transgressive in its subversion of gender norms, allows for both desirer and the desired to explore ever-more rebellious and convoluted sexual avenues. As Judith Halberstam declares, ‘all gender should be transgender, all desire is transgendered, movement is all’.¹¹²

The ‘movement’ and complexities, both sexual and gendered, that these transvestite characters cause, portray and experience, are reminiscent of the intertextual weaving that is apparent in all three texts. Classical Greek myths, ancient Roman texts and Shakespearean references are used prolifically throughout the novels, the most

¹¹⁰ Butler, ‘Preface’ (1999) to *Gender Trouble*, p.xiv-xv.

¹¹¹ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 174.

¹¹² Judith Halberstam, ‘F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity’, in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.132.

obvious of which, the tale of Hermaphroditus, stands as the pivotal influence for Rose Loveall's desire to travel and, more importantly, for her gendered self-awareness in *Misfortune*. The Greek myth centres around Salamacis, who

found Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, bathing in the spring that was named for her. Hermaphroditus begged her forgiveness, and the moment Salamacis saw his face, she fell in love with him. Hermaphroditus was scared and ran away, but she chased him and pulled him back into the water, begging the heavens that the two of them would never be apart. And somehow, in the splashing water and the thrashing limbs, they became a single body. (M:131)

Rose finds this classical tale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* particularly appropriate for her own gender ambiguity and, as Heilmann and Llewellyn assert, 'from the vantage point of the elderly narrator looking back on his life, this was the moment of transformation which, in his enactment of the classical myth, enabled him to accept his doubly-gendered self'.¹¹³ The entire concept of gender and sexual subversion that Hermaphroditus represents is extremely pertinent to the discussion of Rose and her nineteenth-century counterparts due to the fact that in their many gendered and sexual alterations, changes within the self occur. 'In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', Downing notes, 'transformation is intimately linked to sexuality. Gods, aroused by the beauty of mortals, transformed themselves into beasts or mythical creatures in order to consummate their desire. Conversely, those guilty of too much or inappropriate desire were subject to a punishing change of form'.¹¹⁴ The Hermaphroditus myth, with its blending of anatomical sex and more importantly the idea of transformation, clearly then connects to the story of Pygmalion, also from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and which is implied in the plot of *Monsieur Venus*.

¹¹³ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.38.

¹¹⁴ Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, p.122.

Pygmalion, a sculptor from Cyprus, carved an 'ideal' woman from ivory which was then brought to life by the Goddess Venus. Although any reference to the Pygmalion tale in any text would immediately invite thoughts and implications of 'ideal' physical beauty and the human body as a work of art, it also encourages the reader to contemplate issues of transformation and representation, as well as literature, art, myth and reality. As Hawthorne and Constable emphasise, the Pygmalion myth is metaphorically employed in order to 'raise questions about the blurring of aesthetic and erotic experience, about the connections between fantasies and sexual arousal, about the links between looking and desiring, and about what it means to bring artistic representation to life'.¹¹⁵ Both sculptor and author attempt to make 'real' what is essentially an unobtainable combination of gendered beauty and complicated sexual desire, therefore creating what Albert B. Smith terms as 'a serious conflict between present reality and the pleasures envisioned in the ideal'.¹¹⁶ The transvestite figure in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, *Misfortune*, and *Monsieur Venus* disrupts the supposed continuation between sexual desire and idealised beauty. Madeleine, Rose, Raoule and Jacques are, individually and collectively, the epitome of subversion; they breach the boundaries of gender, create crises of sexuality (in themselves and others), and ultimately they elide concrete definition; they remain fluid and indeterminate. Indeed, 'this transgressive figure', Barsoum notes, 'in which dichotomies have melted away, posits not only the question of sexual identity but also provokes the limits of representation'.¹¹⁷

Concerns regarding such 'limits of representation' are also directly related to the neo-Victorian endeavour of depicting a transvestite sexuality which does not patronise,

¹¹⁵ Hawthorne and Constable, 'Introduction' to *Monsieur Venus*, p.xxii.

¹¹⁶ Albert B. Smith, *Ideal and Reality in the Fictional Narratives of Théophile Gautier* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1969), p.6.

¹¹⁷ Barsoum, *Théophile Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin*, p.xi.

simplify or misrepresent the nineteenth century. As Deborah Lutz maintains, ‘we have the tendency to think of the [Victorians] as being at an earlier stage, sexually speaking, than we are at today, as if history were merely a progression from prudery to openness and tolerance’.¹¹⁸ If the twenty-first century is so enlightened towards concepts of sexual identity, gender transgression and sexual desire, then why are neo-Victorian texts still attempting to negotiate this veritable transformative minefield? The answer lies in the fact that, just like the Victorian themselves, we are constantly re-defining definitions of femininity, masculinity, sexual desire and self-identity. Yet, in order to do this, or even attempt to understand the complex enigma of gender and desire, we turn to the nineteenth century as a sexual catalyst; a place in time when sexologists and authors were asking the very questions we ask ourselves today. Every piece of Victoriana, and every neo-Victorian text, film, adaptation is what Matthew Sweet calls ‘the expression of a desire to go back to the past’.¹¹⁹ However, this past persistently comes back to haunt us too. The transvestites of the nineteenth century, along with their various crises of sexuality, come back to life and, according to Elaine Showalter, ‘like Dracula, they are the undead [...] legendary creations who never stay at rest and whose myths have been rewritten and revisioned in our own time’.¹²⁰ The cross-dresser, whether male, female, transsexual, hermaphroditic, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, or any other categorising label, embodies the place of possibility, the indefinable representation of gender, and the liminal sexual identity; ‘the transvestite *is* the space of desire’.¹²¹ In many ways neo-Victorianism, its literature, its filmic adaptations, its reproduction furniture and furnishings and even its institutions are simply acts of

¹¹⁸ Deborah Lutz, *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism* (New York: Norton, 2011), p.15.

¹¹⁹ Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians*, p.228.

¹²⁰ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), p. 15.

¹²¹ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.75 (emphasis added).

necrophilic appropriation. Neo-Victorians are the new Raoule de Vénérandes, the twentieth and twenty-first century grave-robbers.

**Conclusion: ‘when we first met I wanted to know what you were,
because I couldn’t be certain’ (JMB:94)**

The moment in which one’s staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman.

(Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990)¹

If all of the past can be made over, aren’t we just creating our own illusions of the past while getting stuck in an ever-shrinking present – the present of short-term recycling for profit, the present of in-time production, instant entertainment, and placebos for our own sense of dread and insecurity that lies barely underneath the surface of this new gilded age.

(Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 2003)²

The subtitle to the conclusion of this thesis, from Patricia Duncker’s novel *James Miranda Barry*, has a dual meaning; it relates to many people’s reaction to the transvestite, yet it also applies to neo-Victorian fiction. Both cross-dressing and the neo-Victorian project have the ability to defy easy notions of categorisation, leaving the viewer/reader in doubt as to what exactly they are confronted with. The first opening quotation from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* emphasises the discontinuity and uncertainty that becomes paramount when a cross-dresser enters the frame; people struggle to define such a liminal position between the genders when they have only two binary classifications of feminine and masculine which are often ascribed to female and male bodies. The second opening quotation by Andreas Huyssen points out that neo-Victorian fiction, like much historical literature, is often a ‘recycling’ of the past as a method of coping with the postmodern conditions of fear,

¹ Judith Butler, ‘1999 Preface’ to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2007), p.xxiv.

² Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.21.

anxiety and dislocation from contemporary society and our history. Thus, gender masquerade and literary masquerade are closely aligned; they both pretend to be one thing, while actually being another thing entirely. Similarly, they are both judged by their outward appearances. For the transvestite this is obviously the clothing that is worn to express a particular gender, class or race; for neo-Victorian fiction it is the book cover or dust jacket that acts as its covering. Yet crucially, any outer layers such as clothes or book covers are easily altered, changed or disregarded by subsequent generations of wearers or publishers.

Paratextuality: It is all about appearances

The idea of past and present intertwining and the notion of masculine and feminine categories having permeable, or at the very least malleable, boundaries invites speculation on the concept of 'trans'cendence. The often supposed, but not necessarily actual, rigid and fixed lines between genders, genres, and generations are, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, often blurred, 'trans'gressed, undermined, or even obliterated completely. This permeable boundary is initially crossed in the paratext or peritext of the neo-Victorian texts. Whether through authorial influence, editorial procedure, publisher desire or marketing strategy the ability to attract the literary consumer often depends, in large part, on the enticing and the pretended authenticity of the novel's 'attire'. The book covers themselves are thus the first act of cross-dressing the consumer faces and only through reading the text itself can the reader decide whether the fiction is an 'accurate' (re)presentation of the cover image or merely an implausible attempt at recreating nineteenth-century fiction and history and vice versa. As we saw with the cover images of the texts concerning James Barry, the 'pretended' history espoused by Holmes is rendered in pictorial form with the likeness of a colonial gentleman, whereas Duncker's novel portrays a more theatrical illustration which

emphasizes the performance that neo-Victorian texts undertake. Likewise, the somewhat dramatic employment of the archival photographs of Hannah Cullwick from the Munby box in chapter 2 demonstrates the dialogue between the historical subject, the researcher, the publisher and the reader. In fact, Cullwick appears to return the gaze at the readers of her story. With regard to Chase-Riboud's novel on Baartman, though, the reader is implicated in the gaze alongside the gawping freak show patrons that are pictured, whereas the Holmes text merely perpetuates the commodification of Baartman by duplicating the aquatint of 'Hottentot Venus' which secured both her fame and her subjugation. Such cynical acts of blatant consumerism are also evident in the paratexts of *Tipping The Velvet*. The cover of Waters's novel depicts a pair of feminine shoes which most obviously represent the 'pairing' of lesbian lovers, however, the DVD fetishizes this lesbian desire for a male heterosexual audience and shows the actors Keeley Hawes and Rachel Stirling in an erotic pose whilst wearing corsets and other 'Victorian' underwear. By contrast, the dust jacket of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* depicts a caricature of Dan Leno as Widow Twanky, therefore exaggerating the drag and comedic components of the novel and underplaying the murderous undertones of the plot. However, the bright red of the background preempts the gruesome and bloody murders committed by Elizabeth and on the face of Dan Leno appears to be a shocked expression (rather than laughing), which represents the fright and terror of the victims.

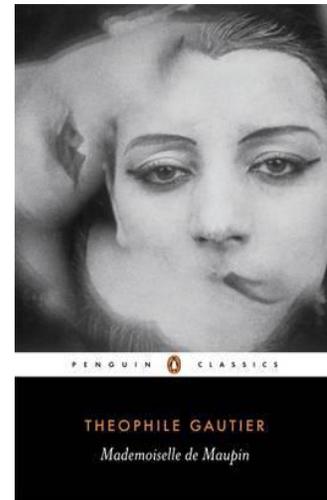
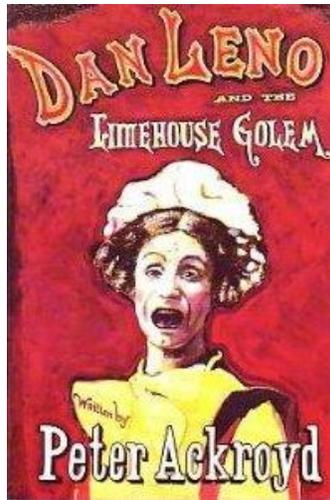


Fig. 19, Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem Fig. 20, Mademoiselle de Maupin

In a similar fashion the paratextual cover image for *Misfortune* exaggerates the juxtaposition between feminine dress and masculine facial hair in order to produce a ‘shock’ factor for the consumers of contemporary fiction. This is in contrast to the image on the cover of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which shows a gender-ambiguous figure replete with theatrical make-up and a sexually desiring gaze. Yet the *Monsieur Venus* cover image completely subverts any comfortable notions of gender and sexual concepts being rooted in the body. The picture of a female anatomical Venus with her orgasmic posture is undermined in the text where it is Jacques, the male protagonist, who is rendered a necrophilic sexual toy and *objet d’art*. However, there are some neo-Victorian texts (not analysed in this thesis as they do not contain cross-dressing), that defy such classification and present paratexts which do not necessarily act as a form of bibliographic transvestism. The specific paratextual images contained within this thesis, though, are produced for a contemporary readership, and are another form of adaptation which seeks to amalgamate the past with the present. In a similar way, the employment of intertextual influences and references attempt to collapse this distance between the nineteenth and twentieth/twenty-

first-centuries, while simultaneously using such connections as a method of claiming authenticity.

Intertextuality: Incestuous influences

In a clear example of the tangled intertextual web which neo-Victorian texts have spun we can turn to Sarah Waters. In her research career, before her fame as a neo-Victorian author, Waters published an article entitled “‘The Most Famous Fairy in History’: Antinous and Homosexual Fantasy’. In this article she examines the multiple (re)configurations of Antinous throughout history, but in doing so she pays particular attention to the nineteenth-century text *Monsieur Venus* by Rachilde. If Raoule ‘is the “new Sappho”’, she states, ‘Jacques is a grotesque modern Antinous...and his fate, if not hers, is predetermined’.³ In this instance we see a researcher examining classical history, supplemented by an analysis of a nineteenth-century French text, and then employing that material in her own neo-Victorian fiction, which is then, in turn, adapted for the twenty-first-century televisual audience. In many ways it is clear that if the authors of the nineteenth century were drawing on ancient and classical material, then it stands to reason that neo-Victorian fiction would likewise employ these influences too. The neo-Victorian project illustrates Huyssen’s point that ‘the desire for narratives of the past, for re-creations, re-readings, re-productions, seems boundless at every level of our culture...the seduction of the archive and its trove of stories of human achievement and suffering has never been greater’.⁴ As such an ever-expanding and ever-changing phenomenon neo-Victorianism clearly does not limit itself to Victorian influences and modes and in fact

³ Sarah Waters, “‘The Most Famous Fairy in History’: Antinous and Homosexual Fantasy’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (1995), Vol. 6, No. 2, p.217.

⁴ Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p.5.

often utilises other forms of media to explore, examine and (re)capture the past. As Huysen goes on to argue,

untold recent and not so recent pasts impinge upon the present through modern media of reproduction like photography, film, recorded music, and the internet, as well as through the explosion of historical scholarship and an ever more voracious museal culture. The past has become part of the present in ways simply unimaginable in earlier centuries. As a result, temporal boundaries have weakened just as the experiential dimension of space has shrunk as a result of modern means of transportation and communication.⁵

Yet, this past which we seem so desperate to research, analyse, cling on to, or even relive through the multiple media formats we now have, becomes a slippery polymorphous subject in its own right. Our perception of the past alters depending on trends and new discoveries but it also relies on what sources we employ, the archival material we unearth, and the literature which precedes it, and as Hayden White has made clear, historical sources and literary imaginings are different only in content rather than in form. Like us, the Victorians themselves were particularly enamoured with epochs from the past, notably the Arthurian legends and the classical Greek myths which experienced a renaissance in various forms during the early modern period. Similarly, the prevalence of the Pygmalion myth, which according to Essaka Joshua ‘was retold and reworked during the nineteenth century more times than in any other’,⁶ carried with it the concepts of ideal beauty and gender configuration. Indeed, Ovidian myth and influence has proven particularly useful to both nineteenth-century and contemporary explorations into sexual and gender transformation because, as Leo C. Curran points out, ‘metamorphosis has tremendous utility as a medium for exploring the complex problem of identity: personal, national, and

⁵ Ibid., p.1.

⁶ Essaka Joshua, *Pygmalion and Galatea: The History of a Narrative in English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p.xx.

human'.⁷ Inevitably, the concept of (self)identity is directly linked to the potential to (trans)form the self; the paramount prerogative of the transvestite. The concept of transformation, then, has travelled, traversed and transcended epochs to appear, once again, in the contemporary literature of the postmodern twenty-first century in the form of the neo-Victorian transvestite characters analysed in this thesis.

The intertextuality of neo-Victorian literature is, like paratextuality, similar to the transvestite act. Reading previous canonical texts through the present is very much the same as 'reading' a gender through prior engagement and understanding of that gender. 'A text', according to Worton and Still, 'is available only through some process of reading; what is produced at the moment of reading is due to the cross-fertilisation of the packaged textual material (say a book) by all the texts which a reader brings to it'.⁸ Therefore, intertextual references or influences can only be 'read' if acknowledged and understood as such, and gender too requires the same kind of recognition. Like Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where gender is sustained through repeated and stylised acts, so the intertextuality apparent in neo-Victorian fiction relies upon the repetition of stylised authorship. Yet, intertextuality also relates to gender and genre confusion in other ways. Graham Allen notes that 'the term intertextuality promotes a new vision of meaning, and thus of authorship and reading: a vision resistant to ingrained notions of originality, uniqueness, singularity and autonomy'.⁹ Just as the transvestite act disrupts concepts of biological essentialism and paratextuality is able to adapt to trends over time, intertextual

⁷ Leo C. Curran 'Transformation and Anti-Augustanism in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', *Arethusa*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1972), p.75.

⁸ Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds), 'Introduction', *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp.1-2.

⁹ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.6.

references too avoid simplistic interpretations of having an ‘original’ author; all three are merely simulacrum, copies of copies with no fixed core of authenticity. Furthermore, Allen goes on to argue, ‘intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to reader’s own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries, and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic “voices” which exist within society’.¹⁰ Historical eras, authors, and publishers speak of their ideals, their categorisations, their concerns, and their anxieties through the gender definitions, paratextual images and intertextual references that we see in neo-Victorian fiction which involves transvestism. Certainly, intertextuality, paratextuality, neo-Victorian fiction and cross-dressing avoid easy definition and classification, they are all slippery subjects and all suggest that authenticity and authorship are mutable categories which can be undermined. As Butler asserts with regards to gender, ‘the terms which make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself)’.¹¹ The lack of a ‘single author’ and the challenge to perceived authenticity, then, emphasises the relationships between history and fiction, class and race performances, the concept of performativity, the crisis of sexuality, and ultimately, the entire notion of neo-Victorian fiction as a drag act.

Relationships: ‘a rather curious mixture of types’ (TTVB:205)

In discussing the film *Stonewall* (1995) Nikki Sullivan raises an important issue with regard to the relationship between history and fiction, but is also easily applies to all neo-Victorian

¹⁰ Ibid., p.209.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.1.

fiction that includes cross-dressing. She declares that ‘history itself becomes a fabulous fable (or a myriad of often camp and contradictory fabulous fables) that no longer conforms to the (hetero)normative demand for a clear definition of, and distinction between the real and the unreal, fact and fiction’.¹² The various texts in this thesis all, at some point, perform a slippage between ‘fact’ and fiction. Archives have been mined for the source material that underpinned the creative endeavour and research has been employed to create a sense of authenticity for the text. Yet, the act of selecting particular subjects, collating the archive material, and reading the various historical documents all require a creativity that is the keystone of fictional writing. Part of the reason for this ‘romance of the archive’¹³ is the fact that bookshops, television and cinema are suffused with historical fiction (of all types) and particularly neo-Victorian fiction. ‘These British romances of the archive’, according to Susana Onega, ‘constitute a fully innovative attempt to reinvigorate the still dominant form of narrative, the English novel, by re-imagining the past and embodying a new structure of feeling capable of representing the changing cultural conditions of our contemporary age’.¹⁴ This attempt to effectively (re)capture the past in the form of the novel, or even in biography, directly relates to the texts in this thesis and reveals the hybridity of neo-Victorianism as a genre. The fictional biographies and biographical fiction that have been written about James Barry MD are an obvious method of endeavouring to examine, or even challenge, our contemporary categorisations of gender, in the same way that the texts

¹² Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p.26.

¹³ The text from which this phrase originated deals with the complexities and influences of historical research in fictionalised modern re-imaginings. See Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Susana Onega, ‘Family Traumas and Serial Killing in Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*’, in Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Gutleben, Christian (Eds.) *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sex and Cultural Politics* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), p.270.

exploring Hannah Cullwick and Saartjie Baartman are undermining contemporary notions of essentialised class and race. Likewise, the remediated forms of history, literature and filmic adaptation which are evidenced by Peter Ackroyd, Sarah Waters, Andrew Davies and Geoffrey Sax, all suggest that history and the past are liminal and permeable spaces on to which performativity and transgression can be easily mapped. The prominent intertextual game in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, *Monsieur Venus* and *Misfortune* also blurs the boundaries between classical and/or historical texts, Victorian fiction and the contemporary engagement with that past. In many ways, the past echoes forward through the twentieth and twenty-first neo-Victorian project, but also is reflected backward, placing emphasis on the people, experiences, definitions and classifications of gender and transvestism that resonate with our own confusions and anxieties.

It is these anxieties which foster examinations into the transvestite figure, but the same anxieties also produce questions and uncertainty with regard to class and race, as similarly socially constructed and regulated categories. As Elaine Showalter asserts, ‘in times of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class and nationality, becomes especially intense’.¹⁵ It is our contemporary dislocation from a long-remembered, rather than long-forgotten, past which produces such postmodern nostalgia. The effects of class oppression, the scars of slavery, and the lasting (and sometimes still prevalent) evidences of gender discrimination are all delineated through our need to recover a history (that is often depicted as worse than our own) in order to make sense of ‘how far

¹⁵ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p.4.

we have come', or not, as the case may be. In the texts dealing with James Barry, s/he is persistently portrayed as the champion of the oppressed and an irascible, yet progressive, figure who performs the role of officer and gentleman with aplomb. Cullwick and Baartman, though, seem to over-perform their respective class and race roles in a commodification of the self which at times, instead of undermining such stereotypes, threaten to reinforce them. Baartman in particular is employed to depict an overly-sexualised exotic being, who is most distinctly 'Othered' by both her 'racial' and 'sexual' attributes. This 'Othering' process is a result of conceptualisations of difference. As Judith Butler maintains, 'the human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognisability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verification of that sex, its ethnicity, [and] the categorical understanding of that ethnicity'.¹⁶ In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and *Tipping the Velvet* (TV adaptation and novel), it is not the body but the slums and less salubrious areas of London that have the effect of 'Othering' the protagonists as these places become the stage on which gender is performed in its extreme. Elizabeth Cree and Nancy Astley are seen to move fluidly between the classes during their many gender masquerades and their theatrical lives. The nineteenth-century French novels along with Stace's contemporary text exhibit most clearly the freedom which the upper classes and nobility had in the nineteenth century with regard to gender masquerade and sexual exploration. Madeleine de Maupin, Rose, and Raoule use their aristocratic position to enjoy the 'depraved' and 'degenerate' appetites that are expected of nineteenth-century decadents by their nineteenth and twenty-first century readerships.

¹⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p.2.

The sexual relationships as portrayed in the fourth chapter of this thesis are just another performance. The tableaux vivants in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the theatrical nature of Rose's seduction of both male and female characters, and the excessive flamboyance of Raoule's treatment of Jacques (even after his death) all contain elements of the business that is show. Likewise, the Cullwick and Baartman (re)presentations emphasise both the performance and the performativity of the human condition, revealing that all is artifice and the 'reality' of class and racial stereotypes is all an illusion. Racster and Grove, Holmes and Duncker also appear to highlight the theatrical and demonstrative aspects of Barry and her life, even down to the way she held her arms 'with elbows in instead of outward' (SP:51). Ultimately, as shown in chapter three of this thesis, the adaptive process from music hall presentation, to historical record, to neo-Victorian fiction and finally to filmic format, demonstrates the notion that *all* pretences, be they gender, class, race, sexual, and especially those of history and fiction are polymorphous, fluid and open to interpretation. 'All performances and all attempts at subversion', Sullivan points out, 'will be ambiguous and open to multiple meanings...it may not be possible to formulate a final, all-encompassing interpretation of a particular performance'.¹⁷

The inability to formulate such a final interpretation of performance is at the heart of the neo-Victorian project as a whole. The various gendered and sexual negotiations which many texts explore merely reveal the ambiguity that is the main postmodern situation. All of the texts in this thesis in some way attempt to 'un-pick' the tangled web of gender, dress and sex. James Barry, for instance, is configured either as a love-struck

¹⁷ Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, p.92.

‘feminine’ female whose ‘normative sexuality fortifies normative gender’,¹⁸ as we would expect in the fantasy and escapist romance fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, or as an asexual hermaphrodite or even lesbian transsexual. Nan Astley, too, embarks on various sexual adventures in her cross-dressed persona and in doing so through the filmic format exposes the ‘new’ titillation of lesbian sexuality for male heterosexual audiences. As Marjorie Garber argues,

Part of the problem – and part of the pleasure and danger of decoding – is in determining which set of referents is in play in each scenario. For decoding itself is an erotics – in fact, one of the most powerful we know. But any erotics is also anxiety producing, and this kind of cultural and political anxiety often has real and adverse consequences for those who are testing the boundaries. The difficulty, the challenge, and the interest posed by the complex interrelationship between transvestism and gay identity lie in simultaneously tracking the dissemination of the signifiers of sex and gender and in combating the oppressive effects of institutionalized binarity.¹⁹

In a comparable vein, the sexually fetishised renditions of Cullwick and Baartman illustrate how sadomasochism and racial exotics become the means of decoding both nineteenth-century and contemporary sexual desire. Each historical epoch invents its own terminology in order to classify, or pathologise, such sexual desires and ‘terms such as invert, queer, sodomite, sapphist, dyke, and so on’, notes Sullivan, ‘are cultural artefacts that are tied to ways of understanding and of being that are specific to a particular cultural milieu’.²⁰ The categories may have different labels in contemporary society but the apparent need to classify and pigeon-hole people into separate groupings remains and this is what neo-Victorian fiction is often seeking to challenge.

¹⁸ Butler, ‘1999 Preface’ to *Gender Trouble*, p.xi.

¹⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.161.

²⁰ Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, p.2.

That challenge, though, is thwarted by our relationship with the past. As Christian Gutleben proposes, ‘contemporary fiction advocates social, sexual and sometimes aesthetic advancement, and yet to do so it appropriates, reverts to and builds on a model of the past. Apparently unable to propose a new model for the present, today’s novel is turning back toward canonical tradition’.²¹ We seem to be simply involved in a cyclical process of trying to distance ourselves from the Victorians whilst simultaneously utilising their expected norms of gender and sexual classifications in order to examine how the supposedly ‘subversive’ Victorian is actually the twenty-first century normality. The neo-Victorianism prevalent in contemporary culture may map modern concerns onto the Victorian era, but it also maps the nineteenth century on to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The reasons for this slippage are many, but an obvious one is the fact that we are still haunted by our apparently repressed and reticent ancestors and, as Matthew Sweet declares, ‘if the Victorians are caricatured as cruel, hypocritical, repressive, intolerant, prudish and cheerless, then it makes all post-Victorian wife-beating, child abuse, social injustice and personal dullness more easy to cope with’.²² Yet, our examinations and explorations into the past are never stable; they change and alter over the span of our own generation, just as our perceptions and expectations of gender and sexuality change over time, which highlights more than anything else that we are the ‘Other’ Victorians and that neo-Victorian fiction is the pinnacle of a drag performance; above all ‘it was a wonderful idea. A trick, a masquerade. A joke against the world’ (*JMB*:60)

²¹ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.10.

²² Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.232.

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