

(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*

Allison Neal

(University of Hull, England, UK)

Abstract:

This paper examines the multi-layered adaptation and (re)presentation of the male impersonator on the Victorian music hall stage. It focuses specifically on the act of performing the performance of gender, the sexual titillation that ensues from such an act and how the format of delivery can impact audience reactions towards the cross-dresser. Particular attention is paid to the comparison between the male impersonation as performed by one of the most famous of Victorian and Edwardian male impersonators, Vesta Tilley (1864-1952), and the neo-Victorian (re)negotiations of the male impersonator as depicted in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and the subsequent BBC adaptation of Waters's novel which aired in 2002.

Keywords: adaptation, cross-dressing, the gaze, gender, music hall, neo-Victorian, performance, sexuality, stage, transvestism.

The nineteenth-century music hall, with its ability to delve into the realm of fantasy and subversion, is a ripe environment for reinventing previously unheard stories, and for creating the outspoken voices of the marginalised or oppressed, such as that of the transvestite. It was also an arena, notes Dagmar Kift, “where social trends and values could be presented and commented on by performers and audiences alike, and where social identities were shaped” (Kift 1996: 2). The stage allows 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. Similar to popular cultural cinematic, televisual, and (re)mediated (re)presentations, (re)creations and adaptations, which “can be seen as a site where meanings are contested and where dominant ideologies can be disturbed” (Gamman and Marshment 1988: 1), the Victorian music hall, according to Cheryl A. Wilson, “was a venue for social commentary as well as entertainment” (Wilson 2006: 285). Indeed, the music hall, with its heady atmosphere of raucous behaviour, has been linked to the idea of an “invert” contagion whereby Victorian social commentators suspected the

theatre as a “location which congenital ‘inverts’ might exploit to turn susceptible young women into ‘femmes’” (King 2005: 146). With the music hall already suffuse with negative connotations of degeneracy, vulgarity and the potential danger to the sexual mores of Victorian society, the female cross-dresser on the stage posed a further concern to society. While the transgression of gender boundaries had the ability to undermine the strict Victorian codes of decent and acceptable behaviour, there was also the possibility of an “erotic charge” (Waters 2002), resulting from the recognition of the female underneath the costume for the audience as they performed their own ‘double reading’ of transvestite performers such as Madame Vestris, Hetty King, and the top-billing Vesta Tilley, whose parodies of the dapper swell-about-town, the soldier, and the sailor “presented a better man than men could ever be” (Maitland 1986: 128-9).

Inspired by the top male impersonators of the nineteenth century, such as Vesta Tilley, and the music hall’s transgressive space, contemporary author Sarah Waters explores and recovers the “erotic charge” in her neo-Victorian novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). Just as the audience in the music hall is subjected to such a simultaneous ‘double-reading’ of the transvestite, so too is the reader of neo-Victorian literature involved in a double-reading of history. 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. As Mariaconcetta Constantini asserts, Waters attempts to “bring back to life the secret yearnings and the anxieties that plagued the Victorians’ minds and, in different ways, still haunt our existence in the new millennium” (Constantini 2006: 20). Thus, our own contemporary issues and theories concerning gender expressions and sexual orientation are, in effect, read backwards into the liminal space of the Victorian music hall stage and are thus explored in such cultural forms and adaptations as the media, cinema, film and television.

In many ways the adaptation and remediation of historical literature into media emphasises the process of negotiation of genders by the transvestite. Sarah Waters herself comments in an interview with Abigail Dennis that

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' (Dennis 2008: 48, original ellipses).

Just as the act of male impersonation or drag can be defined as a copy of a copy with no original core of gender, so too can neo-Victorian literature itself can be classified as a rewriting, a palimpsestic copy of Victorian mores or even a literary 'drag act', if you will. *Tipping the Velvet* can, in fact, be read as an adaptation in triplicate. The original music-hall performances of male impersonators such as Vesta Tilley and Hetty King are appropriated and adapted by Sarah Waters for a lesbian agenda and are then further (re)created and (re)presented by screenwriter Andrew Davies, famed for various BBC adaptations of Victorian novels, whose version of *Tipping the Velvet*, which aired in 2002, re-appropriated the lesbian sexual act for a primarily popular and heterosexual audience. The fluidity of movement between the formats of stage, novel, and screen directly relates to the changing of feminine, androgynous, and masculine dress. *Tipping the Velvet* anticipates such a tripartite adaptational endeavour by delivering the protagonist Nancy Astley/Nan King's cross-dressed story in Victorian triple-decker form. Both novel and television mini-series are split into three distinct phases of plot, which coincide with the three separate phases of cross-dressing Nan undertakes. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn note "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" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 237). In the first phase, Nan adopts male clothing in order to join Kitty Butler on stage as part of a double act, which she then takes onto the London streets and performs as a 'renter', a young male prostitute. In the second phase, Nan is effectively dressed and kept as a sexual prisoner by the rich and forceful Diana Lethaby. In the third phase, Nan has accepted her identity as a transvestite and assumes masculine clothing for the more pragmatic purposes of the Banner household duties. The triple layers and phases of the narrative therefore evinces the multiple layers of gender embodied by the cross-dresser herself.

This paper examines the multi-layered adaptation and representation of the male impersonator on the nineteenth-century music-hall stage for a

contemporary audience. Reading the novel's transvestite characters through Vesta Tilley's performative success in the nineteenth century, this paper argues that Waters's appropriation of the music hall exploits its ability to reveal the liberatory and restrictive acts of complicity in the gender performance of the transvestite and in postmodern historicity in general. Finally, the paper claims that Andrew Davies's adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* deliberately misreads, and thus heterosexualizes, the music hall's transgressive potential through the gaze of another medium, television.

1. Performance

Both cross-dressing and neo-Victorian fiction utilise notions of parody and performance. Calling attention to the artifice behind construction of gender, male impersonators on the music hall stage relied largely on parody. According to Peter Bailey

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 manner, but that crucially he was less than a man. (Bailey 1998:120)

In their different ways historical fiction and cross-dressing negotiate the limitations and concepts of the 'real thing' and the 'counterfeit', of authenticity and artificiality. One can draw similarities, for example, between neo-Victorian fiction's methodology of (re)creating the past and the dissolution of temporal lines and the transvestite's transgressive act of (re)creating and blurring of gender boundaries.

One of the most famous and successful male impersonators on the music-hall stage who represented such an eschewing of gender boundaries was Vesta Tilley. From the age of five, Vesta Tilley (Lady Matilda Alice de Frece née Powles, 1864-1952) was performing on the stage professionally; she made her London debut in 1874 and was still performing well into the early twentieth century. During every performance she had to walk a fine line between acceptability and entertainment in order to avoid 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”. (Maitland 1986: 13)

But her mocking of maleness was acceptable to the Victorian audience because she imitated very distinct stereotypical masculine behaviour. In her performances she often identified with the man she was parodying, thus appealing to the heterosexual female contingent of the audience. By showing women an ideal of maleness that was desirable yet unobtainable, Tilley offered a safe option to many of the female audience members because her act relied solely on the idea of fantasy rather than any actual lived reality. Tilley did, however, permit women to witness an alternative to the restrictive femininity that she conformed to in her off-stage life. She offered women the idea of social, economic and political freedom through “the acquisition of various ‘masculine’ attributes, such as independence and mobility” (Wilson 2006: 294). She also effectively created a confusion of gender, causing the contemporary critic W.R. Titterton to state in 1912, “but for a subtle hint of a womanly waist and curving hips you might fancy it indeed a round-faced boy. Even so, you are doubtful” (Titterton 1912: 147).

Titterton’s ‘double reading’ of Tilley, his recognition of feminine sexuality in a ‘round-faced boy,’ speaks to an awareness of gender codes that Tilley exploits in her drag performance. Depending on the environment, the audience, and the cultural context in which it is performed, drag can result in varying interpretations and significances being produced. Similar to the drag artist, Waters’s neo-Victorian male impersonator can show how slippery our concepts of binary genders actually are. By parodying the opposite gender, the male impersonator emphasises the changeability of gender roles; s/he can in fact become an ‘act’, but only in an exaggerated, satirical, unreal sense. The act relies upon the audience’s actual awareness that gender impersonation is being produced; otherwise it loses its subversive potential and the performer merely becomes an ordinary person on a stage. But to understand that they are participating in a drag ‘act’, the viewers, like Titterton, have to consent to the idea of gender as a binary system in the first place; they need to know that what they are seeing

constitutes parody, pastiche, or gender transgression. As Diane 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” (Dugaw 1989: 148). In this respect, the viewer of male impersonation must speak the language of gender binarity in order to comprehend that gender norms are being subverted, overstressed and undermined.

In the novel, Waters exploits the complexities, both explicit and implicit, produced by the drag act of male impersonation. Throughout the novel she employs her knowledge of gender and queer theory to emphasise the performativity of gender through her cross-dressed protagonists. Kitty’s family name, Butler, directly references the influence Judith Butler’s theories have had on Water’s neo-Victorian fiction. However, it is the character of Nan who embodies every aspect of gender transgression both on and off the music-hall stage. Drag and the male-impersonation act directly challenge the biological basis of gender difference. As Butler contends,

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. (Butler 1990: 187, original emphasis)

Waters’s protagonists Kitty, and even more so, Nan, represent this “radical contingency”. They exemplify the very concept 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 be performed. 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, and the unthinkable can all be explored and experienced, through acting and dress, when on stage in the Victorian music hall. However, the novel is also eager to catalogue and complicate the audience’s resistance to the music hall’s subversive potentialities in a particular episode involving Nan’s cross-dressing.

Drawing on Tilley's subtle parody of the masquerading 'swell', Waters's fictional characters, Nan and Kitty, assume a multi-layered gendered performance in their cross-dressing for the stage. As Wilson notes

through her experiences in the music hall, simultaneously occupying the roles of lesbian lover, swell, and actress, Nan learns that gender and sexuality are social constructions that can – and sometimes must – be performed. (Wilson 2006: 296)

The first layer of such a performance, which Nan and Kitty adopt, as did Tilley, is the 'feminine' role they assume in everyday life, which Nan in particular has difficulty in understanding and exhibiting. When wearing an extremely 'feminine' gown for a party to celebrate her success on stage, Nan finds that "the dress was so transforming it was practically a disguise [...] I looked more like a boy who had donned his sister's ball-gown for a lark" (Waters 1998: 94). Nan discovers that femininity is itself a form masquerade. Having already performed their 'femininity' in their daily lives off stage, Nan and Kitty don a second gendered layer of masculine clothing when performing on stage as male impersonators. Like Tilley's impersonation of male characters, Kitty looked "like a very pretty boy, for her face was a perfect oval, her eyes were large and dark at the lashes, and her lips were rosy and full. Her figure, too, was boy-like and slender" (Waters 1998: 13). For Nan, though, whose male costume has to have added curves stitched in, the layers of gender performance begin to multiply as she finds when dressing in a male suit for the first time she was "clad not exactly as a boy but, rather confusingly, as the boy I would have been, had I been more of a girl" (Waters 1998: 120). 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?" (Waters 1998: 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. Appearing too much like a man could result in the subversive and transgressive nature of the drag act becoming nullified and therefore, unappealing to their music-hall audience. As this episode demonstrates, the act of cross-dressing, and particularly the

performance of drag or male impersonation, has the ability to undermine the idea of gender as a binary system and actually explode the concept of gender as a static reality.

While most of the audiences that Nan and Kitty perform for are appreciative and adoring, there is an occasion when a drunken audience member not only sees through the double act, but actually glimpses the private sexual lives of Nan and Kitty. Half way into their number the man 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!*” (Waters 1998: 140). His heckling disrupts the act but also enables the rest of the audience to suddenly recognise 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!*” (Waters 1998: 141). Nan realises that once revealed, their sexual desire has become conflated with their cross-dressing performance, resulting in their becoming, like another music hall transgender act in the novel, ‘Paul or Pauline’, “freakish by association” (Waters 1998: 143). However, the transvestism in their performance is an ambiguous and contested site for gender play, illicit and explicit sexuality *and* of acceptability. The gender and sexual deviance viewed in their act are the consequence of the various freedoms which Nan sees and, indeed, relishes in. She particularly enjoys cutting her hair short, feeling that “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 grown over, and she was slicing free” (Waters 1998: 405). While Nan views freedom in her short hair cut, she had previously eroticised Kitty’s close-cropped hair because it revealed the nape of her neck as an erotic site. During this time though, in order to appear ‘decent’ in public, Kitty attaches a false hair-piece, styled into a plait, to maintain her respectable appearance. The cutting of Nan’s hair symbolically represents the protagonist’s self-riddance of her culturally imposed feminine gender, the breaking of ties from her old life at Whitstable, yet also connects them implicitly to the criminal, the deviant and the insane. As Nan notices, 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” (Waters 1998: 12). Waters is effectively reclaiming the transvestite act, the lesbian sexual act, and the cutting of female hair from the connotations of deviance and degradation by eroticising short hair and combining the idea of gender freedom with sexual liberty in the hair cut.

2. Sexual Titillation

Cross-dressed acts, such as those performed by Vesta Tilley, rely heavily on the reaction and the understanding of the audience. To prevent any label of deviance being attached to the gender disguise on stage, the audience has to have a ‘pay off’, a reward or a reason to view the male impersonator as acceptable. That reward arrives in the form of sexual titillation. Although Vesta Tilley married and conformed to the heterosexual norm in her off-stage life, her appearance on stage blurred the distinctions between various types of sexual desire. Sara Maitland describes how, as Tilley reached the chorus of her farewell song, she would sing out:

‘Girls. If you want to love a soldier, you can all love ME!’, a stentorian voice from the gallery called out ‘We do!’ [Thus] the gender confusion was complete; the male spectator was prepared to identify himself with ‘the girls’. Even so, women loved her too, [and] the majority of her greatest fans were women. (Maitland 1986: 10)

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 avoided any scandalous insinuations of her reputation, however, by never over-identifying with her male character. 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. (Busby 1976: 169)

What Busby means by “basic femininity” is left in doubt; however, what is clear is that Tilley, unlike Nan, keeps just enough simulation of ‘femininity’ in her portrayal to mitigate her outward ‘masculinity’ and therefore avoid any possible (homo)sexual scandal.

Waters’s depiction of the delicious undecideability of sexual titillation that the music hall affords pits *Tipping the Velvet* against the work of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century sexologists like Havelock Ellis, who attempted to classify what they deemed abnormal or “inverted” sexual desire. 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. (Ellis 1928: 154)

Here, Ellis makes a clear differentiation between dress, gender and sexuality. His analysis shows that sexuality is not always a determining factor when it comes to dress and gender expression. Like Ellis, many sexologists assumed that the transvestite or cross-dresser was sexually “inverted” meaning, simply, a man trapped in a woman’s body or vice versa. Albeit a simplified explanation for physical/sexual attraction between females, Ellis’s concept is explored in *Tipping the Velvet*, which asks the question: ‘what manner of friendship could there *be* between a handsome, clever music-hall artiste, and the girl in the crowd that admired her?’ (Waters 1998: 40). Indeed, the transvestite act exacerbated this problem by refusing classification and “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” (Vicinus 1996: 187).

Although the theatre permits some avenues for breaching gender and sexual boundaries, such as when a female Prince Charming kisses a female Cinderella, Jeanette King notes that “the conventions of this traditional form of theatrical cross-dressing paradoxically reinforce the heterosexual norm”; in contrast, “[a] double act”, such as that performed by Kitty and Nan, “threatens to destabilise that norm, exposing the limits of acceptable transgression” (King 2005: 147). Sarah Waters underscores this instability

of gender and sexual desire by configuring her protagonists Nan and Kitty as a lesbian couple. When Mrs Dendy shows them to their room, which includes a double bed, she exclaims to the pair “you won’t mind *doubling up*, of course [...] you’ll be quite on top of each other in here” (Waters 1998: 70). The act of male impersonation and the sexual act are therefore linked together, as Nan states that “the two things – the act, our love – were not so very different. They had been born together – or, as I liked to think, the one had been born of the other, and was merely its public shape” (Waters 1998: 127). Similar to the sexological debates in the late nineteenth century the conflation of gendered dress and sexuality is thus complete. Indeed, as both Kitty’s dresser and a member of her audience, Nan is aroused by Kitty’s cross-dressing. When she is handed the male costume, she declares that

each item 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. (Waters 1998: 36).

Nan is not aroused by the ‘feminine’ clothes but by the male costume, which represents the transgression of the gender boundary. Nan goes on to imagine that other women would find her similarly attractive if she dressed as a man and performed a male impersonation act, as she imagines that “in every darkened hall there might be one or two female hearts that beat exclusively for me, one or two pairs of eyes that lingered, perhaps immodestly, over my face and figure and suit” (Waters 1998: 129). Thus, Waters reveals that “gender meaning is in the eye of the beholder” (Vicinus 1996: 188), and that sexual desire can be manipulated by the act of cross-dressing. In other words, it is through the act of male impersonation that 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 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 as a member of Kitty’s

audience, Nan still detects a hint of subversion in the act and songs, finding that “it was peculiarly thrilling to have them sung to us, not by a gent, but by a girl, in neck-tie and trousers” (Waters 1998: 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 Whitstable, 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. Yet the sexual titillation experienced by Nan in turn becomes available to *her* music hall audiences once she takes the stage, and thanks to the BBC adaptation of Waters’s novel, accessible to the televisual viewer also.

Whilst Andrew Davies, the screen writer, and Geoffrey Sax, the director of the 2002 TV adaption of Waters’s novel manage to show the connection between the act on stage and the lesbian sexual act “by interweaving scenes of Nan and Kitty’s first sexual encounter with clips from their various theatrical performances” (Wilson 2006: 296), they effectively heterosexualise the spectator’s gaze. Davies’s screenplay revises Waters’s text in that it favours

romance, melodrama and spectacle, [so that] subtlety and depth are foregone in favour of unambiguous simplicity, so that no meaning can be missed [...] leaving the audience with little scope for intellectual and interpretative activity. (Cardwell 2005: 107)

In the TV adaptation, literally, all is laid bare. Partly this is due to the processes involved in adapting a long novel into a condensed three-part drama series, and also because, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin assert, “television programs need to win the moment-by-moment approval of their large, popular audiences, to evoke a set of rapid and predictable emotional responses” that at times leave limited scope for nuance and psychological complexity in the viewer’s engagement with the representation; instead “television must pursue immediacy as authentic emotion, as exemplified most plainly by the ‘heartwarming’ drama” (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 187). According to Sarah Cardwell, Davies

is often accused of adding sex and passion to his adaptations with blatant disregard for the nature and tone of the source texts. At the same time he is praised for his powerful, witty, cunning female characters. What many critics fail to notice is that the two features are positively linked. (Cardwell 2005: 89)

Thus, the TV adaptation takes an explicitly lesbian romp of a neo-Victorian novel – arguably intended first and foremost for queer readers – and stage-manages the *mis-en-scene* so that the lesbian sexual contact becomes a gratuitous performance for a heterosexual male audience. Davies admits in an interview that he is “keen on Victorian erotic memoirs and Victorian pornography”, which primarily served a male audience, and describes *Tipping the Velvet* as “*Pride and Prejudice* with dirty bits” (Davies 2002). Significantly, in an interview with the *Guardian*, he also states that “men are going to love it” (Cozens 2002: n.p.). The contemporary press itself sensationalised the adaptation, with the *Mail*’s headline proclaiming that the “BBC faces obscenity row over ‘shocking’ new lesbian drama” (qtd. Conlan 2002: n.p.). It seems that in contemporary society the neo-Victorian cross-dressed lesbian is still just as shocking to the mass viewing public and must be appropriated into the heterosexual matrix in order to remain acceptable and controlled, even though both straight and gay audience members may also find the scenes sexually titillating too and it was also an opportunity for lesbian viewers to self-identify with the characters. The format of delivery for the transvestite tale may explain one of the reasons why such confinement and sensationalism is deemed necessary. Nonetheless, as the next section of this article argues, despite the predominantly heterosexual medium of television, the subversive qualities of the music hall stage remain available.

3. Format

The stage, the novel, and the television all have differing modes of articulation and (re)presentation, which can impact the actions of the male impersonator and reactions of the audience. On the stage in the Victorian music hall Vesta Tilley, who created, managed and directed her own act, was able to defy definition so completely that it led the critic Titterton to wonder, “is it a dainty, flitting butterfly you are looking at or an affected

fop? Perhaps, seen from this proper distance, they are the same” (Titterton 1912: 151). Tilley’s act was so meticulously rehearsed and delivered that any apparent sexual titillation was a result of the audience’s own imagination. Even though Tilley was aware of her many adoring female fans from their numerous letters, she remained permanently and undoubtedly distanced from their intimacies by the frequent public displays of her heterosexuality and marital status. On stage she represented the idea, the possibility, and the temporary transgression of lesbian desire which liberated her audience’s fantasies, but they were held firmly in check when her act ended. She was the ‘perfect gentleman’ in every respect, beautiful, charming, talented and utterly unobtainable.

Tipping The Velvet, in novel form, collapses the distance between the viewer, or reader, and the lesbian characters. The narrative, delivered in first person from Nan’s perspective, permits the reader to indulge in an erotically charged lesbian fantasy. Waters chiselled away at the distance that Tilley so vigorously enforced between her public performance and private life in order to explore her own desire to write a “lesbian novel with a clear lesbian agenda [...] that deals very frankly, and with relish, [with] the whole issue of lesbian sex” (Waters 2002). Therefore, Waters’s manipulation of cultural history is very much like Nan’s view of Kitty in the theatre; it is “side-on, rather queer” and “full of queer electric spaces” (Waters 1998: 17, 38). Unlike the male impersonation act on the Victorian music hall stage, distance is combined with intimacy in Waters’s novel, allowing her to (re)present how sexual and gender transgression can be perfectly imagined and imagined perfectly. Tilley’s unobtainable ‘perfect gentleman’ was perfect *because* he was distanced and unavailable. Though also distanced from their audience within the music hall, Nan and Kitty are made intimate to the contemporary readership, who become privy to – and are invited to vicariously participate in – their private lesbian lives and loves. However, when Waters’s novel is then adapted, directed and produced for a televisual audience the distance still remains, yet the fantasy of intimacy disintegrates. Lesbian desire is no longer imagined; it exists in full view of both the real and fictional audience, within and outside of the film. In film the female protagonist becomes the *object* of desire, not its subject, and is constructed through the male gaze. As Laura Mulvey declares,

the determining male gaze 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 (Mulvey 1989: 19).

The adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet* incorporates Mulvey's "*leitmotif*" of woman displayed as erotic spectacle. The sexual scenes between Nan and Kitty, Nan and Diana Lethaby, Nan and Blake, and also Nan and Florence, all privilege the televisual audience, yet do so through the diluted and explicit male gaze of the screenwriter and the director. The lesbian sexual erotic fantasy is appropriated and made blatant by the act of adaptation. However, while the adaptation may privilege male viewing pleasure, it also has the ability to offer a multiplicity of enjoyments and gratifications. "The cinema", according to Mulvey, "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 in being looked at" (Mulvey 1989: 16). For example, Nan and Kitty's slow longing looks at each other tends to suggest that they also gain pleasure from looking at each other *and* being looked at, both on and off stage. Yet the film viewer (male or female, heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual) also gains enjoyment from looking at the actors Keeley Hawes (Kitty) and Rachael Stirling (Nan) depicting the transvestite lesbian love affair.

Mulvey's theories have attracted some criticism, which questions whether the gaze is always male or whether there are other configurations of the gaze, including female to female looking. As Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment enquire, "are female looks at other women always about identification or (by analogy with male looking) objectification? Or do dynamics of fascination and difference have other, more progressive, resonances?" (Gamman and Marshment 1988: 4). "The gaze", according to Patricia MacCormack, "is an act of creation. Nothing is reflected in an image unless the spectator creates that image as reflecting something already known" (MacCormack 2008: 15). Thus, the televisual viewer (regardless of sex and sexuality) is able to appropriate the gaze and

effectively ‘create’ their own understanding of and participative transgression in the subversive potential of both lesbian sexuality and cross-dressing during prime time, national TV viewing. Similar to Tilley’s act, the *Tipping the Velvet* TV adaptation allows for the audience and viewer to fantasise, gaze at, and enjoy the gender and sexual transgressions taking place and yet remain distanced from the reality of the intimated act. The novel though, circumvents accusations of scopophilia; though Waters employs graphic language to help readers ‘picture’ the sex scenes, the text nonetheless relies on the reader’s power of imagination and fantasy projection in order to create the sexual titillation produced from gender masquerade.

The seemingly unending desire for televisual and cinematic adaptations of Victorian fiction is 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 other three actually bracket the nineteenth century (Period Dramas.com n.d.). The current craving for adaptation speaks not only of the desire to (re)turn to the 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* TV adaptation includes examinations of that adaptation process. As Linda Hutcheon declares, “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” (Hutcheon 2006: 6). With this in mind it is important to remember that the reasons for adapting a Victorian or neo-Victorian text are multiple and varied. Adaptations make a text more accessible and available to a much more diverse audience than the original readership. It is not a case of the replacement of one format (literary) for another (televisual), but rather of a supplementing and remediating endeavour which, as Bolter and Grusin argue, disseminates the

content over as many markets as possible. Each of those forms takes part of its meaning from the other products in a process of honorific remediation and at the same time makes a tacit claim to offer an experience that the other forms cannot. (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 68)

The TV adaptation of Waters's novel, then, whilst remaining faithful to many aspects of the text, inevitably involves a process of selection and editing in order to appeal to the immediacy required by the audience, with the resulting effect being that viewers are offered a concise depiction of male impersonation that often ignores the complexities and subtleties which are an integral component of the source text. 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" (Davies 2002), the palimpsestic 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 layer upon layer of gender 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 television 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. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 242)

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, which 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 expresses 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" (Rosenman 2002: 54). Thus, when Waters's novel is adapted, directed and produced for a televisual audience the main agenda appears to be Bolter and Grusin's theory of increasing the reputations of Waters's neo-Victorian writing and of Davies and Sax's adaptive abilities in a wider audience, readership and alternative demographic. The adaptation makes a neo-Victorian story of cross-dressed lesbians accessible to a (male) heterosexual audience, by appealing to the sexual titillation of seeing a lesbian couple effectively performing for their gratification.

4. Conclusion: Following in Father's Footsteps

Neo-Victorian literature and filmic adaptations attempt to negotiate contemporary issues, but they do so with a self-conscious and simultaneous awareness of both the past and the present. Nan's adoption of the masculine gender represents the breaking away from 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. The slight anachronism aside, the use of the song in the television adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* 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 follows: as a "*formal entity or*

product; an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works”; as “*a process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-) creation”; and as ‘*a process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality’ (Hutcheon 2006: 7-8, original emphasis). In this sense, the televisual 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, had to be invented and written by Davies himself. Yet, it is also a “process of reception” as it incorporates elements, such as the ‘Following in Father’s Footsteps’ song, which directly relate to Waters’s own source material in Vesta Tilley.

The idea of following in an original author’s footsteps emphasises the issues of authenticity and artificiality inherent in the transvestite act itself. Nan and Kitty’s ““authentic” desire”, according to Sarah Gamble, “masquerades at being ‘artificial’ in order to achieve expression” (Gamble 2009: 134). So too does neo-Victorian literature; and in particular Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and its adaptation achieve their ‘authentic’ creative expression through the artificiality of Victorian parody and pastiche. As Gamble further contends, “novels that place the theme of gender performativity at the centre of the narrative expose the neo-Victorian project in its entirety as a form of masquerade” (Gamble 2009: 128). Neo-Victorian texts and twenty-first century gender theory emphasise the ‘unreal’ quality of the ‘core’ or ‘origin’. Neo-Victorian fiction, in its quest for the pretence of the authentic is synonymous with the transvestite act. Each assumes an alternative disguise for its performative expression and in doing so highlights 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, on gender and sexuality and their variations. Indeed, the idea that neo-Victorian literature in particular can be said to adopt a disguise or masquerade is further supported by Heilmann and Llewellyn, who state that

[n]eo-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. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 27)

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 employed does tend to suggest that the texts are indeed wearing “funny costumes”. Thus, we can see that the neo-Victorian enterprise and the transvestite act have a symbiotic relationship. The performative becomes paramount, sexual titillation is the ultimate reward for the spectator of the male impersonation act, and it is through the various formats of stage, novel and screen, that the gender and sexual transgressions which were once so ‘shocking’ are still in a process of negotiation and (trans)formation.

Bibliography

- Bailey, Peter (ed.). *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986.
- Bailey, Peter. *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Bolter, Jay David; and Grusin, Richard. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Bratton, J.S. (ed.). *Music Hall: Performance and Style*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986.
- Busby, Roy. *British Music Hall: An Illustrated Who's Who From 1850 to the Present Day*. London: Paul Elek, 1976.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990]. New York & London: Routledge, 2007.
- Cardwell, Sarah. *Andrew Davies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- Conlan, Tara. ‘BBC faces obscenity row over “shocking” new lesbian drama’, *The Daily Mail*, [day and month unknown], 2002 (viewed 20 Oct. 2009), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-134616/BBC-faces-obscenity-row-shocking-new-lesbian-drama.html>
- Costantini, Mariaconcetta. ‘Faux-Victorian Melodrama in the New Millennium: The Case of Sarah Waters’, *Critical Survey*, 18:1 (2006), 17-39.
- Cozens, Claire ‘Davies boasts of “filthy” lesbian drama’, *The Guardian*, 19 Sept. 2002 (viewed 20 Oct. 2009), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/sep/19/bbc.broadcasting>.

-
- Davies, Andrew. 'Interview' on *Tipping the Velvet*, DVD Extra Features. Sally Head Production, 2002.
- Dennis, Abigail. "'Ladies in Peril': Sarah Waters on neo-Victorian Narrative Celebrations and Why She Stopped Writing about the Victorian Era", *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1, (2008), 41-52.
- Dugaw, Diane. *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Ellis, Havelock. 'Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. VII: Eonism and Other Supplementary Studies' [1928], in Bauer, Heike (ed.), *Women and Cross-dressing 1800-1939*, Vol. 1. Oxford: Routledge, 2006, 153-283.
- Gamble, Sarah. "'You cannot impersonate what you are?': Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel", *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20 (2009), 126-140.
- Gamman, Lorraine; and Margaret Marshment. (eds.) 'Introduction' to *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. London, Women's Press, 1988, 1-7.
- Heilmann, Ann; and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century 1999-2009*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York & London: Routledge, 2006.
- Kift, Dagmar. *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- King, Jeanette. *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- MacCormack, Patricia. *Cinesexuality*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008.
- Maitland, Sara. *Vesta Tilley*. London: Virago Press, 1986.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1989.
- Period Dramas.com. 2001 (viewed 26 Nov. 2011), <http://www.perioddramas.com/top-rated.php>.
- Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. 'More Stories about Clothing and Furniture: Realism and Bad Commodities', in Krueger, Christine L. (ed.), *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002, 47-62.
- Sax, Geoffrey (dir.). *Tipping the Velvet*. BBC DVD, Sally Head Production, 2002.
- Titterton, W.R. *From Theatre to Music Hall*, London: Stephen Swift and Co, 1912.
- Vicinus, Martha. 'Turn-of-the-century Male Impersonation: Re-writing the Romance Plot', in Miller, Andrew H.; and Adams, James Eli, (eds.), *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996, 187-213.
- Waters, Sarah. *Tipping the Velvet*, London: Virago, 1998.

-
- . Waters, Sarah. 'Interview' on *Tipping the Velvet* DVD Extra Features, BBC DVD, Sally Head Production, 2002.
- Wilson, Cheryl A. 'From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*', *Women's Studies*, 35 (2006), 285-305.