

**‘Victoriana’s Secret’:
Emilie Autumn’s Burlesque Performance
of Subcultural Neo-Victorianism**

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Abstract:

This article discusses the neo-Victorian transmedia performance of Emilie Autumn, in the light of the “disproportionate attention” given to sensationalist tropes in feminist and queer criticism (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 23). Her burlesque performance may, on the one hand, be criticised as commodified neo-Victorianism, but, on the other hand, it can be seen as disturbing the bland heritage formulae still governing many neo-Victorian adaptations. Autumn comes in various guises that give rise to a plethora of fan engagement and foster controversy and publicity, such as her autobiographical neo-Victorian novel, *An Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls* (2009), her music albums, such as *Enchant* (2003), *Opheliac* (2006) or *Fight Like a Girl* (2012), songs (‘Miss Lucy Had Some Leeches’), poems and performances and tours in the USA and Europe. Addressing Autumn as an example of ‘performative’ neo-Victorianism, this article asks the same question that Christine Ferguson has posed with reference to steampunk subcultures: should her transmedia personae be described as an apolitical surface style or is there any substantial subcultural commitment in her contemporary adaptations of Victorianism?

Keywords: Emilie Autumn, burlesque, feminism, Gothic, post-feminism, ‘sexsation’, steampunk, subculture, transgression, medicine.

Women incarcerated by malevolent patriarchs, locked up as lunatics by malicious doctors, hidden away as madwomen in attics or at least suffering from hysteria in upstairs rooms – these are the clichés of sensationalist neo-Victorian femininity. Through sensation fiction, Gothic villains have made their way into countless neo-Victorian narratives, and rebellious women, repressed in their political as well as in their sexual expression, seem to be locked in a perennial battle with the Victorian patriarchy.

In light of these observations this article will discuss the ambiguities and problems inherent in the supposedly feminist burlesque re-enactments of neo-Victorian femininity in the work of the American performer Emilie

Autumn. In doing so, my article also examines recent trends in neo-Victorian criticism, such as the charge of over-sexualisation and the perceived bias for literary rather than performative versions of neo-Victorian re-imagining. As I will argue, the example of Emilie Autumn suggests that performing the neo-Victorian as part of a sexualised and subcultural Goth burlesque show creates a neo-Victorianism vulnerable to charges of ‘sexploitation’, and susceptible of overshadowing its ‘feminist’ gestures. The female body as the site of patriarchal control and its exploitation in prostitution and pornography in an emerging culture of commodification is one of the most widespread motifs in neo-Victorian writing. Speaking to these dominant neo-Victorian themes, the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in Autumn’s performance prove productive to core questions of neo-Victorianism.

1. Emilie Autumn and Neo-Victorianism: An Overview

Let us, first, delineate the Autumn phenomenon. She treads a territory that has been explored endlessly in criticism, but nevertheless remains vibrant in the popular imagination as the eroticised lure of subcultural Victorianism, or, the Victorian underbelly clothed in ‘Victoriana’s Secrets’.¹ Autumn is an excellent example of transmedia marketing, or, in the words of Henry Jenkins, the “flow of content across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins 2006: 2). The story of her psychological problems, the visualisation of her seductive but ‘alternative’ body, her punk/Gothic Lolita persona, and the narrativisation of her neo-Victorian femininity are transmitted across various media:

- Autumn’s novel, *An Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls* (2009) – here it is interesting to note that the glossy photographic reproduction of supposed manuscript material tries to emulate the specific material quality of diary writing, returning to the book a quality often lost when it is addressed solely as a receptacle for text.
- Autumn’s music albums, such as *Enchant* (2003), *Opheliac* (2006) or *Fight like a Girl* (2012) – frequently the lyrics draw on the novel and reference characters, settings or plot elements.
- Autumn’s poems, collected in *Across the Sky and Other Poems* (2001) and *Your Sugar Sits Untouched* (2005) – occasionally with neo-Victorian themes.

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- Autumn's performances and tours in the USA and Europe – again, frequently the stage characters and scenarios echo (or pre-date) the novel.
 - Assorted visual material, such as her music video acting as a femme fatale, 'The Painted Doll', in Darren Lynn Bousman's short film *The Devil's Carnival* (2012), another Gothic musical extravaganza that followed *Repo! The Genetic Opera* (2008).
 - A plethora of fan memorabilia (tea towels, tea sets, T-shirts, etc.), available via sites such as 'The Asylum Emporium'.
 - Autumn's official website and forum as well as a number of unofficial web representations, where controversies about her persona and related matters can be located.

Fan activities and the participatory culture developing around Autumn affords a valuable research topic in its own right. Here, it becomes evident to what extent the traditional literariness of neo-Victorianism has merged with material culture, commercialism and fashion. Topics discussed and themes explored focus on LGBT issues or depression; for instance, one forum section is entitled 'What Sucked About Your Day?', encouraging patrons to give vent to their frustrations. As a 'Plague Rat', 'Muffin' or a member of the 'Bloomer Brigade' (referencing, of course, a signature garment of the nascent feminist figure of the 'New Woman'), Autumn fans are encouraged to publish Autumn-related material (art, fashion, outfits and tattoos, tales).

While the site provides a forum for discussions such as the above, there are also obvious limits to participatory culture in this context, as the site seems to be scrupulously policed and moderated. This is unsurprising as her public persona courts controversy. For example, the media presentation of Autumn is focused on how she was 'damaged' by a still male-defined society. In the *Wikipedia* entry on Autumn, for instance, the performer was presented in 2012 as a "survivor of rape", suffering from "bipolar disorder, which caused her to experience drastic mood swings, insomnia, and auditory hallucinations, and for which she takes medication", and as having "experienced abuse, which began when she was six years old" (Anon. 2012). Autumn is described as asexual and a vegan, believing "that there is a link between the treatment of women and animals in society", and there are narratives of an abortion and a suicide attempt, "which caused her to be

admitted to a psychiatric ward at a Los Angeles hospital and kept on suicide watch” (Anon. 2012).² The experience of institutionalised body regulation, so the publicised story runs, prompted her “wish for the live shows [...] to be an ‘anti-repression statement’ and empowerment” (Holmes 2010).

For her stage persona, Autumn has assumed the name “Emilie Autumn Liddell”, invoking the prepubescent female object of Lewis Carroll’s attentions, who inspired *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Although her birth name is apparently ‘Fritzges’, she claims that Liddell is the maiden name of her maternal grandmother. Moreover, since this 2012 snapshot, the passage on her presumed ‘asexuality’ has been dropped from *Wikipedia*, which is interesting in connection to the increasing lament on the over-sexualisation of neo-Victorianism.

2. Traumatophilia and Transgression

Sensationalist neo-Victorianism such as Autumn’s creative output can be found in texts of popular social history, such as Matthew Sweet’s *Inventing the Victorians* (2001) or Michael Diamond’s *Victorian Sensation* (2003). These texts thrive on the sex and crime of the Victorian age, which came into visibility in the 1960s via Steven Marcus’ *The Other Victorians*, Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* or Ronald Pearsall’s *The Worm in the Bud*. An example pertinent to this analysis of Autumn and her apparent personal trauma is the so-called ‘lunacy panic’ at the end of the 1850s, which inspired the sensational scenarios narrativised in sensation fiction. With considerable glee, Sweet recounts how William Thackeray disposed of his supposedly manic-depressive wife Isabella and how Edward Bulwer-Lytton attempted to “silence his wayward wife” Rosina by having her abducted and incarcerated in the Wyke House Lunatic Asylum, Brentford, with the willing consent of the eminent doctors John Conolly and James Arthur Wilson (Sweet 1999: xxix; see also Sutherland 1995: 56-61).

By now these cases have been thoroughly researched and may be viewed as clichés of Victorianism and, as we shall see in this article, of neo-Victorianism as well.³ Feminist critics have jumped on the opportunity to relate ‘lunacy panic’ narratives to the patriarchal gendering of insanity in texts such as Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859) or Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862).⁴ Elaine Showalter’s classic 1985 study sketches how Victorian patriarchy designs madness as *The Female Malady*, while for Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in*

the Attic was emblematic of how Victorian patriarchy treated women. Mary Poovey investigated mid-Victorian obstetricians and found politicised and silenced female bodies in discourses on hysteria, female eroticism, anaesthesia and the use of chloroform during childbirth. In the opinion of Victorian doctors, Poovey influentially argued, women were supposedly defined by their uteri as emotionally unstable, disorderly or devious (Poovey 1988: 24-50). The fact that Victorian medical discourse and practices can even inspire a light-hearted period comedy on masturbation (*Hysteria*, 2011, dir. Tany Wexler), in which the treatment of hysteria is linked to the invention of the vibrator, shows to what extent this trope has become conventional and how feminist critique has merged with popular entertainment.

In general, research into Victorianism and feminism, at least since the 1960s but probably beginning much earlier, often exhibited a paradoxical attitude of “outraged fascination” with the repressed Victorian patriarchy and its ambiguous narratives (Kaplan 2007: 5). In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault outlined his influential “repressive hypothesis”, namely that a centrifugal movement occurred in the nineteenth century whereby sex was folded in to lurk silently within the confines of the nuclear family, giving rise to a “discursive explosion” on the topic of excluded and repressed practices (Foucault 1978: 10, 17). As he went on to argue:

what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex [...]. They were children wise beyond their years, precocious little girls, ambiguous schoolboys, dubious servants and educators, cruel or maniacal husbands, solitary collectors, ramblers with bizarre impulses; they haunted the houses of correction, the penal colonies, the tribunals, and the asylums; they carried their infamy to the doctors and their sickness to the judges. (Foucault 1978: 40)

These days, of course, this motley crew populates the pages of many a neo-sensationalist, neo-Victorian novel à la Sarah Waters and Michel Faber. In an earlier essay, I argued somewhat controversially that these neo-Victorian narratives seem to be driven by a paradoxical nostalgia for patriarchal

suppression: “Victorian subcultures are rewarding because they are clearly defined by normative discourses and lend contrastive poignancy to portrayals of transgression” (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 120). I still believe this is significant because a focus on subcultural or countercultural Victorianism entails a bias towards the youthful outsiders, deviants, ‘perverts’ and radicals. In the logics of transgression, as expounded by Charles Jencks, “excess is not an abhorration [sic] nor a luxury, it is rather a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule” (Jencks 2003: 7).

Autumn’s burlesque performances, her autobiographical neo-Victorian narrative, *The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls*, and the concomitant Autumn fan culture are meant to be transgressive antidotes to contemporary Western youth culture, but they throw up the question as to what extent neo-Victorianist Goth subculture is able to become Jencks’s empowering “dynamic force in cultural reproduction”. Has the attempt to prevent stagnation via the performance of subcultural Victorianism resulted in a stagnation of its own? Is subcultural neo-Victorianism merely a playground of fashionable deviance, articulated only to be bought and sold in the capitalist neo-Victorian marketplace? Can it be integrated into the norms of youth culture as a temporary Goth or steampunk carnival, a neo-Victorian pressure valve for disoriented youngsters?

Autumn’s performances conform to this subcultural bias. Eclectic hybridity is their transgressive toolkit and finds particular resonance in Foucault’s gloss on “children wise beyond their years” and “precocious little girls”. By this I mean that the performers are young, they engage in an excess of fashion bricolage, and a carnival of deviance, queerness, madness and illness, here expressed in celebratory re-enactments of ‘deviant’ eroticism, depression and bipolar disorder. In Autumn’s texts and performances, the under-age victims of the Victorian male gaze and male science return in the context of a young and desirable subculture, fetishised with the lure of otherness. In Autumn’s work, the asylum is thus styled as a Foucauldian heterotopia: a space of victimisation and control, a space of otherness and deviance, where plague rats subvert the ostensible Victorian canon of cleanliness and sanitisation, where the professed manliness and respectability of the Victorian patriarch is tempted and repudiated by seductive girlhood, where individualism and deviance are thrown into stark relief by panoptic, institutionalised regimes of power and normalisation,

including the family, the asylum, and photography – all in the service of the patriarchy.

Cases of the patriarchal abuse of medicine abound and are a staple of contemporary indictments of Victorian science in Poovey, Showalter, et al. A prominent case is Isaac Baker Brown, the surgeon who performed clitoridectomies on supposedly 'hysterical' women in order to cure them from masturbatory tendencies.⁵ Since Georges Didi-Huberman's classic 2003 study *Invention of Hysteria*, Charcot's 'hysteria shows' have become a standard feature of indictments of Victorian science which, in close collaboration with photography, manipulate, construct and gender insanity according to voyeuristic expectations of the profession and its audiences.

This same impulse filters down into neo-Victorian writing and provides a cue for a feminist critique of manipulative and threatening medicine. This specific kind of critique is foregrounded in texts such as Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992), Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* (2005), Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007), or the neo-Edwardian Maggie O'Farrell's *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* (2006).⁶ Similarly, the link between sexuality and the pathologised 'monstrous' feminine has been discussed at great length in neo-Victorian criticism (Muller 2009; Heiberg-Madsen 2012). On the Charcot template via Foucault, Showalter or Poovey, this "hystoriographic metafiction" (Muller 2009: para. 27) re-enacts Victorianism not as a repressed patriarchal trauma, but as providing the vestiges of a supposedly damaged but liberatory excess Victorianism that uses prudishness, patriarchal brutality and a bland bourgeois lifestyle connoted as 'old' as a shorthand straw man. The asylum has thus become a standard feature of neo-Victorianism, as evidenced by its regular use in the steampunk movement.⁷

In this regard, Autumn is at the very core of a 'feminist' neo-Victorianism that is increasingly seen as being ambiguous, because fashionable and consumerist versions of established narratives trivialise the supposedly 'genuine' impetus of earlier neo-Victorianist revisionism of, say, the novels of Jean Rhys or John Fowles. Sexuality is the battlefield between the supposedly radical Victorian subcultures (e.g., nymphomaniacs, cross-dressers, pornographers, lesbians) and the normative anti-sexual discourses of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Thus, in ways similar to my own

argument, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, following Christian Gutleben, have diagnosed

a nostalgic fetishization of the taboo, the secret and forbidden in a world of sexual over-exposure, a disingenuous belief in the radical nature of a society no longer under the shadow of what Michel Foucault conceptualised as the ‘repressive hypothesis’. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 107)

Marie-Luise Kohlke distilled this attitude in her argument that neo-Victorianism is “the new Orientalism, a significant mode of imagining sexuality in our hedonistic, consumerist, sex-surfeited age” (Kohlke 2008: 67). Indeed, the briefing of this special issue echoed Kohlke and Gutleben’s critique of the banalising over-exposure of tired tropes in neo-Victorian fiction (fallen woman, medium, homosexual), intensified by the “disproportionate attention” given them in feminist and queer criticism, all of which generates “sensationalism, exhibitionism, garishness, trivialisation, cynicism, coarseness and obscenity” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 23). Perhaps not coincidentally, Kohlke and Gutleben draw on Luckhurst’s definition of traumatophilia as “taking a kind of perverse delight in the repetition or abject assumption of a collapsed trauma subjectivity” (Luckhurst 2008: 111), an attitude which, as already noted, also informs Autumn’s performances.

3. ‘Doing’ Neo-Victorianism: Spectacle and Iconophobia

These arguments may indicate an ethical turn of neo-Victorianism, but they also invoke a curious iconophobia of neo-Victorian criticism and an affect against postmodern hybridity within Neo-Victorian Studies. This somewhat harsh critique applies to the heteronormative hijacking of supposedly liberatory, feminist fiction through mainstream re-readings. Exemplary of this mechanism was Andrew Davies’ much maligned adaptation of Sarah Waters’ first novel, which graced television screens in 1998. Discussing Heilmann and Llewellyn’s valid argument regarding the sensationalist, ambiguous and watered-down lesbianism in Davies’ adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*, Imelda Whelehan detects an erroneous “core opposition between screen culture and literature” (Whelehan 2012: 288). Given this, it would seem that performing neo-Victorianism for the screen – or on stage – is

much more problematic than writing a popular narrative about it. Hence, Autumn, like Davies' Nan and Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is not only a narrated version of the tired tropes of neo-Victorianism some fifteen years later on. Rather, Autumn embodies and performs these tropes, which makes her more vulnerable to this kind of criticism.

For a performer such as Autumn, the visual spectacle of neo-Victorianism has become a trademark. She depends commercially on audio-visualisations of herself on stage and screen. It is, indeed, the "spectacle of Victorians on stage and screen" that tends either to go unnoticed or to be regarded as inherently compromised (Whelehan 2012: 289). In casting quite a sceptical glance on the aesthetic, ethical and socio-political potential of neo-Victorian subcultures, contemporary observers articulate an increasing unease with these forms of contemporary neo-Victorianism. Ferguson, for instance, has asked whether steampunk subcultures should be described as an apolitical surface style (neo-tribe, taste culture), or whether there is any substantial subcultural commitment in these contemporary re-enactments of Victorianism (Ferguson 2011: 67-68)?

I argue that in the burlesque transmedia performances of Autumn, neo-Victorianism becomes the template for the articulation of performative gender, focused on displays of excess, difference and diversity. She is an example of what I have termed "'In-yer-face'-Victorianism" (Voigts-Virchow 2009), a subcultural and performative hermeneutics of the Victorian age that can be pitted against historicist or heritage-driven neo-Victorian narratives. Autumn's transmedia performance merges attitudes prevalent in steampunk (affirmative, material, superficial, aesthetic) and feminism (critical, discourse analytic, hermeneutic, subcultural) in an interestingly ambiguous spectacle.

Autumn is, indeed, a perfect example of taboo, trauma and patriarchal nostalgia, yet it seems to me significant that, contrary to the persistent centre of attention in both neo-Victorian research and creative practice, the focus in her work is not solely on narrativity. In making neo-Victorianism a hybrid, neo-Baroque spectacle, the study of a transmedia performer such as Emilie Autumn thus also addresses larger issues relating to the performativity of knowledge formation. Hence, Autumn is part of the trend towards the "presentification" (Gumbrecht 2004: 91) rather than the 'narrativisation' of the Victorian era. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht uses the term in the context of his attack on a *furor hermeneuticus* – the idea that our

relationship to the world is governed exclusively or primarily by reading it – when in fact its manifold meanings are quite as often established through mere material, pre-interpretative contact, or by simple presence. In Autumn’s performances, one might mention the ritual of tea-spilling or writhing handcuffed to a Victorian bed in a mock-Victorian fantasy. Louisa Hadley’s argument, which holds that neo-Victorian narratives are part of a backlash against the narrative experimentation and “cultural fragmentation” of postmodernism (Hadley 2010: 13), does not apply to the quite obvious bricolage of Autumn’s ‘postmodern’ performances. These performances are examples of ‘presentifying’ spectacular neo-Victorianism rather than re-reading the Victorian era – a period, one should point out, that viewed itself as theatrical and that has increasingly been read through the lenses of performativity (see Palmer 2011).

In the case of Autumn, the desire for presence might be addressed as the single most important motivator: she does not re-read the Victorian era, but uses various eclectic nineteenth-century elements as material in her performance. One might even attribute the long-held, “largely oblivious” stance toward steampunk adopted by neo-Victorian scholars (Ferguson 2011: 67) to the consideration that steampunk re-enactments largely veer towards an anti-historicist performative mode of neo-Victorianism. Autumn, however, merges literariness with material culture and inauthentic neo-futurist fashion, while in her persona and performances, traditional feminist narratives of neo-Victorianism become amalgamated with steampunk aesthetics. This also applies to further transmedia emanations of Autumn, such as the fan forum banner, which is clearly inspired by mock-industrial Victorian cogwheels, merging with the leeches and rats to suggest a poisonous Victorian underbelly of stench and decay (see <http://www.forum.emilieautumn.com/>).

Clearly, the anti-historicist neo-Victorianism that surfaces with Autumn challenges the notion that the Victorians were significantly ‘different’ from us, and instead uses their ‘otherness’ in a decidedly contemporary performance. The DIY or DIO (‘doing it ourselves’) costumes lend themselves to the creation of eroticised fantasy Victorianism, or a sort of inauthentic retro-chic, that is deliberately placed for ethical, aesthetic, pragmatic and economic reasons to generate the ire and chagrin of ‘authenticist’ neo-Victorians (see Ferguson 2011: 79). Autumn’s neo-Victorian production and practise is meant to be taken as ironic and

metatextual; hence, while riding the neo-Victorian gravy train, Autumn goes some way towards preventing the 'fossilisation' often critiqued in contemporary diagnoses of 'routine' neo-Victorianism.⁸

4. Waif and Rebellion: The Uses of 'Abject' Victorian Femininity

As I will argue below, Autumn, who is now in her mid-thirties, parades as an 'empowered' and seductive punk 'girl' who represents an antithesis to the middle-aged prudishness traditionally associated with the Victorian age by impersonating an object of its equally conventional male prurience. Autumn is an excellent example of what Ferguson calls "the angry opposite of an uncanny neo-Victorianism imagined as wholly reactionary and escapist" (Ferguson 2011: 71). Autumn's early obsession with Ophelia – evident in the album *Opheliac* and in her mock-Victorian diary novel – seems directly culled from Elaine Showalter's reading of mostly Victorian representations of Shakespeare's figure as a Romantic-Gothic waif suffering from the excess melancholic erotomania in paintings by Millais and others.⁹ As Showalter argues, the Victorian "figure of Ophelia eventually set the style for female insanity" (Showalter 1985b: 92), with asylum superintendents quite literally dressing up female inmates in Ophelia styles of languid, quiet suffering (Gates 1988: 135).

Autumn's publicised suicidal tendencies also accord well with her 'Victorianesque' persona. Barbara Gates reports that – although actual female suicide rates were lower than those for males – narratives of female suicides and the mythology of insanity as a female illness abounded in the Victorian era (Gates 1988: 125-150). These suicides throw into relief the male displacement of self-destructive impulses on supposedly passive, vulnerable women. Small wonder, then, that Autumn notes the Brownings as a key inspiration: consider Aurora Leigh, the eponymous heroine and narrator of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 narrative poem, who, in a show of sisterly solidarity, rescues the 'fallen woman' Marian Erle from symbolic annihilation. Another key reference is Alfred, Lord Tennyson's ballad 'The Lady of Shalott' (1833), which Autumn adapted in her song 'Shalott' (2006) that clearly draws on the ballad of the cursed, suffering heroine, "half sick of shadows" (Tennyson 1833: Part II, l. 35), while at the same time infusing her with more agency. Obviously, Autumn is drawn to the morbid, medievalist side of Victorian poetry and its visualisation through the Pre-Raphaelites, whose work provides the Victorian mise-en-

scène or aesthetic for the practice of self-abjection that characterises her public persona. Autumn, who reworks this into themes of suicidal moods and new rebellious angles, imitates the Victorians in her own neo-Victorian poetry and infuses it with metafiction. Exemplary of this is the self-ironic line from ‘Shalott’, in which the lady of Shalott realises that “some drama queen is gonna write a song for me”, and another song, ‘Alas (The Knight)’ (2005), which is addressed by a female writer to her nameless male creation.

To what extent Autumn is still just toying with the imagery of a ‘victim’, or whether the ‘empowering’ aspects of her persona and the adoption of repressed Victorianism via ‘queered’ sexuality are compromised by the all-too-easy adaptation of mainstream ‘sexsation’,¹⁰ remains unclear. It is evident, however, that Autumn’s public profile makes her a perfect example of a contemporary version of ‘abject’ Victorian femininity, functioning as a site of rebellious alternative excess.

5. ‘Dinner Theatre’: Fashioning Goth Steampunk

As noted above, Autumn’s stage performances are also a hybrid bricolage that incorporate supposedly Victorian elements. First of all, there are features of her performances styled as ‘dinner theatre’ in which the quintessential domesticity of the Victorian woman is ridiculed. The stage action is mainly a travesty of the domestic situation, in which tea bags, muffins, and crumpets are consumed, spat out and thrown at the audience. The stage dresses and stage design clearly reference the burlesque and travesty shows and music-hall revues that were prevalent in London theatres, such as the Gaiety or the Royal Strand, from the 1860s to the 1890s. The entire performance, however, is far removed from any kind of presumed ‘fidelity’ undertaken in the service of faithful ‘period’ re-enactment. Victorianism in Autumn’s *oeuvre* is couched in primitivist disarray (such as punk Iroquois hairstyles, tattoos and body mods, and dishevelled hair), with gestures towards the marginalised bestiary of punk iconography (rats, leeches, vultures, and so on). In addition, the ways in which she performs Victorianism are also clearly theatrical and excessive, involving artificial garish colours, extravagant corsets, feather hats, and heavy make-up.

Another important aspect of Autumn’s performances in this regard is the overly eroticised display of femininity. There are no men on stage, which celebrates sisterhood and various aspects of female identity, while

centred around the stage a troupe of 'alternative' models perform a variety of burlesque personae: Naughty Veronica, The Blessed Contessa, Lady Aprella, Captain Maggots. These Victorian 'girls' appear in a risqué, sexualised show (incorporating semi-undress, suspenders, undergarments in disorder, lesbian kissing), while Autumn as Victorian Goth pin-up also toys with images of rebellious pre-pubescent girliness through trappings such as Pippi Longstocking's striped stockings, dolls, or her signature defiant red Mohawk. This "street urchin" dress style of "deconstructed, (read: torn apart)" Victorianism (Bulloff 2011: 138) is exactly the kind of 'Victoriana's secret' referenced in the title of this essay. In the *Steampunk Bible*, Libby Bulloff notes:

Wear your spoiled petticoats over a pair of knee breeches, ladies. Gentlemen – there is nothing sexier than suspenders over a tea-stained sleeveless undershirt, especially if you have tattoos. Tear up old lingerie [...]. Tea-stain striped tights and white skirts [...]. Be adventurous and go for a wicked Mohawk under your hat [...]. Do not fear to splash your locks with vivid dyes. (Bulloff 2011: 138)

The messy hair, slashed corsets, glitter and pasty covered nipples, red lips, fishnets, and fetish accoutrements sported by the ultra-thin Autumn provide fashion cues for her Goth fan base. Her outfits can be seen as examples of the retro-futurist potential of neo-Victorianism that comes with the bellicose feminist rhetoric of fearless extravagance (as in *F.L.A.G: Fight Like a Girl*; see Bousman 2012). In keeping with this, the music video for *F.L.A.G* (released on YouTube and Vimeo in April 2013) portrays Autumn as an abused burlesque performer shocking elderly Victorian maids by donning an Iroquois wig, having her stockings cut, and kicking various obnoxious 'Victorian' gentlemen while singing about her imminent revenge on "49 per cent of the people in [the world]" (Bousman 2012).

Julie Anne Taddeo argues that contemporary corsetry is liberatory, creating "a neo-Victorian world in which its inhabitants, particularly women, safely and triumphantly play with and transgress its boundaries" (Taddeo 2013: 45). In this narrative, the eclectic dress gadgetry of Autumn and her fan base might be mined for its subversive and transgressive potential, facilitating "the interrogation of gender issues that connect past

and present” (Taddeo 2013: 44). Goth subcultures use a re-imagined past for Utopian ends, “looking to the past to imagine the future, expressing the pain of outsiderdom and the strength of nonconformity”, as Milly Williamson perceptively argues (Williamson 2001: 155). Supposedly subversive erotica are a staple of this subculture (Taddeo 2013; Pagliasotti 2013). The (imagined) insane, supposedly nymphomaniac Victorian girl at the mercy of patriarchy thus becomes a template on which to locate contemporary nonconformist ‘pro-sex’ femininity without appearing to adhere to the alleged ‘sex-negative’ second-wave feminism. One can imagine neo-Victorians flinching at the contradictions implicit in a T-shirt printed with a skeleton and the quote “Thank God I’m Pretty”, from Autumn’s eponymous song.¹¹

Indeed, both Autumn’s music and stage style might be described as eclectic. The music, styled as ‘Victoriaindustrial’, incorporates techno and glam rock, industrial sounds (locomotives), staccato drums, and anachronistic instruments ranging from baroque lutes and harpsichord, and is inspired by the SteamGoth music scene (see VanderMeer 2011: 158-165). Autumn’s stage appearance consists of a playful retro-futurism vs. heritage historicism: a hybrid bricolage of Gothic-Victorian subcultures and contemporary fashion.

Occasionally Autumn appears on stage in a wheelchair and, during a performance I witnessed at the Batschkapp, Frankfurt (27 March 2012), she did part of the performance while handcuffed to a hospital bed. This clearly echoes ‘domesticated’ and/or ‘handicapped’ Victorian femininity confined to both the home and, if unruly, to the asylum, an enactment of what Matthew Sweet referred to as “the relationship between the asylum offered by the home and the asylum offered by the madhouse” (Sweet 1999: xxviii). Implicitly, Victorianism is charged with disabling women, and Autumn adopts the imagery of the ‘crippled’ girl, whose sexuality is exploited and corrupted by male lechery. In an enactment of the pathologisation of the female body in male science, Autumn fights back by articulating a liberated body image, firmly in control of a self-determined sexuality.

At the same time, however, paraphernalia such as handcuffs and wheelchairs are part of an erotic play and display that utilises submission and victimisation. In the context of the show, therefore, Autumn’s disability remains a gesture: it is quite clear that she is able-bodied and anything but repulsive. Her ostensible mental illness, of course, never shows during the

performance in ways that are not orchestrated and cannot be read as attractively empowering, unleashed sexuality and aggression. Now that normalcy has been supposedly overcome by 'crip' queerness,¹² deviancy can be mined for its sexual lure – and this designed disability might raise ethical concerns.¹³

The name of the performer's back-up band, *The Bloody Crumpets*, puns on both griddle cakes and promiscuous women. During the performance I witnessed, Naughty Veronica played a sex initiation game with audience members that was clearly modelled on a 1920s cabaret show. Apparent contradictions between Autumn as sexualised pin-up persona in performances such as these, juxtaposed with her messages of empowerment, have led to fierce online debates between fans and critics.¹⁴ These exchanges throw into sharp relief the current debates within neo-Victorian criticism between the desire to adopt an eclectic belligerence in order to reclaim Victorianism from the prudish and patriarchal bourgeoisie, and the critique of a fashionable sexploitation of neo-Victorianism. This is yet another tangle between the display of neo-Victorian femininity à la Autumn, and criticism brought forward by feminists who once pinned their hopes on the progressive potential of popular culture but have since become disenchanted with post-feminism. One might see Autumn as an example of both youthful "hedonistic female phallicism" and a "post-feminist masquerade" (McRobbie 2009: 5, 67), in which assertiveness replaces servitude as a desirable self, without changing the core logic of female visibility: men act and women appear, and objectification becomes (substitute) empowerment (see Neely 2012: 101-102).¹⁵ The very fact that Autumn persistently adopts the term 'girl', reviled by 1970s feminism and revived by the 1990s riot grrrls, for self-fashioning purposes, not least in the title of her novel *An Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls*, would rouse the suspicion of contemporary feminist critics (see Neely 2012: 113).

Autumn's use of the burlesque and risqué 'in-yer-face' neo-Victorianism implicitly references neo-Victorian precedents – from texts such as Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940) to Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1999) and beyond. As Sarah Gamble argues in one of many critical assessments of Waters' paradigm-defining novel, the music hall is figured "as a significant symbolic site in which licence is given for the expression of alternative conceptions of gender and sexual desire"

(Gamble 2009: 134). This passage might also have been written with reference to Autumn.¹⁶

6. Taboo Nostalgia and *The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls*

One of the most successful, signature Autumn songs, ‘Miss Lucy Had Some Leeches’ also evinces traumatophilia and taboo nostalgia. It is based on the so-called ‘Miss Susie’ or ‘Miss Lucy’ pattern, an American schoolyard rhyme and clapping game in couplets, with an A-B / C-B rhyme scheme, in sprung rhythm with trimetre:

Miss Lucy had some leeches
 Her leeches liked to suck
 And when they drank up all her blood
 She didn't give a –
 Funny when the doctors
 Had locked her in her cell
 Miss Lucy screamed all night that they
 Should go to bloody –
 Hello to the surgeon
 With scalpel old and blunt
 He'll tie you to the table
 Then he'll mutilate your –
 [...]
 Madness is a nuisance
 And no one is immune
 Your sister, mum or daughter
 May become a raving – (Autumn 2006)

The lyrics, which are readily available on various websites, reinforce the thematic preoccupations in Autumn's novel, music and shows (male suppression, clitoridectomy, madness, rebellion, the Gothic). As clapping games suggest the practices of pre-pubescent girls passed on in popular folklore, the format is useful in the context of popular ‘girl power’. The leech as used in medicine is suggestive of the dominant phallus, and ‘sucking’ suggests both sexual practice and self-destructive tendencies. Victorian clitoridectomy à la ‘clitoris cutter’ Brown is also quite bluntly

referenced here, as are the commonplace gender patterns invoked in feminist studies of Victorian male science.

The bipolar, schizophrenic adoption of the Victorian girl image becomes evident in the dualism of 'Emilie' and 'Emily', the Victorian alter ego that Autumn has invented for her novel *The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls*. The supposedly autobiographical work is, in appearance, an asylum diary, within a Victorian parallel world. The book uses the scrapbook format, its Victorian elements (letters by 'Emily') having been supposedly written on wallpaper. Its glossy photographed pages are replete with stains, crayon markings, paperclips, pencilled pictures, cellotape, and Polaroid snap shots, and the writing is rendered in 'typewriterly' courier as well as in handwriting.

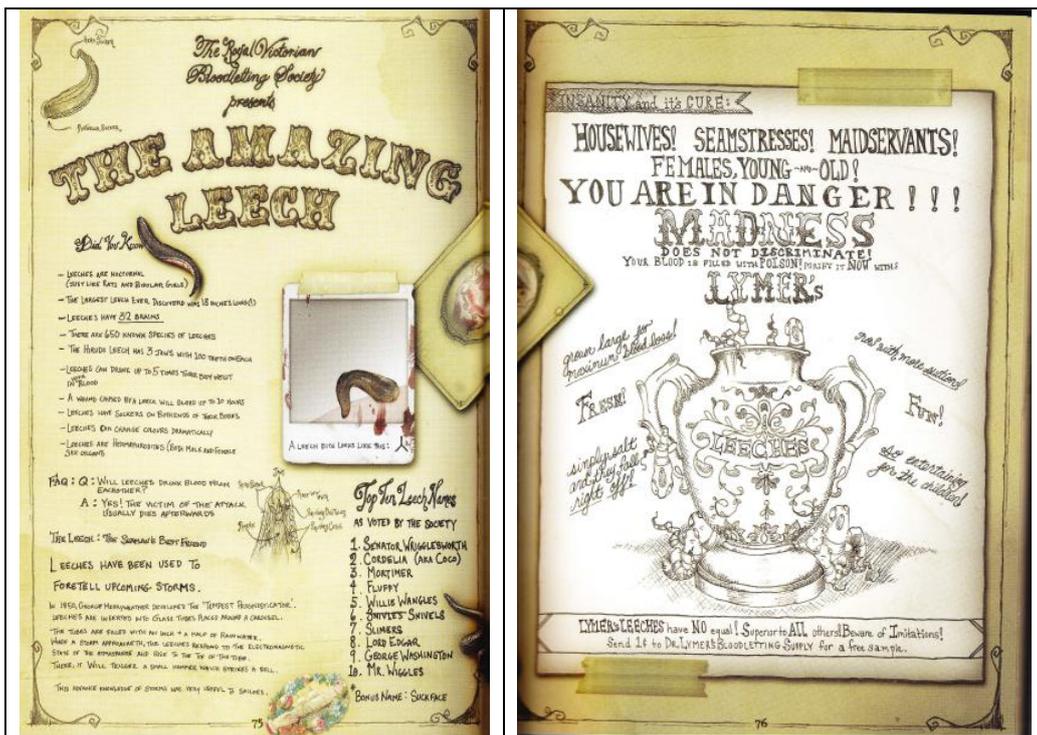


Figure 1: Sample pages from *The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls*. © Emilie Autumn. Reproduced with kind permission of 3phase production, Emilie Autumn management.

Adopting the scrapbook, the format of this neo-Victorian ‘novel’ is, of course, another reference to Victoriana. The scrapbook was a favourite Victorian pastime, and a special outlet for creativity and personal history among ‘literary’ girls (Carr 2003: 51). Autumn herself admits to the conventional tropes of neo-Victorianism as a key source for the Victorian/contemporary dualism of her novel:

I found that the Victorian era in general was when so many of the things we have today started. There was some type of psychological doctor shit going on, this was when we had our first lobotomies and when electroshock started. (Autumn 2009)

The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls is clearly based on the “psychological doctor shit” of the ‘Charcot template’ and the ‘clitoridectomy cliché’. The Victorian element through which the ‘Emily’ character is focalised is a London mental institution modelled on Bedlam hospital, highlighting, of course, the analogy between lunatic antics and burlesque shows, an analogy frequently drawn by many researchers into Victorian theatricality and visuality. *The Asylum* features not only hospitalised girls (both rebellious and nymphomaniac), but also an evil aristocratic foreigner (Count de Rothsberg), manipulative doctors (Dr. Lymer, Dr. Stockill) and a photographer (Thomson). Stockill’s mother, Mrs Mournington is clearly derived from Miss Havisham in Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1860-61). Meanwhile, facetiously, ‘Basil the Rat’, apparently also the name of one of Autumn’s pet rats, references not only a genteel Victorian name, but also the eponymous episode of *Fawlty Towers*.

7: Conclusion: Fearless Feminism or Outsiderdom on Display?

To sum up: Autumn styles her narratives and performances as a sub- and counter-cultural ‘anti-repression statement’, connoting a rejuvenated, empowered and empowering neo-Victorianism. Her version of Gothic neo-Victorian theatricality challenges the long-established focus on literary and heritage neo-Victorianism, while clearly referencing the feminist traditions of neo-Victorian research in a, by now, established conventionalised tropology. Autumn’s ‘Psychotic Vaudeville Burlesque’ expresses an aesthetics of musical and visual excess and difference that offers neo-

Victorianism as a viable template for alternative identities. At the same time, the example of Emilie Autumn demonstrates that, within the confines of the business of pop spectacle, eroticised and transgressive neo-Victorian images can never be fully disentangled from the capitalist exploitation of the body. Clearly, she endeavours to straddle the gulf between feminist critique and a 'marketable', steampunk, Goth fashion extravaganza. This plausibly liberating articulation of subcultural, neo-Victorian, 'steampunk waif' identities also sells ultra-thin body images while making 'otherness' a fashion accessory.

The one aspect of capitalist idolatry that the battle cry to 'fight like a girl' refuses to challenge, however, is youth. The case of Autumn thus reminds one of similar disputes around one of her professed influences: Cyndi Lauper and her contested 1980s agenda of 'girls just wanna have fun' quirkiness and deviance. If it is true that in a society (still) dominated by men, female bodies cater to hegemonic masculinity and the female body is still the easiest or dominant key to a measure of female power (granted, however, by the ruling hegemons), then a youthful attractive body remains women's key cultural capital and, though universally desirable, even more precious for women than for men.

Autumn's neo-Victorian burlesque performance of female 'monstrosity' articulates contemporary positions of deviance, transgression and outsiderdom with LGBT and queer affiliations. To the extent that neo-Victorian body display, however transgressive, becomes normalised as a variant of a seductive contemporary body culture, marketable desire comes to underpin the post-feminist Goth rock-rebellion, and fascinating phenomena like Emilie Autumn continue to risk being engulfed in a versatile multi-faceted consumer culture. As I hope to have shown, the threat of commercial imperatives is even more pressing for neo-Victorian performers than for neo-Victorian novelists as they 'presentify' the Victorian age and may be held responsible for what they are and what they do, not just for what they write. The threat continues to mount with their adoption by, and adaptation in, mainstream media.

Notes

1. This may be more than just a pun. Nancy V. Workman argued that the underwear company 'Victoria's Secret' promotes a cultural enslavement of

women just as rigid as that of repressed Victorian clothing. In this view, powerless women feel the need to be sexually desirable for men, and beneath sober business attire the erotic allure suggests a hidden lineage of suppression (Workman: 1996: 72). For the opposite view, see Taddeo 2013.

2. According to the *Wikipedia* edit history page, the reference was deleted on 1 Jan, 2013, subsequent to a Twitter posting by Autumn herself. Accessed 3 May 2013. The *Wikipedia* entry for Autumn is a highly contested and, occasionally, vandalised page.
3. For an overview see the introduction to Maunder and Moore (2004) and, on Victorian discourses on imprisonment, consult the essays in Alber and Lauterbach (2009). On wrongful incarceration, see McCandless (1981), Smith (1981), and Scull (1993), who has since been attempting a controversial revision of Foucault's theses. Slettedahl Macpherson (2007) and Arias (2009) have shown how, along with other authors, neo-Victorian novelist Sarah Waters uses unlawful imprisonment as a distinctive motif.
4. While being wrongfully confined in a mental institution was particularly threatening for marginalised groups (women, children), men by no means escaped this fate. In Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863) – to the chagrin of the emerging medical discipline of psychology and psychoanalysis – a man is abducted and locked up in an asylum.
5. After a successful career as an obstetrician renowned for his pioneering use of anaesthesia, Brown in effect ended his career by performing clitoridectomies between 1859 and 1866 (see Sheehan 1985 and Black 1997).
6. Cases like that of 'clitoris cutter' Brown subsequently inform neo-Victorianism, for instance in Gray's *Poor Things*, where Victoria agrees to clitoridectomy, or in Elaine di Rollo's *The Peachgrowers' Almanac* (2008) and Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage*, which both feature daughters (the unruly, rebellious, manly Alice; the five-year-old Lucinda, respectively) threatened with clitoridectomy.
7. A major 'UK Steampunk Convivial' run by the Victorian Steampunk Society is called 'Weekend at the Asylum'; see the report on the 2009 Lincoln meeting in Ferguson 2011.
8. See the introduction to Gruss and Schnitker-Boehm, forthcoming in 2014.
9. On the neo-Victorian obsession with the Gothic, see the 2012 edited collection by Kohlke and Gutleben, especially Kohlke's essay on neo-Victorian self-abjection.
10. This sexualisation is best represented by her appearance in a nude lesbian sex scene in the video for the song 'Born Again' by Die Warzau, in her photo in

the *Playboy* US edition, April 2010, or the photo sessions for *Kin Kats*, sub-headed "music and sexy substyle magazine".

11. This may be read as a 'pro-anorexia' statement, particularly if disengaged from the obvious ironies in the song's lyrics, such as: "I'm truly privileged to look this good without clothes on / Which only means that when I sing you're jerking off / And when I'm gone you won't remember". Feminist references to rape and sexism may go unnoticed if casually glimpsed on a T-shirt.
12. On the intersection between queer and 'crip' (i.e. 'crippled') identities in autobiographical performances, see Sandahl (2003).
13. Critical messages on the perceived exploitation of sexuality and disability may be viewed on the website 'Emilie Autumn Confessions' <http://waywardvictorianconfessions.tumblr.com/archive>.
14. See the mock-entry on Autumn in the satirical 'encyclopedia dramatica': https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Emilie_Autumn.
15. Neely quotes from Berger's 1972 classic *Ways of Seeing*.
16. See <http://maciejmalag.wordpress.com/page/2/>. The image depicts the Bloody Crumpets doing dangerous 'Dinner Theatre'.

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