

# CONTEMPORARY FICTION IN FUNNY COSTUMES: CROSS-DRESSING IN THE NOVELS OF SARAH WATERS

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**Abstract:** *Even though earlier works such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* foreshadow current interest in the Victorian period, neo-Victorian fiction has been defined as an independent genre since the 1990s. More than just examples of historical fiction, neo-Victorian novels engage with and (re)interpret the Victorians with a marked self-consciousness. Thus, they perform a double task: in masquerading as Victorian novels, they raise questions about identity and difference between the Victorian period and the present day, shedding light on contemporary issues as well as providing a vehicle for expressing Victorian taboos, or questioning their (our?) values. The recurrent trope of cross-dressing and masquerade can be understood as a reflection of this duality. The aim of this paper, then, is to explore the use of this trope in the novels of Sarah Waters as a metaphor for the status of neo-Victorian fiction in general.*

**Key words:** *neo-Victorian fiction, Victorian fiction, cross-dressing, drag, narrative, crisis, postmodernism*

Jeanette Winterson's verdict on the value of neo-Victorian fiction seems clear and is laid out in no uncertain terms. If you wish to read Victorian novels, there are many original ones to choose from, so why the need for the fake ones of contemporary

production.<sup>1</sup> The truth is that neo-Victorian novels are quite distinct from their Victorian predecessors, and cannot simply be explained away as fiction set in the Victorian period and imitative of its conventions. Even if this were the case, the question would still remain: why does this period hold such an enduring attraction for contemporary novelists and readership alike? If we are to say that there is a difference between Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction, what precisely is the nature of that difference? It is not a mere coincidence that the peak of interest in the Victorian age is to be observed at another end of the century, plagued by its own sense of uncertainty and millennial anxiety. As a transitional period marked by global political upheavals, class confrontations and cultural wars, the end of the twentieth century seems to cope with its own sense of crisis by looking back for solutions to the end of the previous century.

The ambivalent attitude towards its Victorian heritage is expressed in the uncertainty surrounding the naming of the new genre. Critics have variously suggested *post-*, *faux-*, *retro-*, and, finally, *neo-*, as suitable modifications for the contemporary engagement with the older period. Like the *post-* in postcolonialism, the meaning of *neo-* is unstable and seems to include the meanings of the other suggested terms. Even though the earlier term 'post-Victorian' has been abandoned, it does reveal a desire to view the relationship between the Victorian and the neo-Victorian chronologically, as if to stress the juxtaposition of the Victorian regressive, outdated mindset and the contemporary, progressive and liberal one, which the very emergence of the genre seems to subvert. 'Faux-' and 'retro-' indicate, respectively, that neo-Victorian novels are somehow inauthentic and therefore inferior to the Victorian model, and that the primary goal of such fiction is nostalgic escapism. Even this brief survey reveals some of the paradoxical nature of the neo-Victorian: nostalgia for the period of literary (and other) greatness seems to be mixed with self-satisfied recognition of its retrograde views on sexuality and race, now supposedly quite changed.

For some critics, the neo-Victorian project represents an embodiment of narrative crisis and stale creativity. Christian Gutleben, for instance, questions the transgressive potential of neo-Victorian fiction and finds it less than revolutionary: "less radical, less subversive and less innovative than modernism and early postmodernism".<sup>2</sup> He outlines two mutually exclusive

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1 Wachtel, qtd. in: Wormald, M. *Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians*, in: *British Fiction Today*, edited by Tew, P. and Mengham, R. (2006), London: Continuum, p. 187.

2 Gutleben, C. (2001) *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, p. 161.

motives for writing in the neo-Victorian mode: subversion and deconstruction, or conservation and homage.<sup>3</sup> Gutleben's reading posits formal and thematical coherence, so that a critical, subversive stance towards the past will necessarily translate into experimental narrative technique. In other words, the first step towards the deconstruction of the past is the dismantling of past narrative choices. Contrary to this view, the formal features of neo-Victorian novels, which may include an exclusively Victorian setting and Victorian length or technique, need not reflect the treatment of themes and characters or the choice of perspective, which may be decidedly postmodern. Furthermore, neo-Victorian narratives may employ Victorian realist conventions alongside unreliable narrators, include polyphonic narrative structure, play with chronology or eschew a conclusive ending.<sup>4</sup>

Although Gutleben finds it "paradoxical" that "the postmodernist novel resounds with echoes that predate the modernist age",<sup>5</sup> the apparent paradox may simply be another instance of postmodern subversion of linear time, clear chronology and ideas of narrative or cultural progress. Gutleben further implies that the inclusion of voices from ethnic, sexual or social margins merely panders to readerly (and market) expectations, decrying it as the "vogue" of political correctness.<sup>6</sup> However, what he perceives as an opportunistic exploitation of a current fad provides focus on characters and concerns which have heretofore been excluded from narrative representation. Neo-Victorian fiction, frequently written by women, ethnic and sexual minority writers, can be perceived as an act of writing back, a hijacking of the novel form, which developed with the rise of the bourgeoisie, by those silenced or made invisible by middle-class values.

As a result of its own contestable status (reflected, among other things, in the term *faux*-Victorian), the issue of authenticity and fakery is a major neo-Victorian theme. Plagued by accusations of derivativeness and literary plundering, neo-Victorianism questions the assumption of a clear distinction between original and copy in the same way the cross-dresser destabilizes the category of natural, authentic gender. Allison Neal asserts that the neo-Victorian, "in its quest for the pretence of the authentic,

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3 Ibid, p. 7.

4 For instance, the two diaries in *Affinity* disrupt a clear linear chronology. Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* withholds definitive resolution and lets the main protagonist simply walk away after over 800 pages. This frustrated his readers so much that many demanded a sequel.

5 Gutleben, op. cit., p. 16.

6 Ibid, p. 37.

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is synonymous with the transvestite act”.<sup>7</sup> Neo-Victorian fiction abounds with cross-dressing characters, whose presence can be read as a reflection of the essentially performative nature of the genre itself.<sup>8</sup> The liminal position of the cross-dresser and the instability of gender it embodies can be read as a metaphor for the ambiguous status of the neo-Victorian and its relationship with its Victorian precursor. Neo-Victorian texts either consciously expose the difference between the model text and the contemporary imitation, or blur the distinction altogether and question the underlying assumptions about the Victorian age. The tenuous relationship between sameness and difference in neo-Victorian fiction is embodied in the figure of the cross-dresser.

The gender ambiguity provoked by the cross-dresser can range from visible parody to surreptitious passing. For Judith Butler, the cultural practices of drag parody the notion of fixed gender categories by deliberately exposing and drawing attention to the discrepancy between the sex of the performer and the gender which is performed. This overt misalignment is what constitutes, for Butler, the source of subversion: “*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*”.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the drag performance reveals *all* gender identity as performative rather than expressive. What is perceived as an expression of biological essence is in fact an effect of a series of acts, which, through repetition, create an illusion of a solid, naturalized identity. In emphasising its own artificiality, the drag act exposes the constructed nature of gender, destabilizing binary gender categories and the very notion of binary thinking.

For Judith Halberstam, “the incongruence [of the drag performance] becomes the site of gender creativity”.<sup>10</sup> Even though Neal suggests that in order to be subversive, the drag performance needs to remain readable as such,<sup>11</sup> Halberstam provides examples from art and subcultural scenes to illustrate the fact that subversion may also originate in the *unreadability* of one’s gender. In drag king contests, the performers may strive for near-natural authenticity, seeking to minimize, rather than

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7 Neal, A. J. (2012). *(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: 19th Century Transvestism in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hull, Hull, UK, p. 32.

8 In addition to Sarah Waters’ fiction, examples include Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*.

9 Butler, J. (2002) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 175, original emphasis.

10 Halberstam, J. (1998) *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 236.

11 Neal, op. cit., p. 25.

carnivalize, the dissonance between the clothes and the body underneath them. In this case, the drag king's performance is subdued and understated, as opposed to the campy flamboyance of the drag queen or the hyperbolic parody of some other drag king performances. The ambiguity of drag stems from the visible presence of more than one gender, even when the performance of masculinity is set off against the butch masculinity, rather than femininity, of the female performer. Such performance is recognized as ambiguous through theatrical and subcultural contextualization, and might pass for authentic masculinity outside these domains. The drag act may also articulate the intersection of gender and race, as the white drag king act is markedly different from the performance of the black drag king.

In Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, the main protagonists exemplify the gender-bending epitomized by the figure of the cross-dresser. As theatrical performers, male impersonators Kitty Butler and Nan King make their feminine body visible beneath the male costume. As Halberstam contends, in the theatrical tradition of nineteenth-century male impersonation, "more often than not, the trouser role was used to emphasize femininity rather than to mimic maleness" and "plausible representation of mannishness by women was not encouraged".<sup>12</sup> While Kitty's body fits the desired feminine norm, Nan's is deemed too masculine and her jacket has to be tailored to give her the feminine curves her body lacks. When she first dons the male costume, she appears too authentically male, and the effect is described as "unpleasing", because there is "something queer about it".<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in posing as male, Nan is at the same time required to pose as female, and her femininity is shown to be equally artificial and constructed, backed by sartorial props and accessories as is her show of masculinity. On the other hand, her stage performance of masculinity requires the erasure of her actual masculine features. As such, the act is not truly transgressive, and for this reason it remains safely contained in the domain of theatre. Similarly, Nan's relationship with Kitty comes to an end because Kitty finds her "too much like a boy".<sup>14</sup> It is Kitty, the more feminine of the two, who ultimately upholds patriarchal values and shies away from the possibility of an alternative lifestyle. Their act, as well as their relationship, exemplifies how drag in itself need not be enough for subversion (Butler never claims that, either).

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12 Halberstam, op. cit., p. 233.

13 Waters, S. (2012) *Tipping the Velvet*, London: Virago, p. 118.

14 Ibid, p. 171.

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The truly transgressive act is Nan's street performance as a male renter. Using her costumes, she passes for a male homosexual prostitute, and the performance encompasses both feminine and masculine aspects of her gender, along with her queer sexuality. What allows her to successfully pass for male is not only her costume, but also her masculine body. Interestingly, once the costume is relieved of its feminizing alterations and made "its old, masculine self again",<sup>15</sup> it manages to highlight Nan's feminine features in ways her women's clothes does not. When she wears her first adult dress, it brings out the angularity of her jaw and her cheek-bones, and the effect is that of a boy in his sister's frock. On the other hand, when her first street client mistakes her for a man because of her costume, he observes that her lips are "quite like a girl's",<sup>16</sup> a feature which is not readily observable while she is dressed as one. Her renter performance channels her queer identity, "unmistakeably", yet "falsely"<sup>17</sup> interpreted as *male* homosexuality, which illustrates how her character constantly defers a stable interpretation of supposedly solid gender codes.

The renting episodes echo Foucault's assertion that sexuality is not expressive of gender, and that there is no causal link between the two. The thrill provided by Nan's impersonations is non-sexual. Instead, by passing for male, adopting a version of masculinity convincing to other men, and exerting a level of control over them otherwise unavailable, Nan feels "revenged"<sup>18</sup> for the injustices suffered, including Kitty's betrayal with Walter. Her gender in these episodes becomes fluid and unstable, and the difference between her and a prostitute who is biologically male seems beside the point. This is underscored by her acquaintance with a male prostitute who is not only wearing female drag, but is also described as having girlishly long eyelashes and a heart-shaped face. While the simultaneous exposure of both genders is crucial for the success of the theatre act, cross-dressing which aims for convincing levels of authenticity is clearly not intended to showcase such gender interplay. What precedes Nan's decision to walk the streets dressed as a man is her realization of the potential danger she faces if she were to do that as a single woman. Nan's adoption of the male gender in the street allows her to access privilege and security unavailable to her as a female. She spends most of the narrative dressed as a man, engaging in sexual relations with both men and women, as a woman *or* as a man, her body is masculine, and she is even given

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15 Ibid, p. 192.

16 Ibid, p. 199.

17 Ibid, p. 208.

18 Ibid, p. 201.

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a prosthetic penis in one of her male incarnations. Clearly, her gender is hardly reducible to an unchangeable, authentic core. Throughout the novel, it remains the source of confusion, to Nan and to the other characters alike.

Cross-dressing can also uphold conservative values rather than question them. For instance, the drag queen's performance relies on the exaggerated display of stereotypical feminine features and the drag king frequently adopts macho masculinity. Nan's character exemplifies this as well. Her favourite costume is that of a guardsman, the epitome of macho masculine authority. When Florence mistakes her for a voyeur, Nan addresses her in the idiom of the "rough fellows of the street".<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, masculinity is not necessarily associated with the position of power. When she starts living with Diana Lethaby, a rich and decadent Sapphist, Nan is allowed to experiment with her clothes as well as her sexuality. Even though she is given the active sexual role (she is the one wearing Diana's leather dildo), her position in Diana's home is that of a prisoner. Diana restricts her freedom of movement, decides on her daily activities and, significantly, provides and chooses her clothes, shaping Nan's masculinity according to her sexual tastes, without wearing male clothing herself.

While cross-dressing in *Tipping the Velvet* primarily serves to signify the fluidity of gender play and sexual exploration, in *Affinity* it is associated with the broader themes of disguise, illusion and deceit. One of the two protagonists, Selina Dawes, organizes sexually charged séances with the help of Ruth Vigers, a maid of the household. Ruth participates in the séances as a male spirit under the name of Peter Quick, which allows her to interact freely with the young female sitters and to satisfy her unlicensed sexual desires. Her mask is therefore crucial for the expression of her queer sexuality. Disguise and pretence form the basis of Selina and Ruth's plan to swindle Margaret Prior, a wealthy spinster, out of her inheritance, but they also shape the relationship between the narrative and the reader. The success of the plan relies on the success of Selina's act as a sensitive, wrongly-accused medium and on Ruth's self-effacing act as a maid. At the same time, the narrative seeks to disguise its true course and lures the reader into believing that the spiritual connection between Margaret and Selina may well be real, just as Selina does with Margaret. The vital clues concerning the identity of Ruth Vigers are delayed until the very end. In the meantime, the novel masquerades as a ghost story and appropriates the apparitional tropes conventionally employed to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 221.

conceal lesbian desire, by turning them into primary means for its expression.

According to Marjorie Garber, the function of the transvestite figure is to “indicate the place of (...) ‘category crisis’” of various kinds, and to express “cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances”.<sup>20</sup> It is “not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself”,<sup>21</sup> and of the very notion of binarity.<sup>22</sup> Garber shows how the destabilization of one category may spill over into another, so that firm boundaries of gender, class or race may be made permeable. This is evident in Waters’ fiction as well. The blurring of gender lines produced by Ruth’s masquerade intersects with the destabilization of strict class distinctions. Ruth and Selina eventually steal not only Margaret’s wealth, but also her identity as a lady, and Margaret recognizes both the parallels between herself and the prison inmates, who are mostly of lower social rank, and the injustice of the different treatment they receive. On the other hand, the social advantages of Margaret’s upper class are negated by the constricting norms imposed on her, while Selina and Ruth enjoy greater freedom owing to their lower status.

Just as Nan in *Tipping the Velvet* identifies with the hyphen in the sign advertising a vacancy for a “Fe-Male Lodger”,<sup>23</sup> neo-Victorian fiction seems to operate most convincingly in its own hyphen, by constantly testing the tensions between the two hyphenated terms. “[J]ust as gender can be said to be a copy of a copy, so too can the literary genre of neo-Victorian fiction be classified as an adaptation, a rewriting, or a palimpsestic faux-‘copy’ of Victorian mores, characteristics, and narrative techniques: in fact, it becomes a drag act.”<sup>24</sup> It is neither a straightforward conservative revival, as it features aspects of the Victorian previously rejected as unacceptable or undesirable, nor a clearly defined critique, as it simultaneously falls back on conflicting Victorian and postmodernist narrative conventions. Incidentally, Garber points to the prominence of the cross-dressing motif in modernist literature, citing examples such as Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf.<sup>25</sup> Reactions to the Victorian age, both antagonistic and ambivalent, seem to erupt in cross-

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20 Garber, M. (1997) *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York: Routledge, p. 16.

21 Ibid, p. 17.

22 Ibid, p. 10.

23 Waters, op. cit., p. 210.

24 Neal, op. cit., p. 32.

25 Garber, op. cit., p. 9.

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dressing figures, which embody the unresolved attitude towards its legacy.

The figure of the cross-dresser expresses the dialectical, palimpsestic nature of the neo-Victorian narrative, and in that respect functions similar to the trope of haunting and spectrality, which is also heavily featured in the genre. By superimposing one gender over the other, the cross-dresser negates the binary assumption which defines them as mutually exclusive. The figure of the ghost, similarly, belongs to the world of the dead, yet appears in the world of the living and demands to be accounted for. Neo-Victorian novels embody similar tensions. In adopting more traditional narrative techniques, they foreground their (still) potentially shocking subject matter and the contrast between the two. At the same time, the overlapping of the traditional and the contemporary begs the question as to what belongs to each category and whether there really is a straightforward difference. For instance, the lesbian subculture described in *Tipping the Velvet* illustrates the covert existence of alternative sexualities in an age that refused to recognize them, but it also serves as a reminder that sexual minorities still remain in the subcultural domain and may suffer invisibility, stereotyping or prejudice. In a similar fashion, the vibrancy of the music hall world challenges the stereotype of the prudish, repressed Victorian. Significantly, in their assessment of such neo-Victorian contradictions, critics Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn employ the image of masquerade. Echoing Eric Hobsbawm's assertion that "all history is contemporary history in fancy dress", they suggest that "perhaps neo-Victorian texts are contemporary fiction in funny costumes".<sup>26</sup> The neo-Victorian meaning, then, is intrinsically linked with the chosen costume.

In the case of the neo-Victorian, what is perceived as a sign of crisis may in fact be a shift towards a more diverse and inclusive approach to fiction, one which no longer necessarily favours the "male, pale and stale" perspective. One is reminded of John Barth's conviction of the exhausted, used-up state of the novel in the sixties which, supposedly, had nothing new to say and could only recycle old forms and ideas. Such anxieties were dispelled by a wider inclusion of "other voices" and their perspectives. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has noted, the assumption that the dying white male subject is in any way representative disregards a whole array of other subjects:

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<sup>26</sup> Heilmann, A. and Llewellyn, M. (2010) *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 27.

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Feminist critics, like critics of Afro-American and Third World Literatures, are beginning to refuse the implied blackmail of Western, white, male criticism. The death of the subject and of the author may accurately reflect the perceived crisis of Western culture and the bottomless anxieties of its most privileged subjects – the white male authors who had presumed to define it. Those subjects and those authors may, as it were, be dying, but it remains to be demonstrated that their deaths constitute the collective or generic death of subject and author. There remain plenty of subjects and authors who, never having had much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, much less in the name of the culture as a whole, are eager to seize the abandoned podium.<sup>27</sup>

Even before the neo-Victorian boom, Barth was particularly dismayed by authors rushing “back into the arms of nineteenth-century middle-class realism as if the first half of the twentieth century hadn’t happened”,<sup>28</sup> and some contemporary critics seem to share his concern. The critical unease provoked by the return to the Victorian perhaps speaks of a Bloomian anxiety which favours succession and generational antagonism over dialectical marriage of opposites. What comes across as disobedient interest in the realist tradition which modernism and postmodernism have already successfully exorcised may really be a different (replenished?) take on both realist and postmodernist conventions, one which identifies or produces surprising intersections between them. If this is to be understood as crisis, surely it is one to be celebrated.

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<sup>27</sup> Fox-Genovese, E. Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women, in: *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gates, H. L. (1990), New York: Meridian, p. 180.

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Слободанка Ракић Шефер,  
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*САВРЕМЕНА ПРОЗА У ЧУДНИМ КОСТИМИМА:*  
МОТИВ ТРАНС-ОДЕВАЊА У РОМАНИМА  
CAPE VOTERC

Сажетак

Ослањајући се на теорије Џудит Батлер и Џудит Халберстам, рад се бави мотивом прерушавања и транс-одевања у неовикторијанској прози Саре Вотерс. Неовикторијански жанр, који на значају добија деведесетих година двадесетог века, спада у ширу категорију историјског романа, али се од осталих представника разликује по свом самосвесном приступу викторијанском периоду. Неовикторијанска проза није једносмислен повратак викторијанским вредностима или наративним решењима, нити је, како неки критичари упозоравају, знак кризе нарације или креативности. Прерушена у викторијанско рухо, она испитује сличности и разлике између викторијанског периода и садашњег тренутка. Неовикторијански романи обрађују теме од којих викторијански роман зазире, као што су алтернативне сексуалности или перспектива етничких или друштвених мањина, али уз то преиспитују и положај ових субјеката у савременом друштву. Таква двострука визура неовикторијанског текста изражена је, између осталог, мотивом прерушавања и транс-одевања. С једне стране, овај мотив преиспитује бинарна схватања рода и сексуалности у текстовима који се баве овим питањима, те деконструише категорије природног и вештачког, али и бинарну логику уопште. Поред тога, он представља прикладну метафору за неовикторијански роман, који и сâм садржи наизглед непомирљиве елементе. Користећи мотив транс-одевања, неовикторијански жанр истражује границе између оригинала и копије, доводећи у питање њено постојање.

**Кључне речи:** *неовикторијанска проза, викторијанска проза, транс-одевање, драг, нарација, криза, постмодернизам*