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‘We named her, and so she will be till the end of the chapter’: authenticity and the feminine voice in postmodernist neo-Victorianism

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Introduction

When Marie-Luise Kohlke refers to a ‘superabundance of neo-Victorian fantasies’, she alludes both to the endurance of the Victorian setting for contemporary fiction, but also to flaws in its continual reconstruction and reimagination.[1] For Kohlke, resuscitating the spirit of Victoriana has contributed to its fetishisation in the modern cultural consciousness and proliferated a false or ‘fantastical’ Victorian ideal in fiction, an act of fictive manipulation which necessarily instigates a complex relationship between authorial liberties and a desire for historical authenticity.

This relationship becomes particularly troubling in the context of literary postmodernism, which for the purposes of this essay might be broadly defined by its common conventions, including self-reflexivity, metafictionality, and challenges to institutional, or otherwise hegemonic, authority.[2] The ‘superabundance’ of nineteenth century narratives in postmodernism then presents a conflict between content and form, as historical subjects are resurrected with a relativistic approach to reality and chronology. Here, questions of ‘authenticity’ become issues of intention — who are these narratives for and who controls their telling?

[1] Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 1–18 (p. 5).
[2] Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 16.

Postmodernism's apparent preoccupation with Victorianism therefore raises significant problems for neo-historicism more widely, particularly its dialogue with socio-political issues, such as minority representation and the ethics of historical revisionism.[3] Though different aspects of representation encounter unique problems in this neo-historical paradox, I have chosen to restrict my analysis to the treatment of sexual politics and feminist politics, issues which I consider to be emblematic of the kinds of ambiguity these topics encounter. This article will therefore examine the relationship between Victorian mythology, feminist movements around the fin-de-siècle, and postmodernist narrative theory in order to interrogate the supposed 'authenticity' of feminine voice, particularly of characters who do not conform to normative expectations of sexuality and gender.[4]

The role of women who subvert societal norms in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) will be considered alongside the implications of rewriting Victorian women for a late-twentieth-century readership, given the renewed interest in issues of gender equality and the popularisation of feminist theory at this time. Female characters dominate the discourse of these texts but, with the exception of *Tipping the Velvet*, do not provide the primary narrative voice. That these peripheral voices of Victorian society are granted descriptive, but not discursive, prominence is significant; as Helen Davies argues, the question of neo-historical ventriloquism is complicated further by gender, as the 'master discourse of history' from which these writers begin is certainly one which privileges patriarchy and heteronormativity.[5]

[3] Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2001), p. 7.
[4] It is for this reason that I use the term 'feminine' rather than 'female' voice; not all of these characters are figured as indisputably female, and this essay further seeks to examine how these novels problematise such binaries. I use the terms 'women' and 'girls' in a similarly ambivalent sense, and explore this in more detail later in the essay.
[5] Helen Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 3.

The act of re-voicing Victorian women is then inevitably informed by a hierarchy of authority, both within the narrative and outside of it in the compositional dialogue between writer and protagonist. In order to fully examine the presentation of autonomous, subversive women in these texts, it is therefore necessary to consider key postmodernist formal principles, particularly the treatment of the author/narrator figure(s) and the association between voice and social agency. The question of historical revisionism is equally critical and there is undoubtedly potential in these texts for the imposition of retrospective feminist ideals in order to adjust to the expectations of a contemporary readership. This article will therefore propose that these texts portray Victorian women in a way which actively forgoes historical authenticity in order to explore a history which responds directly to the present, and that a patriarchal 'master discourse' is consciously challenged in this exchange between replication and alteration.

'Perhaps Charles is myself disguised': Narration, Authorship, and Performative Fictions

The sense of conscious authorship of these texts places them within a postmodernist tradition, but their complex metafictional elements also present a formal and thematic link between ideas of female authorship and self-invention. Clear authorial intervention in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, alongside almost comic undermining of nineteenth-century literary conventions, presents a composite approach to neo-Victorian fiction, which, although led by a male narrator, bears significant implications for the presentation of female characters. Fowles' novel details the relationship between the aristocratic Charles Smithson and former governess and 'disgraced woman' Sarah Woodruff, and actively both follows and rejects tenets of the Victorian fiction it appears to emulate. The narrative is consciously both 'documentary history *and* artifice', recording and constructing an historical setting whilst

undermining its realism, thus rendering Fowles' presentation of this epoch a paradoxical metafiction.[6] The narrator personifies the novel's contradictory attitudes to fiction and authorship, particularly when addressing his tenuous control over his own narrative. He explains 'perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography […] perhaps Charles is myself disguised'.[7] This mocking revelation considers the autobiographical elements of the narrative. William Stephenson here applies Jean Baudrillard's theory of reality with ironic distance, the idea that '*all* human identity, not just that of literary characters, is based on fiction'.[8] Certainly, the narrator undermines any semblance of a binary between fiction and reality, and fundamentally alters the relationship between text and reader; not merely recording, but manipulating and participating in the narrative, the narrator's admission here moves the reader uneasily from a position of passive consumption to one of complicity.

The narrator continues to present a patently false depiction of his own capabilities, proclaiming that, 'I report, then, only the outward facts' (p. 98), only then to construct highly literary subjective conceits such as the Biblical metaphor which concludes the chapter — 'when the cruel ground rushes up, when the fall is from such a height, what use are precautions?' (p. 99). The objectivity which the narrator claims to enact is sacrificed in these moments of idiosyncrasy, and this voice, and its intentions and motivations, is called into question. By placing Sarah's identity as a Victorian 'fallen woman' within an original sin analogy in this metaphor, the narrator's subjective voice is heard, and its temporality located. That this comparison is derived by an identifiably male narrator constructed by a male writer serves to highlight the sexual politics of such imagery.

The intervention of the first-person narrator in this way is deliberately ironic, both refusing and fulfilling expectations of what Stephenson terms the 'omniscient Victorian

[6] Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 36.
[7] John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 95. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[8] William Stephenson, *Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London and New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), p. 19.

storyteller'.[9] However, as Kohlke suggests, the neo-Victorian 'fantasy' is often a false one, and Fowles plays into this ambiguity. Stephenson draws parallels between the manipulative strategies of Fowles' narrator and those narrators of Victorian novels, including George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, arguing that 'flagrant narratorial intrusions' pre-date postmodernism.[10] In this way, Fowles' more subtle intertextual links challenge pre-conceptions of Victorian fiction whilst adhering to apparent postmodernist sensibilities.

More obvious metafictional elements, such as concluding the novel with the final line of Matthew Arnold's 1852 poem 'To Marguerite: Continued', continue to play with ideas of continuity and unresolvedness at odds with the narrator's apparent interventionist capabilities. The novel's infamous multiple endings again undermine the imperative to report 'only the outward facts', and refuse to bookend the narrative's chronology in any definitive way. In the first ending, Charles and Sarah are reunited after spending much of the novel in conflict, and the introduction of their daughter provides a peculiarly neat conclusion with the closing lines, 'Lalage […] reminds her father — high time indeed — that a thousand violins cloy very rapidly without percussion' (p. 463). The second possible ending maintains distance between Charles and Sarah and ends far less optimistically: 'life […] is to be, however inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea' (p. 470). Fowles here refers to the same ultimate sense of unresolvedness lamented by Arnold, but whilst Arnold's narrator attributes this lack of closure to a lack of individual control in the wider events of the world, Fowles' intertextual, homodiegetic narrative draws attention to its own construction and direction, even including alternative endings, and yet it still refuses fully to resolve Charles and Sarah's story by signalling the reader toward a definitive close.[11]

[9] Stephenson, pp. 20–21.
[10] Ibid., p. 21.
[11] William E. Buckler, *On the Poetry of Matthew Arnold: Essays in Critical Reconstruction* (New York, NY and London: New York University Press, 1982), p. 66.

This conscious manipulation and intervention by Fowles' narrator is often mocking and self-aware. These same questions of authenticity and voice are also key to the depiction of Fevvers in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* as Carter, like Fowles, favours the male perspective in order to examine the female experience. The female subject here is Fevvers, an aerialiste who purportedly hatched from an egg and developed wings, and the novel's rejection of objective realism, and espousal of magical realism, centres on this gendered, bodily ambiguity. Journalist Jack Walser is the facilitator of Fevvers' story, both within the narrative as a journalist, but also initially as primary protagonist. During Fevvers' interview with Walser, her voice is described tellingly — 'It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice […] her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's'.[12] Although Fevvers is shown to enact a certain influence over Walser, this 'siren' imagery aligns her with a perilous, sexual otherness, reaffirming an essentialist fear of female voice, body and autonomy. Walser is the narrator here and so this comparison, like Fowles' Biblical allusions, communicates a distinctly patriarchal anxiety.

As Davies highlights, 'masculine textual authority is privileged over the feminine voice', [13] referring to the section in which Walser considers Fevvers' own narrative voice: 'who or where in all this business was the Svengali who turned the girl into a piece of artifice, who made of her a marvellous machine and equipped her with her story?' (pp. 28–29). Walser's realisation that Fevvers is a woman in possession of her own narrative can only be reconciled by the notion that she has been created, 'automaton-like', by a presumably male Svengali-figure.[14] Walser assumes Fevvers' narrative to be 'artifice', and legitimises this view by presenting himself as a perceptive sceptic with the 'professional ability to see all and believe nothing' (p. 10), and thus is immune to the assumed falsities of Fevvers' oral

[12] Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 43. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[13] Davies, p. 71.
[14] Ibid.

narrative. That he recognises Fevvers' possession of 'her story' but considers it something with which she must be 'equipped' articulates a belief that the power of authorial manipulation is a male domain, though the assumption that his textual authority will bring clarification to Fevvers' narrative is consistently problematised by Carter. The overarching ambiguity surrounding the emergence of Fevvers' wings, for example, remains deliberately unresolved despite Walser's interrogative narrative, and the patriarchal discourse is disrupted by this magical divergence from reality.

Masculine authorial dominance is at once then highlighted and destabilised; despite Walser's primary perspective, it is Fevvers who dominates and drives the narrative, and the novel's thematic focus on the theatrical ensures that she is able to control her story by retaining the narrative spotlight. Sarah Bannock quotes Roland Barthes' metaphor of performance for the writing process — 'a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose "performance" […] may possibly be admired but never his genius'.[15] The performative element of the narrative is introduced thus: the first encounter between Fevvers and Walser, the 'mediator', takes place by way of an interview in her dressing-room, and then he watches her performance in the music hall, 'on stage at the Alhambra, when the curtain went up' (p. 14). Fevvers' introduction to the reader is one steeped in ideas of both performativity and authorship, and Barthes' theory might be applied to suggest the separation between the authorial and 'authentic' self. The composition of these opening scenes directly enforces a link between narrative and performance which continues to define Fevvers' struggle for narrative autonomy and societal acceptance of her deviation from a feminine norm.

Though there are few metafictional elements in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet,* the key questions around self-invention and performative fictions are central to Nan's discovery

[15] Sarah Bannock, 'Auto/biographical souvenirs in *Nights at the Circus'*, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism,* ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York, NY: Longman, 1997), pp. 198–215 (p. 199).

and acceptance of her sexual identity. Set initially against the backdrop of the late-Victorian music hall, Waters' narrative makes literal the transformative potential of musical sub-cultures and gender-bending costuming. Protagonist Nan's first-person narration is revealing, both reinforcing and challenging her own perception of her sexuality and gender identity as well as the perceptions of others, and she consciously re-genders herself throughout the narrative. She initially asserts that she 'was raised an oyster-girl', framing her femininity within the family business, and reaffirming the interrelation between her socio-economic origins and innate sense of self.[16] As her acknowledgement and discovery of her gender identity develops, her self-description is altered. Before her first performance alongside Kitty, Nan notes that 'four nights before I had stood in the same spot, marvelling to see myself dressed as a grown-up woman. Now there had been one quiet visit to a tailor's shop and here I was, a boy' (p. 118). Narrative coding here challenges a normative construction of self, inverting a linear progression of age and gender and suggesting that girlhood does not lead necessarily or directly to womanhood.[17]

This tension is then linguistic, which Davies explores through the imagery of ventriloquism which permeates the novel, and the anxieties around speech which are resolved and then un-resolved.[18] Nan attempts to express her attraction to Kitty, but concludes, 'I knew at once that I shouldn't have spoken' (p. 20). The perils of articulating non-heterosexual desire verbally are disguised in performance, and the distinction between heterosexual speech and queer silence is further amplified when a member of the audience accuses them of being 'toms' — 'there was a sudden hush; the shouts became mumbles […] Kitty had stiffened […] her voice — her lovely, shining, soaring voice — faltered and died'

[16] Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago), p. 4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[17] For further discussion of the construction of womanhood in fiction, see Hilary Fraser and R.S. White, *Constructing Gender: Feminism in Literary Studies* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1994), pp. xiv–xv.
[18] Davies, p. 115.

(pp. 140–41). Significantly, this dichotomy is disrupted at the end of the novel where Nan decides that she wants to make 'a speech of her own' at the socialist rally, but her 'new voice' (p. 471), as Davies explains, is never heard as the novel ends before she is able to speak.[19] The absence of this voice perhaps then recognises the enduring authority of a patriarchal master discourse and highlights the problems of repeating normative Victorian scripts.

Considering Waters' narrative within the context of its neo-Victorian form further complicates this question of discourse; Nan's male impersonation constitutes a form of ventriloquism which voices her queer identity, but she is herself already ventriloquised as a subject of fiction. This metafiction is evident in the production of the novel itself; as Andrea Kirchknopf notes of certain neo-Victorian texts, 'they imitate prevalent genres of the nineteenth century, such as the Bildungsroman'.[20] Nan's physical and emotional journey from Whitstable to London, oyster-girl to music hall performer to activist, is certainly reminiscent of the Bildungsroman format, particularly in the novel's cathartic ending, which sees Nan able to confront and reject Kitty, thus proving her emotional development since their first meeting — '"You have changed," she said again; and I answered, simply: "Yes, Kitty, I have"' (p. 468). In her 're-voicing' of Victorian characters, Waters grants Nan an apparent 'happy ending', utilising a dominant Victorian form to provide a sense of resolution.[21] As in *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* form here then serves to mimic tropes of Victorian fiction and in doing so highlights evidence of inescapable authorial intervention in neo-Victorianism.

[19] Davies, p. 124.
[20] Andrea Kirchknopf, '(Re)-workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 53–80 (54).
[21] Davies, p. 115.

'Is she fact or fiction?': Historical Truths and 'Authenticity'

It is clear that the openly-constructed nature of these texts, namely the intervention and emphasised fictiveness of their narrators, deliberately raises key questions of voice and power in the neo-Victorian genre. The inherent hybridity of neo-Victorianism ensures a complicated relationship between fiction and truth, and although *Tipping the Velvet* presents a less metafictional approach to the form, its relationship with historical accuracy is no less complex. Nan's story unfolds through multiple subversive spaces: the music hall, the streets as a rent-'boy', and in the employ of the aristocratic Diana. In all of these spaces, there is a tension between the private and the public, what is openly declared and what is hidden; Nan's assertion that 'a double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it is' (p. 128) problematises the recreation of what Waters calls women's 'secret history', particularly in the case of queer identities.[22] The novel's multiple settings are often well-visited public spaces, and yet Nan's individual narrative within them is necessarily shrouded in secrecy.

There are therefore numerous thematic references to authenticity and artifice here. Dressing in traditionally male clothing, and the expression of queer desire, is socially acceptable and profitable in the theatrical space of the music hall, as Kitty 'gazed into the stalls for the prettiest girl' to throw a rose into her lap (p. 14). This symbolic act is an open and public declaration of desire, but permissible because it is assumed to be simulated, and Kitty's masculine attire both justifies the act as that of a character, and imbues the scene with an illusion of acceptable heterosexuality. This narrative of gender-mimicry then is staged visually, with clothing — the motif of trousers particularly— forming a key component of the novel's presentation of the performative nature of gendered identity. As Jack Halberstam notes, male impersonation raises critical questions about the 'naturalness' of inherent gendered binaries, arguing that, 'if masculinity adheres "naturally" and inevitably to men,

[22] Danuta Kean, 'Sarah Waters interview: 'I pay attention to women's secret history and lives', *Independent,* 5 September 2014 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sarah-waters-interview-i-pay-attention-to-womens-secret-history-and-lives-9715463.html> [accessed 12/3/19] (para. 12 of 12).

then masculinity cannot be impersonated'.[23] In this sense, Nan's performance operates not only as a 'category crisis of male and female, but as a crisis of category itself', destabilising notions of biological, or otherwise inherent, gender and instead proposing a more ambiguous mode of self-expression.[24]

This performativity does, however, problematise a definitive reading of Nan's narrative of self-discovery. The first time Nan wears trousers in the novel is backstage at the Canterbury Palace before her first performance with Kitty where she notes, 'I felt as though I had never had legs before' (p. 114). Such a fundamental realisation of her physicality outside of the confines of feminine dress might otherwise be read as a celebratory moment in Nan's sexual awakening were it not for the constant reminder that these trousers are but a 'costume' and little has changed since she 'had once, as a girl, worn a suit of my brother's to a masquerade at a party' (p. 114). Sarah Gamble considers these references to 'masquerade' and pretending as part of a wider critique of the neo-Victorian form itself, stating that 'novels that place the theme of gender performativity at the center of the narrative expose the neo-Victorian project in its entirety as a form of masquerade'.[25] Certainly in her stint as a male-presenting music-hall performer, Nan's ultimate aim to achieve an 'authentic sense of oneself as a lesbian subject' goes unfulfilled, despite the apparent obvious queer undertones of her act alongside Kitty, and this continues into her other roles later in the novel.[26] Just as Walser notes of Fevvers, 'in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird woman […] have to pretend she was an artificial one' (Carter, p. 17), so too does Nan's true desire for Kitty necessitate the performativity of their music-hall act and the 'delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing' (Waters, p. 128). In this way, the narrative consciously obfuscates ideas

[23] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 235.
[24] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 1991), p. 17.
[25] Sarah Gamble, '"You cannot impersonate what you are": Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20.1 (2009), 126–40 (p. 128).
[26] Ibid., p. 135.

of artifice and authenticity, subversive gender-identities both articulated and concealed within the performative space of the music hall, whilst simultaneously critiquing the 'neo-Victorian project' as a problematic endeavour in the replication of history.

Fowles similarly appears to place a consideration of historical truth at the centre of his neo-Victorian narrative. If, as Christian Gutleben asserts, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 'brought to public attention the parody of Victorian social, sexual and literary conventions', Fowles' relationship with Victorianism cannot simply be a question of nostalgic homage but instead an act of satirical criticism.[27] The intertextuality of the novel introduces what Gutleben refers to as an 'ironic parallel between past and present',[28] with each chapter referencing a relevant nineteenth-century text — the first chapter opens with a section of Thomas Hardy's 'The Riddle' — and invoking the Victorian convention of epigraphs.[29] This pastiche is juxtaposed throughout by anachronistic twentieth-century terms and allusions, disrupting any illusion of historical authenticity. This hybridity is often humorous — for example, when Mrs Poulteney is introduced and the narrator states that 'there would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady' (p. 21), reframing her character, a conglomerate of numerous Victorian stereotypes, within a modern idiomatic context. This combination of the Victorian subject and modern perspective deliberately forgoes historical authenticity and grants a modern, relevant significance to the novel's satirical elements.

Fowles does not intend to produce an imitation of a Victorian novel, and the text's postmodernist elements ensure that a complex relationship is initiated with the neo-Victorian genre more widely. Gutleben outlines neo-Victorianism as either utilising a Victorian setting primarily as nostalgic homage or as a means of parodying nineteenth-century patriarchal values and literary conventions against a modern context, but Fowles' treatment of the era

[27] Gutleben, p. 5.
[28] Ibid., p. 113.
[29] Deborah Bowen, 'The Riddler Riddled: Reading the Epigraphs in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 25.1 (1995), 67–90 (p. 70).

does neither.[30] There is very little nostalgia in Fowles' rendition of the nineteenth century, characterised by the novel's narrator as a century governed by 'a convention of suppression, repression, and silence' (p. 271). A direct link between past and present is asserted: as the passage goes onto read that, 'we are the more Victorian — in the derogatory sense of the word — century' (p. 271). Such critiques can be found elsewhere in mid to late-twentieth-century discourse, most notably in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, where the reader is included as 'We "Other Victorians"' — 'we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today'.[31] Fowles' parody is seemingly aimed therefore not at the Victorians but at enduring social attitudes, particularly those prevailing from the 1960s onwards, playing on the narrator's ambiguous contemporariness to compare the two centuries.

Gutleben goes on to contest that, 'if the perspective is contemporary […] the Victorian allusions, references, and echoes will necessarily be parodic since there cannot be an illusion of faithful imitation.'[32] The temporality of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is therefore a pertinent aspect of its motives and effects as a work of neo-Victorianism. The narrator notably traverses temporal boundaries, appearing in the railway carriage with Charles but simultaneously emphasising the fictiveness of the scene — 'I have pretended to slip back into 1867; but of course of course that year is in reality a century past' (p. 409). Time is also physically amended shortly before the final ending, where the '*flâneur'*, assumed to be the narrator, 'takes out his watch' and 'makes a small adjustment to the time' (p. 465), literally turning the clock back and giving Charles and Sarah an opportunity to alter their final interaction. There is shown to be no definitive ending to this historical narrative; the past can be run and rerun, and this section in the present tense alludes to the possibility that this practice may occur indefinitely. As Mark Currie argues, the 'objectivity of historical fiction

[30] Gutleben, pp. 7–8.
[31] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 3.
[32] Gutleben, p. 8.

depends [upon] impersonal omniscience', and by revealing the authorial narrator as a subjective intervenor, particularly one seemingly unaffected by physical principles of time and place, this objectivity is sacrificed and 'history' presented clearly as a parodic invention.[33]

Nights at the Circus similarly situates itself uneasily in a complex historical context, as Carter also treats time as a 'manipulable concept'.[34] The novel is located around the turn of the twentieth century, as 'the world tilt[s] away from the sun towards night, winter and the new century' (p. 200), and yet there are significant magical slippages in this purportedly realist setting, most notably when Lizzie, Fevvers' adoptive mother figure, forces time to stand still. Displaying clear tenets of magical realism, a genre in which realism is 'invaded by something too strange to believe', such interventions destabilise the historicity of the narrative, often in deliberately self-conscious ways.[35] As Walser expects Big Ben to strike one on the first day of the new century, he realises that 'Big Ben had once again struck midnight' (p. 53). This sense of disconnection is effected by Lizzie, a specialist in 'household magic' (p. 199), who 'reinforces a moment of stasis' at a crucial transformative juncture in a novel which continually traverses spatial and temporal realms.[36] As in the case of Fowles' narrator, history is disrupted by Lizzie's intervention; Alejo Carpentier's assertion that 'buildings and spaces also speak to us of a past forever suspended' is demonstrated literally here, blurring the distinction between past and present in order to situate the novel in an artificially extended nineteenth century.[37] Invoking the familiar tolls of Big Ben, Carter brings the sensory plane of Victorianism firmly into (post)modernity.

[33] Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 67.
[34] Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 166.
[35] Matthew C Strecher, 'Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 25.2 (1999), 263–98 (p. 267).
[36] Armitt, p. 165.
[37] Alejo Carpentier, 'On the Marvellous Real in America', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 75–88 (p. 81).

Considering the role of historical truths in this seminal work of magical realism is therefore complex; *Nights at the Circus* deliberately refuses to enact a simple replication or retelling of history. Defined by Franz Roh as embodying the 'calm admiration of the magic of being', magical realism evokes a sense of the extraordinary in the real which Carter allies with aspects of fantasy in the novel, destabilising the nature of historical truths as presented by her neo-Victorian narrative.[38] In the spirit of magical realism, there is a duality to Lizzie's role as Fevvers' fairy godmother figure; she performs both magic — 'the things my foster mother can pull off when she sets her mind to it […] shrinkings and swellings and clocks running ahead or behind' (p. 199) — and everyday domestic tasks which are here imbued with a sense of the extraordinary — 'A little flight of steps ran up to the front door, steps that Lizzie, faithful as any housewife in London, scrubbed and whitened every morning' (p. 26). Lizzie thus operates between the cliches of dutiful housewife and supernatural witch, rewriting the binary conventions of the fairy-tale narrative.

Indeed, for Sarah Sceats, despite the invocation of magical realism, Carter is less concerned with what is demonstrably real and more with the instability of objective truth itself;[39] Walser drives the narrative with Fevvers, seeking an answer to the question 'Is she fact or fiction?' (p. 7) This question is not, and can never be fully answered, as Fevvers is a product both of Carter's fiction and her own mythology, a kind of narrative ownership which Walser cannot contravene. Her final words to him, 'To think I really fooled you […] it just goes to show there's nothing like confidence' (p. 295), might refer to her wings, virginity, or the persona she adopts in her performance. Sceats reasons that it is this 'confidence trick' which allows Fevvers to maintain control of both her recorded narrative and her life, and this performative doubt concerning what is demonstrably real ensures that she challenges

[38] Franz Roh, 'Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 15–31 (p. 20).
[39] Sarah Sceats, 'Flights of Fancy: Angela Carter's Transgressive Narratives', in *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. by Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), pp. 143–50 (p. 146).

Walser's re-writing of her experiences.[40] The tension between authenticity and artifice is central to the novel, and Fevvers' subversive voice is foregrounded despite its evident unreliability.

'A rising ripple of applause': Retrospective Feminism and Revisionism

Perhaps somewhat predictably in a genre defined by Gutleben as a 'paradoxical' conflation of modern and historical influences, there is clearly potential for revisionism in the retrospective presentation of Victorian women.[41] The influences of *Nights at the Circus* encapsulate this tension between Victorianism and modernity; Lucie Armitt's assertion that magical realism operates as a 'particularly displaced form of contemporary gothicism' places the movement uneasily in relation to another canonical genre, one which, significantly, proved popular during the nineteenth century.[42] Combining elements of both Victorian and postmodernist convention certainly complicates the novel's presentation of any kind of feminist ideology. Time operates as a central motif in Fevvers' performance, manipulating what her audience expects and witnesses — 'what made her remarkable as an *aerialiste*, however, was her speed — or rather the lack of it […] so that the packed theatre could enjoy the spectacle, as in slow motion' (p. 17) — and so it is perhaps unsurprising that her character is a curious amalgam of both contemporary and enduring ideas of subversion.

Nowhere can this be more readily observed than in Carter's treatment of Fevvers' sexuality. Much of the subversiveness of Fevvers' character lies in its ambiguity, particularly for Walser, who expresses the possibility that Fevvers could be anything between bird, woman, or man, given her size — 'six feet two in her stockings' (p. 12) — and indelicate features. The intense, almost eroticised curiosity around Fevvers' physicality begins to mimic the 'taboos and suppressions associated with the unspoken and the scandalous in sexual

[40] Sceats, p. 147.
[41] Gutleben, p. 16.
[42] Armitt, p. 14.

experience'.[43] The development of her wings, for example, is heralded by the arrival of her 'woman's bleeding' (p. 23), but perhaps even more shocking in this description is the way in which her wings are explicitly sexualised in the suggestiveness of the phrase, 'I spread' (p. 24). Isobel Armstrong argues for a Freudian reading of this passage, that Carter exposes the way in which 'libidinal feeling is displaced from […] one part of the body to another'.[44] Carter parodies the language of taboo by conferring sexual meaning onto a body-part which is not inherently sexual, and indeed may not even be there.

There are clear echoes of a very distinct brand of anti-essentialist feminism in Fevvers' sexual characterisation; Lorna Sage argues that Carter's writing presents the lack of 'a place in the world' for women as a myth but one that is 'compounded by the sanctification of motherhood'.[45] The issue of Fevvers' parenthood is covered succinctly in one line — 'Hatched; by whom, I do not know' (p. 21) — and that Fevvers is brought up largely collectively by a 'half-a-dozen' (p. 21) adoptive mothers serves to emphasise this apparent rejection of repressive motherhood and sexuality as synonymous with reproduction. Significantly, this anti-essentialism manifests itself in the novel as a clear defence of the artificiality of femininity and 'women's nature'; the novel complicates any notion of true 'authenticity' to argue against the existence of objective truth, particularly regarding Fevvers' body. Fevvers maintains the discursive power to suggest a possible resolution to Walser's overarching enquiry: 'as to questions of whether I am fact or fiction, you must answer that for yourself!' (p. 292) Perhaps radical even to twenty-first century readers, Carter's narrative arc for Fevvers explores the possibility that those who do not adhere to traditional tenets of femininity may be given a happy ending, thus disrupting a heteronormative 'master discourse' which proposes a clearer articulation of sexual difference.

[43] Isobel Armstrong, 'Woolf by the Lake, Woolf at the Circus: Carter and Tradition', in *Essays on the Art of Angela Carter: Flesh and the Mirror*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 266–86 (p. 282).
[44] Ibid.
[45] Lorna Sage, 'Introduction', in *Essays on the Art of Angela Carter: Flesh and the Mirror*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 20–41 (p. 32).

In *Tipping the Velvet,* there is a similar tension between Victorian feminist allusions and more contemporary ideologies. There is certainly evidence that Nan embodies a 'New Woman' ideal within the novel; indeed most troubling for patriarchal hegemonies in *Tipping the Velvet* is Nan's ultimate rejection of passive femininity. Her engagement with politics and promotion of socialism, for example, are radical in her speech towards the close of the novel — 'It is not by charity and paltry reforms that we shall improve conditions for the weakest classes […] but by turning over the land, and industry, to the people who work it' (p. 459) — and is reminiscent of Gail Cunningham's characterisation of the 'New Woman' as 'revolutionary'.[46] An even clearer adherence to this stereotype can be observed in Nan's clothing as she opts to wear trousers for her rousing speech. This act consciously echoes the principles of the 'rational dress campaign', a reformist movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century which called for emancipation from the dictates of fashion and traditional femininity, and encouraged women to wear clothing which was more practical for physical activity. In this context, Nan's clothing choices become even more subversive, both signalling a change in her personal attitudes and relating her narrative to one of wider social reform.[47]

However, despite subverting normative expectations of female dress, Nan's lesbianism succeeds in defending her from other critiques of the 'New Woman', particularly that intellectual or political endeavour would distract heterosexual women from familial duty and the rearing of children.[48] Although Nan's sexual identity disrupts a dominant patriarchal narrative, she is able to escape the particular subjugation of the male spouse where Kitty does

[46] Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), p. 10. Cunningham's political definition of the 'New Woman' is certainly one which most closely pertains to Nan's characterisation, however the inconsistencies of the term are important to note here. The 'New Woman' is a notably indistinct figure in fin-de-siècle literature and culture, operating as an exaggerated, or even fabricated, personification of patriarchal anxieties. For more on these ambiguities, see Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
[47] Sally Ledger, 'Ibsen, the New Woman, and the Actress' in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 79–93 (p. 82).
[48] Cunningham, p. 12.

not, and participate more effectively in politics and intellectualism. Patricia Marks argues that 'women's newfound taste for independence would emasculate their spouses', which implicitly refers to the heteronormativity of Victorian family dynamics.[49] Nan does therefore rebel from a traditional expression of femininity, but deviates even further from this standard by her lesbianism.[50] This element of her identity is then inherently subversive but granted legitimacy and, crucially, a happy ending; in deciding to present a queer Victorian narrative, Waters re-examines preconceived notions of nineteenth-century hetero-conformity.

This happy ending does however complicate the novel's fictiveness; Nan's narrative ultimately appears to end in success, as symbolised by her clothing choice — 'I had become known in the district as something of a trouser-wearer' (p. 407). Most significantly, the narrative concludes at a political rally, where Nan affirms both her socialist stance and her relationship with Florence in front of a crowd of people who provide the novel's final action, 'a rising ripple of applause' (p. 472). That this theatrical applause ends the novel serves to question the apparent success and progression of Nan's endeavours; there is still a sense of performativity surrounding her romantic relationships, and this public reaction to her kissing Florence is certainly reminiscent of the responses of the audience during her performances alongside Kitty, where she was 'clapped, and cheered' (p. 128). Cheryl A. Wilson's argument that the 'depiction of Nan's emerging feminine identity may recall the influence of performance on contemporary conceptions of gender' is certainly strengthened by the consistency of this applause motif, and the self-consciously utopian ending of the novel

[49] Patricia Marks, *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1992), pp. 124–25.
[50] For further discussion of the historical and cultural privilege of heterosexuality, see Rachel Carroll, *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 5–8.

draws further attention to its fictiveness, thus rendering its treatment of Nan as a subversive figure, particularly in the ambiguity of her gender, distinctly postmodernist.[51]

Like both Fevvers and Nan, Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* appears superficially to be a distinctly nineteenth-century character, falling neatly, at least initially, within a Victorian 'disgraced woman' stereotype. She has been abandoned by a 'Frenchman in Weymouth' (p. 35), however, as the vicar indicates in his exposition, the blame appears to lie with her: 'the impropriety, of her behaviour. Not to put too fine a point upon it, madam, she is slightly crazed' (pp. 35–36). The chapter opens with an epigraph from Tennyson's *Maud* — 'Ah Maud, you milkwhite fawn, you are all unmeet for a wife' (p. 32) — reiterating an idealised version of womanhood which Sarah clearly does not fulfil, and the marital implications of this. However, though her low social status may not render her an unusual Victorian character, that she remains without the redemption of noble origins, and in fact proves to be the heroine of the novel, is fairly un-Victorian.[52] She takes ownership of her reputation, stating, 'I have set myself beyond the pale […] I am the French Lieutenant's Whore' (p. 176), becoming something of an 'anti-Victorian character' by not only fulfilling the role of the social outcast but using this as a means of critiquing the social order.[53]

This critique is also evident in the dual endings; there is no reconciliation in the second ending between individual emancipation and familial responsibility, and the narrator describes any potential future relationship between Charles and Sarah as a 'possession' (p. 468). Stephenson considers the two endings as a direct comparison between Victorian and modern ideals, but it would be reductive to consider the second ending in some way enlightened in its attitude to women; [54] Sarah is either relegated to the position of the 'wilful child' (p. 466) or master manipulator. If these endings are indeed a juxtaposition between

[51] Cheryl A. Wilson, 'From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*', *Women's Studies,* 35.3 (2006), 285–305 (p. 303).
[52] Gutleben, p. 35.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Stephenson, p. 53.

Victorian and modern ideals, neither is shown to be sufficient means of self-liberation, and Fowles here perhaps contests the notion that modernity and female autonomy are necessarily interlinked. Indeed, as Matthew Sweet argues, 'the founding myths of modernity' are based in defining the current era in opposition to the past: 'If the Victorians are caricatured as cruel […] then it makes all post-Victorian wife-beating, child abuse, social injustice and personal dullness more easy to cope with'.[55] By complicating the relationship between past and present, Fowles avoids a binary presentation of enlightened modernity versus intolerant past, and critiques enduring negative attitudes towards women.

Indeed, in presenting both endings, a postmodernist rejection of narrative closure is even more apparent. The feminist undertones of disallowing not only a structurally neater, but also more familial, ending should not be overlooked; Kohlke and Gutleben quote Anthony S. Wohl and reason that, 'It was *en famille* that the Victorians like to be remembered and were so often recorded'.[56] In this way, Fowles appears to subvert both formal and thematic conventions of the very genre which the novel often mimics, and places Sarah at the centre of this subversion. When Charles first observes her, he asks Ernestina the reason for her ostracism, 'And he abandoned her? There is a child?' (p. 9), relating her female identity directly to reproduction. Later, when Sarah refuses his proposal of marriage, Charles believes that, 'some terrible perversion of human sexual destiny had begun' (p. 456), reiterating an enduring ideology connecting women and marriage. This second and final ending therefore reveals this idea of 'destiny' as plainly false, exposing hypocrisy in both Victorian mythology around female reproduction and the dominant patriarchal discourse of the twentieth century and beyond.

[55] Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 231–32.
[56] Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, 'Introducing Neo-Victorian Family Matters: Cultural Capital and Reproduction', in *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics,* ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 1–44 (p. 2).

Conclusion

The relationship between postmodernism and neo-Victorianism is evidently inherently complex. The postmodernist fascination with the nineteenth century appears to derive from the very similarities which might ostensibly separate them; consideration of the construction of the self, narrative power, and questions of authenticity and fictiveness are central to the neo-Victorian genre, and indeed the Victorian texts to which they often refer. The use of direct allusions, Fowles' epigraphs for example, evidences these textual connections, and all three of the novels considered here actively blur the distinction between past and present. Indeed, Davies refers to neo-Victorianism revealingly as 'talking back' to the nineteenth century, the insinuation being both that there is something to respond to, and that this response constitutes a challenge to some form of authority, whether this be dominant narrative modes or a 'master discourse' of history.

It is this discursive power dynamic, implicit in the neo-historical genre, which complicates the presentation of subversive feminine voices in these texts; the neo-Victorian imperative to investigate issues of authenticity and artifice is crucial to their depictions of Victorian women. All three novels play heavily on motifs of performativity and fictiveness, utilising modern or temporally ambiguous narrative voices to challenge conventions of Victorian narration as well as present themselves as products of conscious authorial construction. Although the female protagonists of these narratives are often distilled through the perspectives of male onlookers, they retain autonomy through this very obfuscation of truth and fiction. Fevvers in particular exemplifies Alison Lee's argument that creating 'levels of fiction', a mythology surrounding oneself, calls in to question the 'assumption that truth and reality are absolutes'.[57] The equivocal treatment of reality and temporality in these texts exposes the impossibility of the neo-Victorian project as an act of pure replication;

[57] Lee, p. 3.

rather, there is necessarily a modern dimension to these historical narratives which is declared openly and serves to amplify elements of history which respond most pertinently to the present.

All of these novels refuse to present a binary between past and present, interweaving emergent feminist discourses of the twentieth century with prevailing Victorian attitudes. The queer focus of *Tipping the Velvet*, and the way in which Nan's lesbian identity is acknowledged and accepted within the narrative, is perhaps most symptomatic of the way in which subversive gendered and sexual identities are retrospectively granted a voice in mainstream society. Constructing characters who explicitly diverge from heteronormative expectations is not an exclusively modern endeavour, but Nan's queer voice is granted narrative autonomy here, notably placing the novel both within a distinctly Victorian historical moment, and alongside the rise of literary queer theory in the twentieth century.[58] These narratives critique preconceptions of the Victorians by relating them thematically and formally to a modern readership, and succeed therefore in highlighting enduring social injustices. Historical authenticity is then deliberately sacrificed in order to present a challenge to both narrative and societal norms, and it is the exchange between replication and alteration which ensures that the voices of subversive female characters may be heard.

[58] Fraser and White, *Constructing Gender,* p. xiii.

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