Studies in the Victorian and Neo-Victorian Novel

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Edited by

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PREFACE

The nineteenth century was the age of the novel and the Victorian epoch brought about an unprecedented flourishing of it. The public did not want so much to read about fundamental problems of humankind and how to approach them, but merely wished to be entertained with what was familiar, to pretend that what was found in books did really happen, that literature was journalism and fiction was history. The literary trend that such expectations thus generated was (critical) realism, seen as a representation of truth – social, economic or individual – and the typical and familiar in real life, rather than an idealized, formalized or romantic interpretation of it. Readers wanted to read about easily identifiable situations with ordinary people like themselves but liberated from the dullness of daily routine. Indeed, such novels generously fulfilled their expectations and offered them chronological, straightforward and easily discernible development of plots, familiar backgrounds and credible characters.

About a century or more later, the Victorian novel is perceived – not seldom with nostalgia – as a sort of ideal, representing the great tradition, an omnipresent and reliable point of reference. The age has changed, and so has the reading public, but the fascination and engagement with Victorian literature and culture is still active. Nonetheless, as many critics argue, simply using a Victorian backdrop cannot make the work in question "Neo-Victorian". Though the foundation is still there, rooted in the nineteenth century tradition, Neo-Victorianism is associated with something more, namely a wide range of issues including memory, race and empire, sex and science, spectrality and the heritage industry. To these, a number of key trends and studies such as gender, sexuality and gendered perspectives, postmodernism, reimagining the Empire and redefining postcolonialism that retain a Victorian "anchor", find their place within Neo-Victorianism and emphasize that there is always something new, something recently developed that may lead to a more complex apprehension of the characteristics of the investigated novel and, consequently, consider it Neo-Victorian.

Worth mentioning here is also the contemporary and popular tendency today to follow up or recycle Victorian fiction materials and offer the reading public of today modern replicas of well-known Victorian creations. Such is the case of the renowned and almost classic novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, but also of *The Dark Clue* by James Wilson, *Thornfield*

Hall by Emma Tenant, *Drood* by Dan Simmons or *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill, to mention but a few titles that successfully represent this stream.

This volume contains ten studies whose main point is to discover and discuss Victorian roots and attributes, as well as neo-Victorian products and characteristics, in creations of literary fiction associated with the two ages situated about more than one hundred years apart and, consequently, to argue and demonstrate what they contain that may label them as Victorian or Neo-Victorian products.

In Chapter One, entitled "A Palimpsestuous Reading of Sarah Waters's novel *Tipping the Velvet*: From Male Impersonator to Drag King", the author, Elsa Adán Hernández, discusses the novel's main heroine Nancy Astley's process of self-discovery and maturation which, in parallel, takes the reader through a process of dismantling gender and sexual stereotypes to suit socially acceptable scenarios. In her study Adán Hernández reveals Sarah Waters's own contemporary outlook on such issues of the Victorian past as, for example, the figure of the male impersonator.

In her study "Fin de Siècle Descent into the Underworld of London – A Gothic Reimagination of East End" published in Chapter Two Ana Cristina Băniceru offers the reader a fin-the-siècle image of East End, associated with the underworld of murder, prostitution, anarchism, degeneration, and occultism. To prove its point, the study discusses a few famous *fin de siècle* texts, such as *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, *Dracula*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or *The Time Machine* where the city turns into a meeting point between anachronistic forces, represented by Hyde, Dorian's nocturnal flâneries, Dracula and Helen, and tendencies of modernity, all based on our propensity to exteriorize evil, give it a name and a place.

Chapter Three, "The Gendered Construction of Childhood through the Looking Glass in Victorian England: Victorian Wonder Tales" is dedicated to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses*. Here Alexandra Cheira discusses the gendered constructions of childhood in Victorian wonder tales which showcase Victorian femininities (and masculinities) filtered through a looking glass with regard to sexual identity in their wonder tales – namely in their portrayal of young girls.

"The Urban Gothic Necropolis in Dan Simmon's *Drood* and Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*" is Chapter Four's title given by Krisztina Jilling to her study dedicated to Dickens's innovations in the field of the urban Gothic, constantly recycled by neo-Dickensian fictions in representations of the urban Gothic Necropolis. The starting point is Dickens's novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, seen as the culmination of Dickens's urban Gothic. Simmons's novel *Drood* recycles specific motifs

from Dickens's crime novel, makes Dickens's unfinished story of Edwin Drood function as a metonymy of the Dickensian urban Gothic and represents it as the motif of the city as a Necropolis.

Cam Khaski Graglia's study "(Neo)Victorian Readers: The Revival of Victorian Reading Practices", published in Chapter Five, discusses the reception of the literary outputs of the nineteenth century and of today. The author starts from the fact that reading communities were common during the 19th-century and so they are today – more than two hundred years later – when, because of social platforms, reading communities continue their existence but have acquired new dimensions chiefly driven by the mutual or shared literary tastes of readers from anywhere in the world. The study is contrastive as its author juxtaposes the reading habits of the 19th-century readers associated with circulating libraries or social gatherings with those of today who evidence the revival of Neo-Victorianism in reading practices of digital communities such as Goodreads, Story Graph, Bookstagram or Booktube.

Chapter Six contains Marta Miquel-Baldellou's study "Evoking and Recreating Victorian Performances of Aging Selves: From *Great Expectations* to *The Woman in Black*". The study investigates Susan Hill's novel *The Woman in Black* (1983) with roots in the classic Victorian ghost story and signals significant intertextualities with Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Marta Miquel-Baldellou insists on the reinsertion and evolution of aging selves such as Miss Havisham and Pip in Dickens's *Great Expectations* to the contemporary counterparts of the Woman in Black and Arthur Kipps, in Susan Hill's novel and Stephen Mallatratt's homonymous play.

Georgiana Nicoară claims in her study "The Repulsive Race: Reconstructing the Gypsy Trope in George Eliot's *The Mill On The Floss* And Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*" contained in Chapter Seven, that, as in the Victorian age the gypsies were perceived as a different race altogether. Both Maggie Tulliver, from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss,* and Jane Eyre from Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel, are epitomes of unconventional femininity represented through the trope of the gypsy. Georgiana Nicoară boldly argues in this chapter that the two characters' rejection of the fitness of femininity will ultimately result in their identification with the socially peripheral gypsy stance.

In his study "Transgressions of Gender, Agency and Vulnerability in Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* and *Armadale*" published in Chapter Eight, Sercan Öztekin starts from the premise that in the Victorian age gender roles were conservatively constructed: women were associated with weakness of character or sentimentalism whereas men were seen as

dominant, strong, and proficient. In reaction, the study shows how Wilkie Collins challenges such Victorian gender perceptions in his novels *The Law and The Lady* and *Armadale* and, consequently, subverts these gendered ideologies by presenting resolute women active in masculine domains of law, but feeble and vulnerable men.

For Nazan Yildiz, her study titled "The Phantom of Woolf and Quandary of Charles Dickens and George Eliot whether to Redeem the Fallen Woman" included in Chapter Nine, is a good opportunity to discuss how Dickens and Eliot represent their fallen women, Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Hetty in *Adam Bede* respectively. Dickens idealised the Angel in the House image of the woman and seemed to maintain his protective attitude even in the case of fallen women and did not consider them as the cause of illness, moral corruption, and humiliation. George Eliot did not add excessive weight and condemnation to the representation of the fallen women, as she herself was an un-Victorian type of woman, a religious dissenter, a woman who was quite against conventional social norms and Victorian institutions such as the institution of marriage.

Chapter Ten incorporates the last study in this volume written by Andrej Zavrl and titled "Parallel Lives: *Teleny* and Wilde". Its author discusses the possible associations between Oscar Wilde and the anonymous novel *Teleny or The Reverse of the Medal* (1893). He tries to give answers to a few troublesome questions such as what events and texts, scandals and trials in the life of Wilde might have influenced the novel's reception, or how the tale of passionate and fatal love between two men may be associated with Wilde's canon. However, even though such doubts may never be removed, as Andrej Zavrl concludes, what remains is this novel's association with Wilde, which gives it greater prominence and more attention than it would otherwise have received.

I hope that the readers of this volume find the studies it contains stimulating, revealing and beneficial and consider them a suitable addition to the existing critical literature dedicated to the literary and cultural output of the Victorian and Neo-Victorian ages, consider them edifying and enjoy reading them.

CHAPTER ONE

A PALIMPSESTUOUS READING OF SARAH WATERS'S *TIPPING THE VELVET*: FROM MALE IMPERSONATOR TO DRAG KING

ELSA ADÁN HERNÁNDEZ

Abstract

Tipping the Velvet (1998), Sarah Waters' first novel, presents the life of Nancy Astley, an oyster girl born in the 1890s in Whitstable, a seaside town on the north coast of Kent. She is expected to make a living in the family business, marry a kind man and live a contented life. However, in one of her visits to the theatre she meets the male impersonator Kitty Butler and, after falling in love, moves with her to London. This moment marks the beginning of Nan's process of self-discovery and maturation. Cross-dressing and theatricality open up to her the possibility of dismantling gender and sexual stereotypes on socially acceptable scenarios. As a first-person narrator, Nancy explains in detail her feelings and thoughts, which are strongly indebted to Judith Butler's ideas about performativity and act as a kind of palimpsest to be deciphered and interpreted by the reader. Butler equates the concepts of queerness and the palimpsest to describe identity, something that runs parallel to Nan's process of identity formation. The palimpsest allows us to read through Nan's narrative and discover layers of meaning that can go unnoticed at first sight. Drawing on Gérard Genette, Sarah Dillon proposes the term "palimpsestuous" to describe the type of relationality that is reified in the palimpsest. This relational reading offers the possibility of revealing the connection between our own contemporary age and the issues of the Victorian past explored by Waters, as is the case of the male impersonator. Interpreting the novel from this relational perspective, the protagonists display clear drag-king traits. The fact that this key but disregarded figure within the LGBTQ+ community can be unearthed from the profound layers of Waters's palimpsestuous novel,

proves that the Neo-Victorian genre can "highlight for astute readers the very contemporary (and un-Victorian) nature of the text".[1]

Keywords: Drag king, gender performativity, male impersonator, neo-Victorian fiction, palimpsest.

Introduction

The reader of Sarah Waters's fiction must always be prepared to read between the lines and be sufficiently alert to get the real significance of her novels by establishing connections between past and present issues. Such is the case of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). Waters's first fictional work, in which she masterfully combines a passionate love story between Nancy and Kitty with the examination of a complex self-maturation process in which sexual discovery and gender identification become the predominant topics. Waters's *opera prima* was born after the writing of her PhD Thesis on historical fiction in 1995, titled *Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present*,[2] offers a detailed portrayal of lesbian and gay historical fiction and, more concretely, of lesbian writing from the late Victorian Era to the last decade of the twentieth century. It makes sense, therefore, that when she ventured to write her first fictional work, she decided to focus on a concrete lesbian prototype located in a historical past that she was very familiar with, as a way of creating her own contribution to the lesbian canon. Consequently, one of the most significant and recurrent motifs, not only in *Tipping the Velvet* but also in her next two novels, is the recuperation of the marginal stories disregarded by history books, mainly, those about female homosexuality. As Jerome de Groot points out "the historical novel raises significant questions about representation, and the choices made by both the author and reader in interrogating and understanding the world."[3] Indeed, one of Waters's main achievements is her skilful manipulation of both past and present, creating a continuum that allows her readers to trace back some hidden parts of history while critically assessing contemporary cultural and political issues, especially in relation to the lesbian community, and also, more broadly

[1] Mark Llewellyn. "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999)," *Journal of Gender Studies* 13 no.3 (2004): 213.

[2] Sarah Waters. *Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present.* Queen Mary U, PhD Dissertation, 1995. https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/ 123456789/28854/.

[3] Jerome de Groot. "'Something New and a Bit Startling': Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel," in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Kaye Mitchell (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 57.

speaking, situation concerning the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. In so doing, she is contributing to one of the main tenets of neo-Victorianism, since, as Heilmann and Llewellyn highlight "the 'neo-Victorian' is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century [...] [It] *must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.*"[4] (emphasis in the original).

Tipping the Velvet presents the story of Nancy Astley, an oyster girl born in the 1890s in Whitstable, a seaside town on the north coast of Kent. She is expected to make a living in the family business, marry a kind man and live a contented life. However, in one of her visits to the theatre she meets the male impersonator Kitty Butler and, after falling in love, moves with her to London. This moment marks the beginning of Nan's process of self-discovery and maturation. As a first-person narrator, Nancy explains in detail her feelings and thoughts, which act as a kind of palimpsest to be deciphered and interpreted by the reader. Cross-dressing and theatricality become the central topics of the novel, and in exploring them Nancy discovers the possibility of dismantling gender and sexual stereotypes on socially acceptable scenarios. All these ideas are closely related to Judith Butler's performativity theory. Thus, drawing on this notion of gender as performance, I will analyse *Tipping the Velvet* by means of the palimpsest metaphor, as it allows us to read through Nan's narrative and discover layers of meaning that can go unnoticed at first sight. This relational reading offers the possibility of revealing the connection between our own contemporary age and the issues of the Victorian past explored by Waters, as is the case of the male impersonator. Interpreting the novel from this perspective, my contention is that the protagonist displays clear drag king traits, as I will try to show in this chapter, and could be easily paralleled with contemporary figures who seek to give voice to outcasts communities. By equating this remarkable Victorian character with today's drag kings, I will try to prove that this key but disregarded figure within the LGBTQ+ community can be unearthed from the profound layers of the complex palimpsest Sarah Waters has created in this novel. Finally, to put an end to this chapter and round up the most contemporary approach to the novel I will attempt to establish certain connections by paralleling the protagonist in Tipping the Velvet with a worldwide performer, artistically known as Christine and the Queens.

[4] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn. "Doing It with Mirrors, or Tricks of the Trade: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic," in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the in the Twenty-First Century, 1999 – 2009*, ed. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

Reading this Neo-Victorian Novel through the Palimpsest Metaphor: Gender Performativity across Centuries

Tipping the Velvet is considered to be ground-breaking in many respects, especially in relation to the portrayal of the coming of age of its young protagonist, Nancy Astley, focusing on themes that may attract a readership from the lesbian community as well as from the general public and the academia, especially those related to sexuality and gender. Thus, the initial question triggered when reading *Tipping the Velvet*—as well as in all Waters's fictional and non-fictional works—is then: "What is it with queers and history?"[5] The answer to this question is provided by Doan and Waters herself in the following terms: "historical fiction has been rehabilitated for queer consumption alongside romance, crime and science fiction; lesbians may now indulge the serious pleasure of repossessing their own lost histories."[6] In this process of "repossession" many hidden issues come to light. What is more interesting is that by revisiting the past writers are also shedding light on our present and understand certain human behaviours, putting at the centre certain issues that have always remained in the shadows. Indeed, this is one of the endeavours of neo-Victorianism, since by revisiting and rewriting the past, neo-Victorian fiction grants the possibility of providing a more nuanced and imaginative version of certain historical events. Neo-Victorianism gives back a voice to a wide range of silenced characters, who are now allowed to speak for their own, and present their individualist versions and visions of history. As Louisa Hadley aptly explains, "neo-Victorian fictions seek to both reinsert the Victorians into their particular historical context and engage with contemporary uses of the Victorians which efface that historical context."[7] By so doing, writers engage critically with issues of the past, with a special focus on the treatment of gender, race, sexuality and/or social class distinctions and discrimination.

In order to achieve my aim of building a bridge between past and present concerns, as an analytical tool I try to maximise the potential of the palimpsest metaphor since it allows us to revisit and re-imagine the Victorian past as a way of projecting a critical image of today's society.

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[5] Sarah Waters. "Out and about: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fiction," *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (1999): 313.

[6] Laura Doan and Sarah Waters. "Making up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History," in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda R. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 13.

[7]. Louisa Hadley. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6.

Therefore, it is necessary to briefly comment on it. Drawing on Gérard Genette, Sarah Dillon offers in *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2013), a path-breaking theorisation of the palimpsest metaphor that can be useful for the analysis of complex and multi-layered novels such as this one. In her book Dillon describes the birth and historical use of the term, emphasising its "process of metaphorisation from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day."[8] The word "palimpsest" was first used in this broader figurative sense by Thomas de Quincey in his essay "The Palimpsest" included in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845). As Dillon explains, relying on de Quincey's interpretation, by "coupling 'palimpsest' with the definite article 'the' (for the first time in a non-specific sense), de Quincey's essay "*inaugurated* —that is, both introduced, and initiated the subsequent use of— the substantive concept of the palimpsest" (emphasis in the original).[9] Then, following Genette's initial distinction, she elaborates on the difference between the adjectives "palimpsestic" and "palimpsestuous". The former refers to a layering of textual strata, requiring a vertical reading aimed to unearth the hidden layers covered up by the most recent (or upper) layers subsequently added to the text. By contrast, a "palimpsestuous" or relational interpretation begs for a horizontal reading of the text, meant to establish the way in which the lower and the upper layers inform each other and become inseparable, thus creating a whole new meaning that differs from those of the different layers. These two terms designate, therefore, two different types of reading: while palimpsestic emphasises the importance of unearthing the hidden message of the subtext, palimpsestuous begs for a relational reading capable of revealing the complex meaning of a text in constant evolution and change, and consequently providing a whole new meaning of it. In order to carry out my main aim, in this chapter, I will carry out a palimpsestuous (or vertical) reading of Nancy Astley's body and performances, meant to bring to the fore the entwined textual relationality resulting from the process of conflation of the different nineteenth and twentieth-century layers that constitute Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian novel.

With this methodology in mind, in terms of thematic concerns, as I exposed in the introduction of this chapter, sexuality and gender lie at the core of this novel. As I have explained in detail elsewhere,[10] *Tipping the Velvet* is strongly indebted to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, and

[8] Sarah Dillon. *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.
[9] Dillon, 1.
[10] Elsa Adán Hernández. "Nan King's Orientation in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*: A Journey of Gender and Sexual Self-Discovery Following 'the slantwise direction of queer desire'," *Gender Studies* 20, no. 1 (2021): 61-68.

becomes essential in order to fully understand the ultimate significance of the novel. Butler equates the concepts of queerness and the palimpsest to describe identity, something that runs parallel to Nan's process of identity formation. As is widely known, Butler's theory explores the notion of gender as something that is performed and can take various forms, dismantling the historical misconception that associated the female gender as the performed counterpart of its binary contrary, that is, masculine gender. From Butler's perspective, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,"[11] an idea is quintessential in understanding gender performativity theory. Although, as I have also explained, Butler's ideas evolved and the conceptualization of different aspects has changed dramatically in the last two decades, especially concerning the LGBTQ+ community, in order to understand Nancy's evolution in the novel, it remains fundamental to bear in mind Butler's first definition of performativity, as it the concept that triggers all the character's actions: "[it] is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration."[12] Besides, together with Butler understanding of gender performance, as I also analysed in detailed in my article "Nan King's Orientation in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*: A Journey of Gender and Sexual Self-Discovery Following 'the slantwise direction of queer desire'" (2021), the theorisation of the processes of "queering" and "being oriented" carried out by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006),[13] proves extremely useful for the analysis of Nancy throughout the plot. Ahmed delves into the theorisation of the way in which non-normative bodies —meaning non-normative sexualities and identities— relate to space and how, in turn, these bodies are shaped depending on the orientation —or direction— they follow. As I have argued, "a central aspect of the novel is the process of construction of Nancy's identity as a human being in a world that seems increasingly queer for her, in both senses of the word."[14] As I also exposed in this article, the mastery with which Waters employs the word queer—meaning both homosexual and out of the norm—illustrate the

[11] Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.
[12] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.
[13] Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).
[14] Adán Hernández, 71.

broader, playful and all-encompassing meaning of this word.[15] Bearing these ideas in mind, I will now delve into Nancy's role as a male impersonator, tracing back her gender and identity performance in Victorian times until reaching our present times.

From Male Impersonator to Drag King: Reading the Novel from a Twenty-First-Century Perspective

During the Victorian period, the male impersonator became a relevant music-hall figure both in Great Britain and the United States. The type of gender-crossing that was permitted and became a popular form of entertainment by the end of the nineteenth century was that acted out by male impersonators.[16] This prototype is central to the novel, as it triggers Nancy's questions about gender and sexual assumptions. As Elaine Aston explains,

> The dominant ideology of Victorian and Edwardian England, supported the conservative image of women as 'angels of the house': as beautiful, chaste, domestic creatures. However, stereotyped femininity did not go unchallenged, and among those dissenters who promoted an image of 'unwomanly women' were the male impersonators of the music hall, who, in male guise, assumed values of the 'dominant' sex and undermined them, with satirical lyrics and a parody of male mannerisms.[17]

The popularity of male music-hall impersonators conveyed a persistent cultural association of female transvestism with lesbianism. For all their variety, if one had to choose, Nancy would definitely belong to the group of "unwomanly" satirical male impersonators arising as a sign of resistance to heteropatriarchal conventions.[18] Here, we need to take into account that Nancy's story is told in retrospect, that is to say, the fact that the narrator sets her story in the 1890s but recalls it approximately in the 1920s, allows us to take into consideration the evolution of the role of women with regard to society along these decades. It is important to highlight that the idea of "woman" shifted in significant ways from the late Victorian to the

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[15] Adán Hernández, 69-70.
[16] Rachel Wood. "'Walking and Watching' in Queer London: Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17 no.3/4 (2006): 307.
[17] Elaine Aston. "Male Impersonation in the Music Hall: The Case of Vesta Tilley," *New Theatre Quarterly* 4 no.5 (1988): 247.
[18] Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms. *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 118.

Edwardian period, giving rise to the path-breaking notion of the "New Woman" at the turn of the twentieth century. As Andrzej Diniejko explains,

> The term "New Woman" was coined by the writer and public speaker Sarah Grand in 1894. It soon became a popular catch-phrase in newspapers and books. The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. The New Women were not only middle-class female radicals, but also factory and office workers.[19]

The development of this figure brought about the first changes in terms of women's relationship with the world. Especially relevant in the previous quotation are the words "emancipated, independent and self-supporting" as this description perfectly conveys the main characteristics of the New Woman. Nancy is associated with this figure at the end of the novel, particularly after she moves away from Kitty and her theatre life, and later on, when she gets to know different political movements. Her assumption of this new female role can help twenty-first-century readers predict an evolution from Victorian male impersonator to contemporary drag king performer. What is more, the fact that the concept of "drag king" was not popularised until the 1990s,[20] reinforces the consideration of *Tipping the Velvet* as an example of neo-Victorian literature, since, as Rosario Arias forcefully argues, neo-Victorian fiction "textualises concerns with (mis)representations of the past, often revisiting and revising the position allocated to those who have been underrepresented."[21]

In order to make sense of Nancy's evolution, it is necessary to highlight the different stages she goes through, especially after running away from Kitty and walking the streets in male guise. Her intimate relationship with Kitty inaugurated Nancy's experience of romantic attachment and sexual attraction for another woman, something that led her to acknowledge that homosexuality was a real possibility. However, after her first heartbreak, her decision to start working as a male prostitute—also analysed in detail in

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[19]. Andrzej Diniejko. "The New Woman Fiction." *The Victorian Web.* December 2011, accessed February 11, 2020.
http://www.victorianweb.org/ gender/diniejko1.html/.

[20]. Maite Escudero-Alías. *Long Live the King: A Genealogy of Performative Genders* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 58.

[21]. Rosario Arias. "'Talking with the dead': Revisiting the Victorian Past and the Occult in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters' *Affinity,*" *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 13 (2005): 87.

my above-mentioned article—destabilises certain received notions tied not only to sex but also to gender that she had so far taken for granted. It was during this time that she was spotted on the streets of London by Diana Lethaby, a Sapphist lady, and offered the possibility of living together. At her place, Nancy will become acquainted with surprising objects and situations that, as I will now explore, make her discover more possibilities as far as sexuality is concerned, and that lead her to engage differently in transvestite performances, thus further changing her mind about the fixity of genders. By submerging herself in this Sapphist underworld, Nan discovers that there are more women like her; women who enjoy their homosexuality, and who, for instance, enjoy role-playing and drag as a way of deconstructing what is socially accepted as straight and "normal" behavioural patterns. However, the story does not stop here, as Nan is expelled from this house because she is surprised having sexual intercourse with another servant, Zena, and Diana Lethaby cannot stand this act of betrayal. After that, the final step in her maturation process takes place at Florence Banner's house. As readers soon learn, the Banners are high in the local labour movement and Florence works in a charity helping poor families. Nancy's chance encounter with her becomes fundamental for her ultimate personal self-definition. The first time they see each other, Nancy is dressed as a man, smoking in the dark of the balcony of her rented room in Mrs Milne's house in Green Street, and Florence, who is celebrating the lodging of a poor family in a nearby house, comes out for fresh air to the balcony opposite Nancy's. The second time, Nancy, dressed as a woman, meets Florence, also by chance, in the street and tells her that she is the person that gave her a start in the balcony. Florence takes this lightly and, when Nancy asks her to meet again, she invites her to attend a lecture on "The Woman Question" in the Athenaeum Hall.[22] They do not make an appointment after that, since Florence tells Nancy that she is leaving London for a new job in a hostel at Stratford, but when Nancy becomes homeless again, she decides to look for her and finally finds the place she worked at, "a house of friendless girls."[23] After some time, Florence accepts Nancy as a kind of flat mate, and it is during this period that Nancy finally feels at ease with her true identity, both in terms of gender and sexual orientation. She starts being more flexible about clothing, and she becomes acquainted with some political movements related to the Labour Party and the Socialist Guilds that Florence is fighting for. The discovery of their political activism helps Nancy reaffirm her social role.

[22] Sarah Waters. *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago Press, 1998), 226.
[23] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 343.

Taking into consideration the various stages in Nancy's process of maturation and her final identification, it becomes evident that she could hardly belong to either of the binary categories established by heteropatriarchal normativity. Just as gender identity is consciously constructed in transvestite performances, Nancy's problematises of her female identity by confronting it with a performed male identity. We return here to Judith Butler's key point: that "repeated stylization of the body."[24] Therefore, by receiving and normalising the opposite gender's practices, while taking into consideration the environmental and social background in which the performance takes place, masculine and feminine elements are confronted with the aim of defying their limits and the established dichotomy between them. This entails the creation of an ambiguous, in-between, queer identity, perceived as puzzling by everyone who experiences or perceives it. An example of this ambiguity is the episode in the balconies when Florence thought Nancy was a man. In their second meeting, when they encountered each other in daylight, Florence asked Nancy if she was wearing trousers to spy on people from the balcony. On hearing this, Nancy is afraid that Florence "might take me not [only] for an impertinent *voyeur*, but [also] for a fool,"[25] and feels the need to justify the reasons for so doing, as she perceives Florence as a possible harmless new friend at a moment when she had deliberately "quit the business of hearts and kisses."[26]

The same gender problematisation underlies contemporary drag king performances. As Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms explain, in a drag king performance, "far from being easily distinguishable, the theatrical/artificial and the everyday/real exist in a fluid, mutually informative relationship with each other."[27] Sarah Waters herself has recognised in interviews that, in her fictions, she seeks to "make some really neat links between things happening in society and in contemporary culture."[28] Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that, although Nancy's story takes places in Victorian times, the same feelings of unbelonging are experienced nowadays by various minority groups that feel pushed aside and silenced due to different sexual, gender or racial issues. Then, the term "drag" is appropriate to describe Nancy because, as Butler already explained in *Gender Trouble*, "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender

[24] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.
[25] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 223.
[26] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 225.
[27] Torr and Bottoms, 31.
[28] Dennis, Abigail. "'Ladies in Peril': Sarah Waters on Neo-Victorian Narrative Celebrations and Why she Stopped Writing about the Victorian Era," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1, no.1 (2008): 45.

itself."[29] Drag performances prove that gender originates by means of different cultural mechanisms. A drag king, understood in Maite Escudero-Alías's sense of the term, is a "weapon of self-representation and self-expression."[30] This phrase may be said to encapsulate Nancy's main motif throughout the novel, as she revolves around masculinity and femininity in order to find the embodied expression that better suits her sense of self. As Escudero-Alías explains with reference to the masculine/feminine dichotomy in the late twentieth century, approximately from the 1970s onwards, the feminine gender was already tied to socio-cultural factors that situate it in an inferior position with regard to the masculine gender: "there were indeed two realities corresponding to two distinct gender identities [...]. The difference between the masculine and the feminine culture would be that feminine culture was still a counterculture in the sense that it had not yet reached cultural visibility and social value."[31] Historically, femininity has been considered apt to be performed as it is the "counterculture" of masculinity. However, the performance of masculinity sets out several problems, as this part of the binary resists performativity. Judith Halberstam describes this problem as the "asymmetry of male and female impersonation,"[32] something that Nancy herself experiences, as I have already pointed out. As Halberstam makes clear, drag is, above all, a way of exposing "the structure of dominant masculinity by making it theatrical and by rehearsing the repertoire of roles and types on which such masculinity depends."[33] Likewise, for Del Lagrace Volcano —an internationally recognised photographer and tireless LGBTQ + activist, sometimes self-described as "part-time gender terrorist" —[34] the answer to the question of what is a drag king is crystal clear: "Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity."[35] Notwithstanding O'Callaghan's categorical assertion that "Nan is not a drag artist, which differs from male impersonation in that for drag artists the overt parody of gender provides the very point of the act,"[36] I would venture to maintain that the novel does ask readers to set them side by side. Nowadays, drags do not imperatively

[29] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.
[30] Escudero-Alías, 3.
[31] Escudero-Alías, 20.
[32] Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 233.
[33] Halberstam, 239.
[34] Jay Prosser. "Home". *Del Lagrace Volcano.* Del Lagrace Volcano, 2015, https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/.
[35] Torr and Bottoms, 1.
[36] Claire, O'Callaghan, Claire. *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 25.

use parody and there is a wide variety of subcategories within the world of drag kings. Besides, the performance of drag kings should not be considered merely an entertaining activity as "it also demonstrates how leisure can be used as a site of political transgression and resistance."[37] In the same vein, Steven P. Schacht argues that "just [from] their appearance, one could easily mistake several of them to be 'real' men if one was not told otherwise,"[38] so that parody is not detected. What is more, already in the late 1990s, Halberstam provided the readers of *Female Masculinity* (1998) with a list of different types of drag kings depending on their performances and styles, including some subcategories in which parody was not even considered, thus making clear that it is not a fixed category.[39] Accordingly, it could be stated that there are as many types of drags as performers, or even, that some performers may identify differently across time, as they evolve and discover further consequences of performing as drags. Taking this into account, it may be argued that Nan's entire process of self-discovery and self-definition is comparable to that of a drag king. Indeed, Sarah Waters herself has said of Victorian performers such as Vesta Tilley and Hetty King that "they just look like drag kings," and she has recognised that she wrote the novel at "a time in which the lesbian community [...] seemed to be becoming a bit more playful [...]. There was a lot about drag kings around."[40]

Yet another element Nancy shares with drag kings is the power she attributes to naming in the construction of identity. Nancy Astley's repeated changes of names already point to the analogy between gender performance and identitarian fluidity. The performative aspect of naming is highlighted by the evolution of her name from a traditional female name—Nancy and Nance—to Nan, a shortened, more neutral and gender-ambiguous form. Our protagonist is addressed as Nan for the first time by Kitty, when she wishes to call her in a more familiar and affective way.[41] However, the most important change comes when Kitty and Nancy's success on stage demands that they are renamed as a duet. The moment itself is significant as Nancy admits that she wants to keep the "Nan" part "since Kitty herself had re-

[37] Joshua Trey Barnett and Corey W. Johnson. "We Are All Royalty: Narrative Comparison of a Drag Queen and King," *Journal of Leisure Research* 45.5 (2013): 686.
[38] Steven P. Schacht. "Lesbian Drag Kings and the Feminine Embodiment of the Masculine," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 43 no. 3/4 (2003): 82.
[39] Halberstam, 246-55.
[40] Mitchell, Kaye. "'I'd love to write an anti-Dowton!': An Interview with Sarah Waters," in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 130.
[41]. Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 36.

christened [her],"[42] meaning that she considered the name "Nan" as the symbol of her sexual awakening. Then, someone else came with the surname "King" and they all seemed to like it. Here, referencing Butler once more, "it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings."[43] Therefore, the fact that the gender-ambiguous name of Nancy's music-hall persona marks her entrance into adulthood, effectively opens up the possibility of disrupting the commonly accepted, normative gender binary. Needless to say, this combination offers greater opportunities to perform a fluid version of the self, in which not only the binary male/female opposition is made explicit, but also begs for the acknowledgement of a wider gender spectrum. In the following pages, I will attempt to demonstrate that the fact that her surname is "King" effectively links her with the central figure of this part of the chapter: the drag king performer.

Obviously, both physical appearance and the image projected to the external world are fundamental in order to perform as a drag king. As I pointed elsewhere,[44] when she cross-dresses, Nancy passes off as a man and nobody seems to notice it. She is able to play with the external gaze at will, except when Mrs Diana Lethaby stops her carriage by her side and says, catching her eye: "any gent who could bring such a sense of drama to the staging of an encounter [deserves some attention]."[45] However, Nancy's greatest surprise takes place when she realises that the person who is inviting her for a ride is a wealthy woman and not a man, as usual. Interestingly, Nancy's spontaneous reaction is to try and clarify that she is not a man—"Believe me, I haven't got what you are after"[46] —to what Diana answers: "On the contrary, my dear. You have exactly what I'm after [...]. You, little fool [...] get in."[47] The fact that Diana picks out Nancy's performance straight away, in spite of the realness of her disguise, clearly points to the existence of covert alternative subcultures in which this activity was more common than Nancy naively thought. After that, Nancy starts discovering a whole world of Sapphists gathering in the hidden and dark parts of the city. And here, it is important to highlight, as Torr and Bottoms note, that "long before female-to-male cross-dressing began to be associated

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42. Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 125.
43. Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. 2004. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.
44. Adán Hernández, 67.
45 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 232.
46 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 233.
47 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 233-4.

with 'inversion' or lesbianism, it was recognized as a sign of resistance to the norms of patriarchal economy."[48] This is precisely the role assigned to Mrs Diana Lethaby in the novel, as she acts both as the representation of another existing reality for women in the Victorian period and as a catalyst for the rise of thought-provoking ideas in Nancy.

After their first encounter, Nancy moves from her hired room in Mrs Milne's house to Diana's mansion, significantly called "Felicity Place." As Antosa notes, it is at this stage that Diana renames Nancy as "Neville King," thus, granting her a symbolic rebirth,[49] as Nancy herself acknowledges: "She had created me anew: the old dark days before were nothing to her."[50] This new stage in Nancy's life quest will further destabilise the heteropatriarchal system presented at the beginning of the novel. For instance, the first time Nancy goes to a ladies Club as Diana's partner a woman in the lobby expresses her shock to another one: "Mrs Lethaby, I can't speak for the ladies; but some might consider this a little — irregular."[51] Diana's answer could not be clearer: "we are all here for the sake of the irregular."[52] This irregularity may be said to characterise the daily performances of these Sapphist women. Barnett and Johnson's words make perfect sense in this context: "As a term, drag performer warrants unpacking [...]. The second half of the term, performer, points to the theatrical component of drag. Whether staged or not, drag takes on characteristics of theatrical performance since it requires the performer to assume a different persona, aesthetic, and attitude."[53] This is exactly the panorama Nancy witnesses when entering the Club:

> There were about thirty of them, I think — all women; all seated at tables, bearing drinks and books and papers. You might have passed any one of them upon the street, and thought nothing; but the effect of their appearance all combined was rather queer. They were dressed, not strangely, but somehow distinctly. They wore skirts — but the kind of skirts a tailor might design if he were set, for a dare, to sew a bustle for a gent. Many seemed clad in walking-suits and riding habits. Many wore pince-nez, or carried monocles on ribbons. There were one or two rather startling coiffures; and

[48] Torr and Bottoms, 118.
[49] Silvia Antosa. "'What is it with Queers and History?' Performing History and Gender in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*," *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani* 40 (2015): 46.
[50] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 251.
[51] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 271.
[52] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 271.
[53] Barnett and Johnson, 678-9.

> there were more neckties that I had ever before seen brought together at an exclusively female ensemble.[54]

Read through the metaphor of the palimpsest, the mixture of all these different styles and costumes, reinforces the idea that every drag performer can make individual choices regardless of the common motif behind the collective act of performance. In this case, the variety of styles and costumes could be understood as the break of heteronormative rules and the expression of a more fluid sense of self, untied to normative clothing and constructions. In Nancy's own words: "But all performers dress to suit their stages, I recalled. And what a stage was this — and what an audience!"[55]

As the relationship between Diana and Nancy becomes more personal and intense, Diana gets tired of seeing her dressed in "basic" male suits and orders Nancy —deliberately addressed in ways such as "Diana's *caprice*," "this *freak*," or "*her* boy"[56] (emphasis in the original) that reinforce her role as a performing artist in the house— to dress up in more playful costumes: "it was part of Diana's mystery, to make real the words that other people said in metaphor or jest."[57] In all cases, her costumes praise female power by impersonating mythical figures traditionally associated with artfulness and monstrosity by patriarchal culture,[58] such as an Amazon, Salome or Medusa,[59] but always incorporating typically male attire or a mixture of both. As in a drag performance, this blend is used to dismantle and mock the rigidly oppositional normative structures, so that "incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity."[60] The most playful and transgressive episode related to clothing takes place when Diana celebrates her birthday fancy-dress ball, explicitly inviting "*Sapphists Only*" (emphasis in the original). [61] In this masquerade party, clothing and certain complements acquire a symbolic role. As Antosa notes, "Diana creates an environment in which most Sapphic icons are evoked, from Marie Antoinette to the Ladies of Llangollen and Queen Christina of Sweden. The masquerade becomes the occasion in which the Victorian lesbian community can playfully celebrate

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[54] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 272.
[55] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 272.
[56] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 278-9.
[57] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 280.
[58] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 34.
[59] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 281.
[60] Halberstam, 236.
[61] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 307.

its own genealogy."[62] Perhaps one of the most remarkable costumes Nancy wears to please her mistress is the one she calls "Hermaphroditus": "I was a Hermaphroditus. I wore a crown of Laurel, a layer of silver grease paint — and nothing else save, strapped to my hips, Diana's Monsieur Dildo."[63] This costume fits some of the main characteristics of the drag king, as it "expressly performs maleness by self-consciously hyperbolizing the signs of masculinity,"[64] in this case, Diana's secret dildo, which acquires especial significance in this part of the novel.

As already pointed out, the non-fixity of the notion of drag king allows performers to change their outer guise over time, in consonance with the internal growth and self-acceptance of their inner self. This makes perfect sense by the end of the novel, when Nancy decides to wear man's clothes to do the cleaning of Florence's house. The following is perhaps her most revealing statement about gender performativity and the role she decides to play:

> I kept my hair short. I wore my trousers, as I had planned, to do my housework in — at least, for a month or so I did: after all, the neighbours had all caught glimpses of me in them, and since I had become known in the district as something of a trouser-wearer, it seemed rather a fuss to take the trousers off at night and put a frock on. No one appeared to mind it.[65]

In this case, we could even say that Nan is performing a different role, that of a drag butch; that is, the role of "a masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender expression".[66] This change enhances even more the fluidity of Nancy's understanding of gender. Here, masculinity is taken as a part of herself and is performed in a more "natural" way, substituting simple parody for a more significant meaning: "the trousers reflect her character, as she is still a tom-boy, but this time without the splitting of her identity or creating of performative alter egos."[67] Besides, dressing as a man is for some women a way of exploring further sexual identities as homosexuals, something that can be fostered by the figure of the drag butch, who try to be freed from the narrowly defined gender binary, with the aim of exploring complex identities in terms of

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[62] Antosa, 47.
[63] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 281.
[64] Escudero-Alías , 61.
[65] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 406-7.
[66] Halberstam qtd. in Escudero-Alías, 61.
[67] Michaela Weiss. "Tipping the History: Gender Performances and Costumes that Matter in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*," *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* 3 no.2 (2012): 60.

gender identification. This is especially remarkable by the end of the novel, when Nancy is involved in political activism, as her daily performance, including clothing, becomes in itself a statement. A clear example of this is the above-mentioned episode in which she deliberately decides to clean the house wearing trousers, either merely as a question of comfort, or, more interestingly, as a part of her self-definition process. What is more, this remarkable episode also reflects that Nancy is aware and fond of being able to teach the neighbours to become familiar with women wearing trousers, as even if at that time it was extremely weird to see a woman dressed like that in the day light and in working-class neighbourhoods, even if some decades later it become more frequent and even fashionable. Consequently, the evolution of Nancy's performance as well as the fact that she feels totally comfortable wearing trousers, points to the fluidity of gender and its entire dependency on deliberate performance. MilDred, a New York drag king, describes this fluid sense of self in the following terms: "I'm not a butch or femme. I can be one way one day and another way another day."[68] As for Nancy, there are numberless comments on how she feels and which label should she "wear" at some determined moments. Both Nancy and MilDred locate themselves in a variety of positions, rejecting the idea of belonging to just one group and identifying with a fluid persona, willing to explore further possibilities. As Nancy explains, it was after her first performative experience walking down the streets of the Soho neighbourhood that her attitude to cross-dressing changed. The more she ventured into this activity, the bolder she became: "The success of that first performance made me bold [...]. For on every visit I found some new trick to better my impersonation."[69] Another very telling comment can be read at the end of the novel, when she arrives at Victoria Park during the Workers' Rally. Before going there Nancy had doubts about the "etiquette" that would best suit her for that occasion, and she decided to wear a skirt instead of trousers. However, when she sees some other women, she describes them as "trousered toms,"[70] and realises her mistake: "I had breached some tommish etiquette, coming here in short hair and skirt."[71] Her next comment to Florence clarifies that her fear of being observed and judged because of her clothing was only tied to her previous narrow-minded heteropatriarchal thoughts: "To think […] that I might have worn my moleskins after all."[72] This and similar comments suggest that Nancy dares to explore the infinite possibilities cross-dressing

[68] Volcano and Halberstam qtd. in Escudero-Alías, 87.
[69] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 195.
[70] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 417.
[71] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 418.
[72] Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 417.

offers for her, so that, through her life journey, different labels can be effectively applied to her.

Nan and Chris: Two Rebellious Women Fighting for Visibility across the Centuries

To close this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate that Nancy, the Victorian character, is not so far from our contemporary culture and the very neat links can be established between the two centuries, by comparing her with a global singer, the French performer Héloïse Letissier, who seems to be the twenty-first century embodiment of Waters's Victorian protagonist. Letissier's was firstly known Christine and the Queens, partly as a tribute to a Drag Queen Club in London where she found her way and felt safe enough to express her true self. On the occasion of the release of her second album, also in 2018, she reinvented her artistic persona and shortened her name, wishing to be simply addressed as "Chris." This switch of names already establishes a clear parallelism with Nancy: behind the shortening of their names is the desire to express their real selves and their capacity for evolution. In various articles and interviews, Héloïse Letissier has described her deliberate change of name from Christine to Chris as the creation of an *alter ego* of her first *alter ego*.[73,74] As she explains, her earliest artistic choices were already a form of "*constructing identities*, but I was just trying to please other people [...]. With Christine, it's just about trying to please myself and to be myself" (emphasis added).[75] As this comment suggests, the French performer's internal growth and self-acceptance are somehow reflected in the outside. In fact, she has developed this idea further on various occasions. As she explained in an interview appositely titled "Christine and the Queens on reinventing herself as Chris," "I think of identities as constructions. I think every choice we make, every day, is a

[73] Kitty Empire. "Christine and the Queens Review — Born-again Chris in a Class of her Own," *The Guardian*, November 24, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/nov/24/heloise-letissier-christine-and-the-queens-review-hammersmith-apollo-five-stars/.

[74] Alexandra Pollard. "Christine and the Queens Interview: 'I'm Working the Excess, in a Way that a Masculine Hero is Excessive'," *Independent*, November 19, 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/christine-and-queens-interview-chris-album-tour-uk-a8637561.html/.

[75] Pollard, "Christine and the Queens Interview."