Escaping the Women's Sphere in Neo-Victorian Fiction

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Abstract: This article looks at two turn-of-the-century neo-Victorian works – *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) by Sarah Waters and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) by Peter Ackroyd. Both novels offer a detailed depiction of cross-dressing and theatre in the latter part of the nineteenth century and its effects on the main characters. The article analyses each work individually to sufficiently examine significant relationships and their impact on the main heroines' character formation. Furthermore, it looks at gender performativity in the Victorian setting and the unique environment of the music halls. As demonstrated, the examined characters achieve liberation by occupying both male and female spheres and by refusing to propagate the strict rules encompassing gender binaries. As a result, both characters are able to freely explore their possibilities while wearing male clothes and arrive at a more authentic and well-rounded image of who they are.

Keywords: neo-Victorian literature, cross-dressing, Sarah Waters, Peter Ackroyd, music halls

Introduction

Neo-Victorian literature carries within it the inherent need to transform and reinterpret the past in order to free its characters from the stifling rules of the nineteenth century. As a result, the predetermined roles are abandoned in favour of nonconformity and, in some cases, deviancy that reflects the interests of the contemporary reader. The portrayal of underdeveloped, ostracised, and overlooked characters is the observable characteristic of many novels written after the second half of the twentieth century and the novels written at the turn of the millennium, which this article discusses, also continue in this tradition. *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) by Sarah Waters and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) by Peter Ackroyd give voice to Victorian women who refuse to embody

limiting roles prescribed to them by society. Instead, the main characters go on a journey to self-discovery that centres around their transformation aided by cross-dressing and theatre.

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble,* observes that it is "impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (2002, 6). Gender is commonly viewed as a social construct, adhering to an arguably skewed and limited understanding of what belongs in the category of feminine or masculine. Like many other theorists, Butler is against limiting gender binaries, using their performative functions as a reflection of unstable and changeable opinions throughout history. Additionally, phenomenological and feminist theories acknowledge that "the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (Butler 1988, 521). However, it is worth noting that there is a marked difference between the formed and self-aware performance on the stage and the internalised acts that constitute one's gender. In the theatre, all the acts and roles can come into question; thus, the characters' formation and actions are disseminated, together with the ideals behind their roles. Consequently, the theatre environment allows the exploration of the norms imposed on individuals off the stage.

Theatre represents a relatively safe space for anyone who diverges from the arbitrary standard. Therefore, it is also an ideal setting for a neo-Victorian novel exploring the margins of society and the refusal to follow predetermined roles. This article illustrates how performance permits the discussed characters to occupy both male and female spheres. By refusing the limiting binaries, the heroines in both novels draw attention to deeper issues of the era in which they live and the freedoms gained by their transgressions.

Entering the Stage and the Streets in *Tipping the Velvet*

In her neo-Victorian trilogy, which debuted with *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters portrays women who gradually grow tired of hiding who they are. The main protagonist in the 1998 work is a young woman Nancy Astley, who undergoes a transformation from an ordinary Victorian girl into an unapologetic transgressor of the oppressive rules during her early adulthood. Nancy, or Nan, belongs in the category Kathleen Renk calls "female rogues" or "gender outlaws" since her portrayal outwardly challenges as well as highlights "the limitations placed on women's social, economic, and public roles, while demonstrating how

women's lives have been circumscribed by these imposed limitations" (2020, 92). Throughout the book, the main character's appearance, interests and experiences continuously draw attention to the importance of breaking the rules that, arguably, should not have been imposed on her in the first place.

Nancy emphasises her plainness at the beginning of the novel. She describes herself as "a slender, white-faced, unremarkable-looking girl, … [with] her lips continually moving to the words of some street-singer's or music-hall song" (Waters 1999, 4). Waters depicts an ordinary young woman who should not be viewed as someone whose subsequent behaviour is deviant. The narrative also immediately points to one of Nancy's most significant passions – the music halls. The main heroine enjoys her passive, voyeuristic role from the audience, where she can observe the braver and more outspoken performers. Nevertheless, as the story continues, her need to discover who she truly is and find a place where she can grow and thrive pushes her towards more risky and active roles.

Several people play a crucial role in the development of Nancy's character. While some shape her towards secrecy and shame, others show her that the world will never accept her unless she learns to love herself. The person who helps to initiate Nancy's transformation is a male impersonator Kitty Butler,

> who signals to Nan that it is possible for her not only to access the stage but also to experience same-sex love and desire, and thus Kitty makes two seemingly unavailable realms accessible to Nan. (Koolen 2010, 379)

Kitty becomes a symbol of freedom and exploration in the eyes of the young and inexperienced main heroine; however, as the two women grow closer, Nancy realises that behind the performance and confidence, Kitty is yet another woman who fears outwardly transgressing the Victorian rules.

Kitty's performance on the stage consists of a "masher act" where she dresses as a man and sings suggestive songs. Nancy admires this show, and Kitty's appearance also shocks and attracts her. While the short hair typically suggests that women "had spent time in hospital or prison; or they were mad" (Waters 1999, 12), Kitty is "like a very pretty boy, for her face was oval, and her eyes were large and dark at the lashes, and her lips were rosy and full" (13). There is nothing upsetting or scary about Kitty's looks. On the contrary, Nancy's description makes it clear that the unusual features can still be appreciated and admired.

The otherness is portrayed as beautiful and captivating, reinforcing the view that there is no place for discriminatory opinions.

It is because of Kitty that one of the most significant turning points in the novel takes place. When Nancy and Kitty become a cross-dressing masher duo, their performance further arouses Nancy's hidden sexuality and leads to a romantic relationship between the two women. As Rachel Wood notes:

> The space of the theater is an iconic one in this novel, acting as a microcosm of a city space that permits Nan's playfulness with identity and her subversive pleasure in passing off a variety of identities. (Wood 2013, 309)

Their performance is enjoyed both by the oblivious audience as well as the Victorian "toms" looking for a role model. "Waters emphasizes the erotic thrill that Nan and Kitty receive from cross-dressing" (Koolen 2010, 380). However, while Kitty limits the male clothes to the stage, Nancy, having experienced the transformation through the male attire, cannot restrict her masculine endeavours the same way.

The Victorian music halls are a unique space for the performers whose transgressions on the stage are welcomed. However, as Patricia O'Hara points out in her study of a Victorian journal *The Music Hall and Theatre Review*, it was crucial to "stress the artiste's off-stage domesticity and modesty – qualities not in evidence in the performances of women who took center stage in the music hall" (1997, 141). Performers such as Kitty and Nancy are allowed to portray the other sphere under the condition that their femininity permeates their lives outside the theatre. Additionally, the publications from the Victorian era made sure to divide yet also find ways of "reconciling the public male impersonator with the private, 'essentially feminine' woman" (O'Hara 1997, 148). Thus, in Waters's novel, Nancy's self-expression and stage clothing are controlled by the more repressed and cautious Kitty. Nancy is only allowed to wear male clothes that do not cross over from theatricality to authenticity. The main heroine herself points this out when she, while in her stage outfit, is "clad not exactly as a boy but, rather confusingly, as the boy [she] would have been, had [she] been more of a girl" (Waters 1999, 120). She is expected to make it clear with her makeup and feminine curves that she is still a woman and not someone who belongs to the male sphere. As a result, the depiction of femininity follows the traditional path in which feminine traits are associated with visible features of the body (Butler 2011, 6-7).

Consequently, while with Kitty, Nancy "is not to be read as threatening the binary between female and male because she is just temporarily performing masculinity for the audience's entertainment" (Koolen 2010, 380). Furthermore, since Kitty struggles between being true to herself and continuing the Victorian farce, the impersonator is split between her public and private roles, and she "is not comfortable with the potentially dissident implications of her and Nan's double act" (Wood 2013, 310). In the end, Kitty portrays a male entertainer on the stage and also follows the rules pointed out by O'Hara.

On the other hand, as Jeanette King writes, Nancy is described as a transgressor of "gender boundaries both sexually and professionally, taking on the so-called masculine traits in order to become [a] 'New Wom[a]n'" (2005, 132). She and the other heroines of the neo-Victorian genre "court 'deviance' in order to further their own evolution, ignoring the social imperative of marriage and the evolutionary imperative of maternity" (132). Because of this, Kitty cannot become the story's main character since she pursues heteronormative marriage and motherhood to fit in. Furthermore, she describes her initial attraction to Nancy as something she should not feel, and when Nancy tries to open their lives to more people like them, Kitty immediately draws a line between them and "toms".

Such different viewpoints signal that the relationship between the two women cannot continue. Their break-up forces Nancy to start over; however, she finds herself "in a city that favoured sweethearts and gentlemen; a girl in a city where girls walked only to be gazed at" (Waters 1999, 191). Being a Victorian woman is very limiting, and once, walking unchaperoned, Nancy has to face the criticism of her surroundings.

> Women may have had increased freedoms to *use* particular areas of the city in specific ways, but to wander through the streets without purpose is still potentially problematic behaviour for a woman, as public visibility is implicitly mapped onto sexual availability. (Wood 2013, 311)

Therefore, the idea of dressing as a man in public is born out of necessity. This time, Nancy does not want to keep a hint of femininity, nor does she avoid altogether crossing over to the male sphere. What Nancy desires at that moment is to become invisible. However, this decision carries with itself a considerable danger since "there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary

character of the act, indeed, on the street …, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality" (Butler 1988, 527). Therefore, Nancy must ensure that she subdues her femininity in order to become a believable man, and her embodiment must fulfil both the perceivable and internalised conditions.

This endeavour proves to be successful; nevertheless, Nancy soon realizes that although she is able to avoid the scrutiny, there are new gazes pointed her way she has not noticed before. By dressing as a man, Nancy unknowingly enters the world of prostitutes/renters. The attention comes from men whose vocabulary and body language has been carefully crafted to ensure greater safety and avoid misunderstandings between the ones in the know. Nancy decides to become one of them as well, which is a decision influenced by her need to be in control. As a renter, she never reveals her gender; instead, she plays the part of a male homosexual prostitute. The main heroine compares this impersonation to her career on the stage. However, the one distinction she makes is the lack of an audience, which she regrets at times:

> I would gaze about me at the dim and dreary place in which my gentleman and I leaned panting, and wish the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. I would long for just one eye - just one! - to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold and knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gulled and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner. (Waters 206)

This creates an interesting contrast between her initial decision to wear male clothes in the streets and her new profession. Yet, once again, what the main heroine emphasises is her own agency and control over the situation. She does not want to be gazed upon by those who would deem her as a transgressor; instead, dressed as a man, Nancy "broaden(s) the social and sexual boundaries imposed on females" (Renk 2020, 116). Ultimately, Nancy wants her imagined audience to appreciate her transformation as well as her seizure of power.

The Rich and the Poor in *Tipping the Velvet*

Nancy embodies numerous roles during her young adulthood. After leaving Kitty and the theatre and after learning more about the lives of lower-class Victorian prostitutes, she also becomes a companion of a wealthy upper-class widow,

Diana Lethaby. Georges Letissier describes Diana as "a wealthy, childless widow, … [who] affords a first instance of an iconoclastic alternative to the Victorian society's ordinary ways and rules" (2011, 384). The society in which Diana spends her time is full of older women whose fortunes allow them to indulge in societal taboos.

With the taboos removed, Nancy sees her relationship with Diana as transactional. Although she can never ignore her emotions entirely, Nancy overlooks Diana's more minor transgressions and abusive behaviour to enjoy the comforts of her company. Diana showers her new lover with gifts, and the ones that Nancy treasures the most are the male clothes, which the main heroine describes in great detail. Still, this relationship cannot last because of Diana's control. Nancy is treated as an object, a plaything in the eyes of the older woman. As Nancy points out: "it became a kind of sport with her, to put me in a new costume and have me walk before her guests, or among them, filling glasses, lighting cigarettes" (Waters 1999, 280). Unlike Nancy or even Kitty, Diana does not have to worry about repercussions because of her high social standing.

The world Diana opens up to Nancy is "antisocial [and] anti-familial" (Letissier 2011, 385). In an attempt to transgress the rules, it also refuses the structures the main heroine seeks. To Nancy, cross-dressing has a more profound significance which, while living in this upper-class bubble, starts to lose its meaning. Her clothing reflects luxury and compliance, while before, it embodied the main character's desire to understand herself and seek control over her circumstances. The cross-dressing turns into an empty performance that no longer directly fights "to expose the tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms" (Butler, 2002 xxiii). Nancy's place in this world is also questioned since Diana does not let her form meaningful relationships or familial bonds. The Sapphist upper-class revels in "scandal-mongering, aphorisms, and grotesquely hyperbolic comments" (Letissier 2011, 385). Thus, just like the clothes become more outlandish and inauthentic, so does the main character's behaviour which undergoes a drastic change that greatly contrasts with the heroine that has been depicted so far.

In the last part of the novel, Nancy struggles to regain her power when she moves in with political activists and siblings Florence and Ralph Banner. This move introduces yet another world to the young protagonist, who, despite being far removed from the innocent fishmonger's daughter she used to be, is still ignorant about the lives of the working class in London. Nancy feels excluded

from the conversation, and every time the Banners talk politics with their visitors, she compares her marginality to that at Diana's house. Adding that "at least they [Diana's friends] had liked to look at me. At Florence's house, no one looked at me at all" (Waters 1999, 378). This observation emphasises the main heroine's relationship with performance. At Banners household, she is unsure of her role. She hides her sexuality in fear of being shunned, and her lack of understanding of current affairs makes her feel isolated and inconsequential.

As a result of her unremarkableness in the lives of Florence and Ralph, Nancy once again tries to adjust her behaviour and discover what her new role is. Additionally, the feminine and uncomfortable clothes she initially wears also show this struggle. It is only after Nancy puts on more masculine outfits that she finds the confidence to be more genuine around her new acquaintances. Nancy also realises that the years of dressing up in male clothes have altered her appearance:

> The truth was, I had looked awful ever since leaving St John's Wood; and now, in a flowery frock, I only looked extraordinarily awful. The clothes I had bought, they were the kind I'd used to wear in Whitstable and with Kitty; and I seemed to remember that I had been known then as a handsome enough girl. But it was as if wearing gentlemen's suits had magically unfitted me for girlishness, for ever - as if my jaw had grown firmer, my brows heavier, my hips slimmer and my hands extra large, to match the clothes Diana had put me in. (Waters 1999, 381)

The inner transformation Nancy has undergone during her formation years in London manifests itself in her appearance. However, this change is not unwanted or refused by the main heroine, who does not want to return to her old life and clothes. When Nancy starts wearing trousers again, no one seems to care. She is not seen as a transgressor since, in the poor parts of the city, "it was a luxury to have any sort of clothes," and women often wore "their husbands' jackets" (Waters 1999, 407). Cheryl Wilson also observes that after Nancy becomes romantically involved with Florence Banner, she is finally able to "begin[] the painful separation of her sexual identity from her music hall performances" (2006, 302). Florence does not take part in the pretence and role-switching that Nancy has previously employed. Thus, the main heroine finally appears to be en route to an even deeper acceptance of herself and a move away from the performative acts she did to protect herself.

Therefore, by the end of the novel, Nancy Astley becomes a confident character who refuses to hide her desires. The transition greatly contrasts with the young girl introduced at the novel's beginning. As Louisa Yates observes, with Florence, "Nan defines a contemporary family of choice in a nineteenth-century setting, a family in which the roles are constantly negotiated" (2011, 106). Comfortable and meaningful clothes are a significant part of the heroine's journey, who finally starts seeing her outfits as an extension of herself. The refusal of long hair, flowy dresses and feminine roles complete the image of an individual who does not subscribe to the limiting gender rules. Instead, she shapes the world according to her needs.

Religion and Theatre in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*

The other novel discussed in this article shares many similarities with Waters's work. *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* by Peter Ackroyd depicts a woman who also refuses to follow the limiting rules of the era. Instead, the main heroine Elizabeth Cree breaks as many rules and laws as possible in her quest for self-exploration and self-expression. As Petr Chalupský observes, London seems to be the perfect place for the novel due to "its two faces: the official, public, rational city and the unofficial, hidden, shadowy city" (2016, 69). This also describes the main heroine, who revises her roles according to her needs. She is able to reveal more about her true nature when she pretends to be a man, whether it is in writing or her costume, which becomes a significant part of the exploration of her identity. The novel deals with the issues of societal rules, expected roles and gender identity, and it does not fail to shock the reader with its gruesome depictions of murders and abuse. The narrative alternates between court proceedings, Elizabeth's narration and her husband's diary entries. However, as it is revealed at the end of the novel, the diary entries are also written by Elizabeth, who fabricates them to frame her husband for her murders.

Elizabeth does not have a solid family background, so she finds refuge in the music halls. The unique environment that accepts people from various walks of life attracts the main heroine, who is still searching for a place in the world. Coming from a religious background, Elizabeth considers the halls as an acceptable alternative to going to church. The fact that "many of these halls and little theatres were once chapels and churches" (Ackroyd 2007, 68) validates her interest even more, and just like her mother is obsessed with the church, Elizabeth indulges in her love of the performance arts. Patricia Pulham writes that

"[t]he novel makes use of the underlying theme of London's Victorian Music Halls to destabilize gender, identity, and sexuality, while simultaneously staging its own textual 'theatre' of voices" (2009, 162). The main character is able to experience a sense of community after joining the performers. Additionally, she encounters an environment where "[a] woman's voice was always heard" (Ackroyd 2007, 225), significantly contrasting with the world outside the theatre.

Elizabeth's dissatisfaction with her life, as well as her hatred for her abusive mother, are important aspects in the formation of her character. She is motivated to get as far away from her past as possible, and her roles and costumes on the stage aid this transformation. Maureen Moran points out that even during the late Victorian era, "identity for many still depended on traditional moral and religious principles and codes of social conduct" (2006, 3). What was preferred was conventionality, normalcy, and obedience; however, the outfits Elizabeth puts on offer new possibilities and roles she gladly takes on.

The transformation that Elizabeth undergoes on the stage already shows that after she becomes the character called Little Victor's Daughter, or later the character of the Older Brother, she transcends the reality in which she exists and becomes consumed by the role:

> It was as if I had some other personality which walked out from my body every time I stood in the glare of the gas, and sometimes she even surprised me with her slangster rhymes and cockney stuff. She had her own clothes by now—a battered bonnet, long skirt and big boots suited her best—and, as I slowly put them on, she began to appear. Sometimes she was uncontrollable, (Ackroyd 2007, 106-107)

In the passage, she addresses her role in the third person because she acknowledges the uniqueness and individuality of each persona she embodies. She enjoys becoming someone else as she can escape the "firmly policed … boundaries of 'normal' identity with respect to gender and sexuality" (Moran 2006, 4). Initially, the character of an innocent girl is enough to keep Elizabeth occupied; however, she soon realizes that it is very restricting: "She was just too sweet, and I longed to kill her off by some violent action" (Ackroyd 2007, 150). Little Victor's Daughter still has to follow the limiting rules of the era, therefore, not allowing Elizabeth to indulge in pretence and further possibilities fully. Susana Onega notes that what follows is a much more liberating role in which Elizabeth assumes "her first

transexual impersonation" (2011, 289). The part of the Older Brother makes her feel "above them all" as "she can change [herself] at will" (Ackroyd 2007, 153). Furthermore, Elizabeth likes the fact that everyone knows she is portraying the part of Little Victor's Daughter and her brother: "I could be girl and boy, man and woman, without any shame" (153). The sense of superiority that stems from her dressing up strengthens the argument that crossing from one sphere to another gives Elizabeth more opportunities, and she becomes freer.

Elizabeth thus outwardly transgresses the public rules within the theatre space that offers her protection.

> In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender and arrangements. (Butler 1988, 527)

O'Hara also points to the discussion of gender that occurred at the turn of the century. As she writes: "the conception of gender identity as essential and inherent was being actively contested in New Woman writings" (1997, 147). Nevertheless, as O'Hara also notes, a line was drawn between the New Women and the cross-dressers on the stage. She explains this by pointing to the artificial emphasis on the femininity of actresses who engaged in masher acts (1977, 143). What, however, might be derived from this is also an attempt to protect the act on the stage and silence the critics who could question its morality and possible effects on the performers and the established order.

Benjamin Poore also notes that cross-dressing is a significant motif in neo-Victorian literature, viewed

> as a means of self-liberation and self-discovery for Victorian women whose movements and behaviour are otherwise rigorously proscribed and surveilled. This is another characteristic move of neo-Victorianism, of course: to subject Victorian certainties to modern (feminist and/or queer) scrutiny, and to find that, in terms of modern identity politics, it is the Victorian orthodoxy that is deviant, and the 'villainous' or 'unspeakable' behaviour quite natural or explicable. (2017, 23)

Thus, as Poore points out, it is the otherness and all the idiosyncrasies of these characters that are celebrated by the modern reader and viewer. Both Waters and Ackroyd dress their heroines in male clothes to showcase the significant transformation that ensues. Elizabeth's change is all the more extreme once she becomes a cross-dressing serial murderess. Nevertheless, this change reflects the neo-Victorian desire to free its characters from nineteenth-century boundaries. Elizabeth moves on from the overlooked marshes, where she grows up unnoticed and uncared for, to the limelight of the music halls. Nevertheless, besides representing the often overlooked and unusual, Scott Freer points to another crucial aspect of this genre which is embodying "the grotesque 'Other' of a Victorian criminal underworld" (2008/2009, 52). Elizabeth's role, which surpasses all expectations, is that of the feared Limehouse Golem. Her murderous spree results in much more significant infamy than on the stage, and Elizabeth closely follows and revels in the discourse surrounding her crimes.

In neo-Victorian works, unconventional characters are often restricted to the margins. They are scrutinized and judged; however, in Ackroyd's novel, Elizabeth is able to protect her position within society by what Pulham describes as "shape-shifting" (2009, 166). Her public roles include an innocent girl and, later on, a respectable married woman. Unlike Waters's heroine Nancy King, who goes through a series of transformations in order to arrive at an authentic version of herself, Elizabeth parodies the gender divide. Butler describes this act as "the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command" (2011, 82). The main character consciously mimics weakness and innocence in front of others despite being capable of caring for herself. She is aware of not fitting into the predetermined mould; nevertheless, her transgressions are more calculated and thought out. As a result, "gender is an act which has been rehearsed" (Butler 1988, 526) by the main heroine. Elizabeth has had years of experience observing the world and learning the customs she is expected to follow. While on the stage, her performance is protected, and her wrongdoings outside the theatre are disguised with the help of costumes and calculated acts.

In order to understand the main heroine better, it is necessary to examine the complicated relationship with her mother. In Elizabeth's own words, she was an

> only child, and always an unloved one ... the bitter fruit of her [mother's] womb, the outward sign of her inward corruption, the token of her lust and the symbol of her fall. (Ackroyd 2007, 11)

Elizabeth's upbringing is abusive and strict. Her mother sees her as a daily reminder of her own moral fall and her failure to embody "the Victorian feminine ideal … [of a] highly idealised … woman as disembodied, spiritual and, above all, chaste" (King 2005, 10). Elizabeth's mother becomes obsessed with religion to save her corrupt soul; however, she is also convinced that because her daughter was born out of wedlock, she is "the sign of the devil" (Ackroyd 2007, 50). Additionally, the fact she is a girl predisposes her to further sin and shame. In the novel, Elizabeth recounts some of the abuse she had to face:

> There is a place between my legs which my mother loathed and cursed—when I was very little she would pinch it fiercely, or prick it with her needle, in order to teach me that it was the home of pain and punishment. (13)

Thus, it is understandable that Elizabeth seeks refuge in male clothes to escape the judgement and pain associated with her gender. This abuse leads to deep-rooted issues with her intimacy as well as her disdain for fallen women. Elizabeth is another victim of the Victorian belief that "the female body is always the potential source of deviance, particularly of sexual deviance" (King 2005, 67). As a consequence, when she becomes the Limehouse Golem, she murders prostitutes, women who sell their bodies, and therefore commit the ultimate sin Elizabeth has been warned about since childhood. The worst offence in her eyes, instilled in her by her mother, is losing innocence and succumbing to primal desires. She considers the women she murders to be weak – they represent the limiting idea of a woman reduced to the margins of society as the weaker sex who give themselves to men. Their surrender is another offence in the main character's eyes, and the fact that she murders other women while wearing male clothes creates a further void between her and their spheres.

Surpassing the Margins in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*

The variety of forms, personas and rules Elizabeth embodies throughout the novel illustrate her unique journey to self-discovery. As Adrienne Rich argues: "this drive for self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (1972, 18). Elizabeth's roles as the Older Brother and the Limehouse Golem

further help to uncover some of her motives. However, it is important to note that the information about her performative murders is only accessible through the diary entries fabricated under her husband's name. As a result, the main character once again portrays a man, and through these diary entries, her thoughts become accessible.

As the reader learns, the diary entries supposedly written by John Cree are "*preserved in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum*" (Ackroyd 2007, 24, original emphasis). They become evidence, just like the reports of the trial. Elizabeth, therefore, achieves the fame she had desired during her acting days, and her writing can be found among other books and documents written about and for men. Rich notes that "every woman writer has written for men" (1972, 20), and Elizabeth not only achieves this but also is perceived as one. Onega goes on to aptly analyse the meaning behind Elizabeth's writing:

> The fact that she kept a different record for each type of murder, signing one with a female and the other with a male name, situates the origin of her murderous behaviour in the presumed cultural divide that ascribes women to the private sphere and men to the public one. At the same time, the fact that the private and public murders run parallel to each other points to Elizabeth's self-fragmentation, pinpointed by her transformation from slum-born poor and illegitimate child to music-hall comedian, middle-class married woman and phantasmal Limehouse Golem. (2011, 276)

The public murders are the ones she commits in male clothes, under the guise of the Limehouse Golem, for her pleasure and moral judgement. When she commits the first performative, public murder, she notes that it is "to mark [her] entrance upon the stage of the world" (Ackroyd 2007, 28). This crime moves Elizabeth from the limited private sphere to the public one, allowing her greater freedom of expression.

When Elizabeth is finally tried for her crimes, it is not for the murders of the Limehouse Golem nor some of the murders she has done without the costume, but the poisoning of her husband. The possibility of Elizabeth committing hideous murders is described as impossible by her legal defence. All that is necessary to make this judgement is her appearance and gender. "Just look at her. Does she seem to you a monster incarnate, a veritable terror, as Mr. Greatorex has

implied? On the contrary, I see all the womanly virtues in her face. I see loyalty, and chastity, and piety" (Ackroyd 2007, 158). The word "womanly" is used as a justifiable argument, the representation of good and innocent, gentle and obedient. A woman, in Mr. Lister's eyes, but also in the eyes of the general populace of that time, was born with specific virtues that predisposed her to a life of submission. Even her last character is dressed all in white for her execution. The virginal white, connected with innocence and purity, is the last time Elizabeth attempts to be perceived as someone else.

The numerous characters and roles Elizabeth Cree portrays during her life are significant in discovering herself. When she becomes the murderess or the respectable wife, she achieves more freedom than other women as she is not restricted by just one of these portrayals. On the contrary, with every new costume change and every new character she introduces, Elizabeth revises her life. When she becomes the Limehouse Golem, she surpasses the description of a man and becomes a creature, a monster, a supernatural being that transcends the limits of gender binaries. Wandering through the dark streets of London, Elizabeth experiences "liberating escapes from the restraints of … convention" (Chalupský 2016, 196). She herself acknowledges this superiority and sees herself as the rightful judge. While she is not the heroine of the Victorian era but rather a deviant murderess, she does embody the qualities of a neo-Victorian heroine who refuses to be reduced to only the "other" and the periphery.

Conclusion

Both discussed novels portray female characters who refuse only to embody a limiting role of a Victorian woman. "Nancy's cross-dressing onstage as a male impersonator and offstage as a male prostitute drives the narrative" (Emmens 2009, 139). Similarly, Elizabeth's switching between various roles makes the novel distinctively neo-Victorian. Both women's path to self-realisation is achieved through their love of music halls and performance. While Nancy is viewed as a transgressor of the rules due to her sexuality, Elizabeth becomes a criminal with a warped idea of justice.

These novels challenge the limiting depiction of gender as a strict and total binary, and instead, through contesting Victorian certainties, the main characters manage to embody more than just Victorian women. Music halls represent a space where transgressions are allowed and nurtured, while the streets

of London present a further challenge to the preconceived notions that started to be questioned by the end of the nineteenth century.

As it has been illustrated with excerpts from Butler's works on the performativity of gender, the depiction of crossing from one sphere to another contributes to the discussion of gender being a social construct formed and upheld by society. Both neo-Victorian heroines uncover the inherent artificiality of pretending to be someone they are not, yet, at the same time, performance becomes the common link that frees them from the constraints of the era and their gender. Thus, Waters and Ackroyd join the ranks of other neo-Victorian authors whose works reflect the need to revisit and rescue forgotten voices that are still relevant now.

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