

Lin Elinor Pettersson. 2014. *Gender Performance and Spatial Negotiation in the Neo-Victorian Novel*. Málaga: Universidad de Málaga. 179 pages. 1 *

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Back in 1997, when she coined the term “neo-Victorian novel” to refer to a “subset” of the historical novel entirely or partly set in the nineteenth century and sharing a revisionist approach to the past (Shiller 538-540), Dana Shiller could not have imagined that fifteen years later this subgenre would still be the object of so much study and debate, as is indicated by works such as Ann Heilmann’s and Mark Llewelyn’s *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2005* (2010), and *The Neo-Victorian Series* edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben about trauma (2010), families (2011), the Gothic (2012), and cities (2015) in neo-Victorianism among others.

However, the intense attention that specialised criticism has been devoting to the neo-Victorian novel, partly due to its renaissance in the twenty-first century accompanied by its popularity among academia and the general public, could impose extra difficulties for any young scholar aiming to deal with so much information and to approach the subject from a fresh perspective. Nevertheless, Lin Pettersson achieves such goals in her volume *Gender Performance and Spatial Negotiation in the Neo-Victorian Novel* (2014), which, applying theories of gender and theatricality to a selection of historical novels revising the late nineteenth century, results in an exercise of well-researched and accessible literary criticism.

In her study, Pettersson analyses Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) and Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) drawing on two pillars that uphold a very particular reading: on the one hand, she supports Ann Heilmann’s and Mark Llewelyn’s thesis that neo-Victorianism connects the Victorian past with today’s present incorporating current concerns into a literary imitation of the nineteenth century (Heilmann and Llewelyn 7), thus penetrating where historiography is limited; on the other, she relies on Judith Butler’s concept of performative gender

as a tool to gain insight into this subgenre. Likewise, Pettersson's interpretation of the texts incorporates to these two ideas an unusual twist: that this interplay between past and present coupled with their own metafictional self-awareness turn those texts into performative entities like their protagonists.

Consequently, through the examination of three female performers in their pursuit of a public presence in the Victorian circus, the freak show and the music hall as well as in other spaces within the city of London which Pettersson suggests could be perceived as metaphorical stages as well, the volume intends to "prove how neo-Victorian fiction deconstructs the treatment of women as a single and coherent category, and moreover, destabilizes a fixed division of space into a public/private dichotomy" (Pettersson 10).

For this purpose, a selection of authors and novels has been carefully made, encompassing a) *Nights at the Circus* as a canonical example of historiographic metafiction according to Linda Hutcheon's *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1995), b) a novel of transition between the height of historiographic metafiction and new forms of historical fiction - *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* -, and c) *Tipping the Velvet* as representative of the most recent trends in neo-Victorianism, all three of which have attained different degrees of popularity among readers and academics with which Pettersson is acquainted. Furthermore, Pettersson establishes other interconnections between the three novels, for she considers that Carter had a deep influence on Waters, that Waters and Ackroyd explore of the world of the music-hall in similar ways, and that Carter's and Ackroyd's metafictional techniques are alike. As a result of this interrelation, the three texts are thematically approached through six sections presenting substantial evidence from the primary texts alongside a wide and updated range of arguments extracted from a selection of sources dealing with gender, history, feminism, and critical theory. A structure which, including short summaries of the primary sources, facilitates the understanding of Pettersson's ideas.

After the introduction, in which Pettersson overviews the three novels analysed in the central parts of the volume and briefly

announces the theoretical background on which her work is based, the first chapter, entitled “Gender Performance in Theory and Cultural Practice” delves deeper into Judith Butler’s concept of gender performance, the particularities of theatre in the Victorian era and its connections with class and gender, ending with a reflection about how London is frequently perceived as a stage. Although it explores altogether dissimilar topics, the section is presented quite coherently. Regarding Butler’s philosophy, it provides an enlightening explanation of her understanding of the three-dimensional body and the cultural roots of gender, rendering her theories quite intelligible and linking her thinking to acting through the concept of performance. Moreover, it includes an original defence of Victorian forms of popular entertainment as responses to uniformity and industrialisation which facilitated places for gender and social transgression. In addition to this, it emphasises the music hall’s capacity to break the boundaries between performance and reality in what is not only a vindication of the genre, but also a powerful argument to support her thesis, which she summarises when stating that “we can question whether art imitates life or life imitates art, but what is important is the action of imitation” (51), a claim which is crucial with regards to the final sections of the book.

Along similar lines, chapters two and three, named “On-Stage Performance of Gender” and “Off-Stage Performance of Gender” respectively, concentrate on the way in which the heroines of the three neo-Victorian texts explore their fluid gender identities in a subversive way, displaying a performative attitude both in theatrical and urban settings, thus demonstrating that gender is a social construct. In addition, chapter two is the first section that dissects examples of neo-Victorian fiction. It concentrates on the way in which the female protagonists of the three novels explore gender identities in the circus and the theatre with the help of the theories discussed in the previous chapters. Here, Pettersson applies Mulvey’s textual analysis to novels in relation to the power of the gaze (Pettersson 74, 99) in order to explore aspects such as cross-dressing in *Tipping the Velvet* and *Dan Leno*, highlighting how in those texts changing gender roles go beyond changing clothes (Pettersson 81-82), for the stage appears as both a means of evasion and social protest (89).

This connects with chapter three, which extends the performative acts of the protagonists to other parts of London, raising questions of gender at moments in which the protagonists are not in the theatre, but still performing in a subversive way. For instance, Pettersson contemplates the possibility that in *Nights at the Circus*, the main character, Fevvers, never steps out of her persona, holding control of the situation thanks to her performance. At the same time, this continuation of her persona offstage makes her interlocutor doubt about her gender (94-95), while she reverts the Victorian ideal of woman as the *Angel in the house* (95-96). Thus, in Butlerian terms, Pettersson displays Fevvers's identity as fluid, based on performance (96). Similarly, Pettersson finds moments of subversive off-stage performance in *Tipping the Velvet* and *Dan Leno*, where characters defy binary gender roles and patriarchy even in the courtroom (120). On the other hand, Pettersson interestingly also comments on how in *Tipping the Velvet* men are not the only ones who exercise power over women, but how other women can also subjugate those of their same sex (Pettersson 105).

Finally, chapter four, entitled “ Neo-Victorian Novels as Textual Performance” takes performativity one step further by applying the concept to the neo-Victorian novel itself, blending the meanings of genre and gender, for, like the protagonists of the works analysed, neo-Victorian fiction mixes fact and fiction to create a hybrid (Pettersson 125) while subverting literary conventions. This is so to such an extent that the structure of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, which, unlike that of Carter's and Waters's stories, is not triangular, is still uniquely approached by Pettersson in terms of a theatrical structure through the association of the five stages of development experienced by the protagonist over the course of the novel with Freytag's Pyramid (Pettersson 137-143). Additionally, relying on Sarah Gamble's idea that neo-Victorianism is “a performative mode in itself” (Pettersson, 123), Pettersson also draws a parallel between neo-Victorianism's capacity to turn readers into other spectators who observe the imitated past and learn about the characteristics of Victorian entertainment while receiving comments on contemporary culture. Therefore, she establishes a powerful connection between the plots of stage novels, the whole of neo-Victorian literature, and gender performance, which, according to

Judith Butler, is “a stylized repetition of acts” (Pettersson 125), which resembles neo-Victorianism because it:

possesses a carnivalesque characteristic which is based on the suspension of Victorian social norms, articulation of taboos and rewriting of the established “truth” “[...]” In recycling the nineteenth century and being a double act of recollection, the neo-Victorian genre becomes a *stylized repetition* of the Victorian period and of a literary past (Pettersson 126, emphasis added)

As the concluding section of *Gender Performance and Spatial Negotiation in the Neo-Victorian Novel* implies, Pettersson’s work meets the goal of making readers aware of the important position that revising the past holds in contemporary society and the richness that neo-Victorian novels can enclose. Undoubtedly, the complex way in which gender and space are negotiated in contemporary fiction set in the late Victorian period is shown in these three neo-Victorian novels. It is particularly embodied by their three main female-performer characters, and Pettersson skilfully unveils it. Additionally, she is able to prove that neo-Victorian fiction offers a complex and fluid view, inherited from postmodernity, of gender as well as of space. For this purpose, Pettersson acknowledges Judith Butler’s influence and uses the idea underlying the works of Schiller and Heilmann and Llewelyn that neo-Victorianism entails a constant dialogue between past and present, inviting readers to reflect upon their time, the true meaning of gender, and the nature of fiction.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the three authors chosen by Pettersson have combined their fiction writing with academicism. Therefore, they are probably fully conscious of the complex scope of their texts. This, and the short length of her study makes us wonder if less metafictional, and, more specifically, postmillennial exponents of the neo-Victorian phenomenon could also be studied from a similar perspective, for the development of her arguments seems to indicate that these concerns could appear in other similar pieces of literature. Consequently, this particular volume could serve to open the way for further investigation on the field of neo-

Victorianism. However, the study's very brevity, the nature of the novels studied, Pettersson's straightforward style, and her use of a mosaic of critical sources result in a piece of research not only interesting for those seeking new perspectives on contemporary historical fiction, but also for those who wish to be initiated in neo-Victorianism, since it provides a textual analysis that offers an overall view of a whole literary subgenre alongside a well-structured account of the history of Victorian performance and clear summaries of landmarks in gender and spatial theories—from Judith Butler to Paulina Palmer, from Walter Benjamin to Julian Wolfreys—, conjugating critical rigour with an innovative approach.

NOTES

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