

**The Perks and Pitfalls of Parody:
Review of Claire Nally's *Steampunk:
Gender, Sub-Culture and the Neo-Victorian***

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Claire Nally, *Steampunk: Gender, Sub-Culture and the Neo-Victorian*

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Claire Nally's *Steampunk: Gender, Sub-Culture, and the Neo-Victorian* is the first full-length study to consider steampunk through a lens of neo-Victorian critique. A neo-Victorian perspective on steampunk has of course been well established in and through this journal since Rebecca Onion's 2008 article in its inaugural issue, a 2010 special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* dedicated to the subject and guest edited by Rachel Bowser and Brian Croxall, and several subsequent articles (see, e.g., Montz 2011, Ferguson 2011, Danahay 2016a and 2016b, Pho 2019). Three anthologies have further interrogated a wide range of aspects in steampunk's imaginative fiction and subculture, often focused on its creative re-use of technology and subcultural politics, but also including colonial frontiers, urbanism, gender and femininity, race and disability, consumerism, and identity (see Taddeo and Miller 2013, Brummett 2014, Bowser and Croxall 2016). James Carrott and Brian Johnson's non-fiction *Vintage Tomorrows* (2013) and concomitant documentary (2015, Samuel Goldwyn Films) have explored and documented steampunk subculture in the US, and Brandy Schillace's *Clockwork Futures* (2017) illustrates the history of the technology integral to the steampunk imagination. Meanwhile Roger Whitson's *Steampunk and Nineteenth-Century Digital Humanities* (2016) is dedicated to steampunk's material culture in the context of digital humanities. In its effort to examine a movement that spans across media

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(fiction, music, visual art and sculpture, DIY practise, cosplay, etc.) and continents, steampunk research is as diverse as the subculture itself, so that a full-length study such as Nally's is a welcome contribution.

In her own words, Nally's study represents "a concerted attempt to engage with the issue of gender representation in the steampunk subculture" (p. 4), contributing to ongoing debates within neo-Victorian studies, where gender has continuously and prominently encoded neo-Victorianism's engagement with and re-signification of the traumas and legacies of the Victorian age, and issues of social justice. Nally's work relies on and intersects productively with such neo-Victorian concerns, while also delving into the rich and unexplored depths of steampunk textual and visual practise, where the neo-Victorian approach to the past is infused with anachronistic play and retro-speculation. One of the strengths of this study is certainly Nally's focus on cross-media material, ranging from the publication *Steampunk Magazine* (2007-2013) across music, visual art and photography, and neo-burlesque performance, to graphic novels and prose fiction, particularly the genre of romance. In so doing, Nally shines a light on material that has not yet been discussed in this way, but which represents the wide spectrum of steampunk's manifestations. She contextualises these different media convincingly by illustrating how steampunk is stratified between counterculture and commercialisation. Moreover, by frequently drawing on gothic subculture as a parallel, Nally highlights the previously under-researched connections between gothic and steampunk, opening a promising avenue for future critical enquiry.

From the beginning, Nally situates her analysis within the well-established framework of neo-Victorianism's relationship with Margaret Thatcher's notorious 'Victorian Values', but by considering the legacy of neoliberal ideologies in the age of Brexit at various points in the monograph, Nally also contributes innovative and necessary new impulses towards a discussion of neo-Victorianism in the present cultural moment, querying to what extent and in which way steampunk may perform resistance to such conservative nostalgia. While Nally takes into account that steampunk is a global phenomenon rooted in fiction emerging out of 1980s California, her perspective is focused on the United Kingdom and its cultural context. This certainly strengthens the focus and resonance of her analysis, but it also made me wonder to what degree an Anglocentric neo-Victorian lens might impose artificial limitations on our understanding of a

global phenomenon such as steampunk. Nally's examples are chosen well for her reading in a British context, but does that mean we need separate studies about the significant amount of steampunk that is produced in other parts of the world?

Drawing on an appropriate variety of interdisciplinary approaches, Nally creates a flexible theoretical and methodological framework designed effectively to account for steampunk's unruly diversity, while also accommodating her focus on neo-Victorian readings of gender. Another strength of Nally's study is that her discussion of gender extends in equal measure to masculinity and femininity, as well as, in the last chapter, queer identities. Neo-historical metafiction has largely understood itself as being able to address a perceived systemic historical inequality where gender is concerned, and neo-Victorian criticism, like gender studies at large, tends to gravitate towards feminist analysis and queer identities, because that is where inequality is focused. Even though traditional masculinity is also increasingly discussed, it is notable and illuminating that Nally discusses masculinity and femininity in tandem.

Her first chapter considers steampunk non-fiction, zine culture, and activism in *Steampunk Magazine*, an integral mouthpiece for the subculture's political aims, which has frequently been cited as a source in steampunk scholarship, but rarely been analysed as a publication in itself. She examines the publication's role in creating an "imagined community" (p. 34), which aligns itself with the underdogs and activists of the Victorian age as a means of countercultural resistance "to mainstream values" (p. 32). Nally examines *Steampunk Magazine* in light of zine culture and counterculture activism, as well as outlining how feminist, intersectional activist Miriam Roček draws on the historical Emma Goldman to voice feminist concerns of both the past and present in dialogue with one another, compellingly illustrating the historical context that informs such steampunk creations. So too in her discussion of the steampunk band The Men Who Will Not Be Blamed For Nothing, which focuses on how their celebration of marginalised voices and deviant Victorian and steampunk women may criticise gender stereotypes. Nally here alludes to ongoing debates in neo-Victorian studies about sensationalism and voyeurism, and also calls up the recent #MeToo movement to provide a nuanced argument. She concludes her chapter with a close reading of The Men Who Will Not Be Blamed For Nothing's songs about the Victorian murderess Mary Ann Cotton and baby

farmer Amelia Dyer, also convicted of infanticide, against the backdrop of their respective historical contexts, illustrating how the band “examine a horrific, dystopian past and project these experiences as a warning to the present” (p. 70). In this chapter, Nally outlines how steampunk “can be inflected with a subversive agenda” and “seek[s] to articulate a political attitude” by reflecting on “the history of marginalization and disenfranchisement” (p. 71), aspects of which continue into the present.

Chapter Two focuses on how Victorian jingoistic masculinity is parodied in the illustrations of Doctor Geof and Nick Simpson, and how it reflects “upon the intersection of gender, history, representation, and steampunk” (p. 83). Nally examines the role of humour, irony, and absurdity in creating steampunk parodies of Victorian gender roles, aware that such irony must remain readable to a contemporary audience. Doctor Geof’s art succinctly exemplifies this trend, especially in its parodic transposition of historical military propaganda and jingoism to the Victorian ritual of taking tea. Nally’s close reading against the historical backdrop of ideals of military masculinities between new imperialism and the First World War provides a productive analysis of elements that are integral to the steampunk mode but not always easy to analyse, namely irony and parody, while also examining the legacy of Victorian gender ideals in the present, especially in the context of Brexit, which Doctor Geof lampoons with his ‘Tea Referendum’. Here, the visual language of propaganda is redirected towards tea drinking, and while tea is itself also symbolic of colonial practise, its association with elaborate ceremony and manners help render the illustration’s boisterous tone absurd.

Nally also suggests that Doctor Geof’s art, though produced from a male perspective, successfully (rather than maliciously) caricatures the nineteenth-century ‘weaker sex’ by “magnifying and ridiculing myths of femininity” (p. 110). She then examines Nick Simpson’s photography of an imagined steampunk alter ego against the “heroic masculinity” (p. 116) of the Crimean War, especially the Charge of the Light Brigade and the way it configured nobility, courage, and failure. Lastly, the second chapter interrogates steampunk afterlives of the inventor and explorer and gendered notions about science. Outlining how Victorian masculinities are prodded and parodied “through bathos, incongruous humour, carnivalesque excess and irony”, Nally claims that steampunk representations of gender may reflect “upon the ways in which our contemporary moment can rethink these

stereotypes” (p. 130). In spite of her detailed and convincing reading, however, I also wonder how and where exactly this jovial self-parody offers impulses to imagine alternatives to current hyper or toxic masculinities dominating the public realm. The material discussed here seems largely content with identifying jingoistic stereotypes and offering them up as absurdities, and while that is certainly how steampunk humour largely works, additional impulses would be needed in order to really rethink these gender ideas. That such endeavours may be fraught with ambiguity and the risk of implication or even involuntary complicity in the very discourses one seeks to dismantle is illustrated in the following chapter.

Here, Nally turns towards the performer Emilie Autumn and the complex ways in which the latter’s neo-burlesque performance attempts to challenge stereotypes about gender, sexuality, and mental illness through a neo-Victorian steampunk aesthetic in potentially problematic ways considering the “sexualized, sensational, or exhibitionist manner” in which she does so (p. 141). Autumn has long been regarded as a gothic performer who has been embraced by the steampunk community, and so Nally is right to claim that she “is also a useful figure to reflect upon the ways in which steampunk has intersected with other subcultures and movements, such as goth and Neo-Victorianism, neo-cabaret and burlesque” (p. 141). Nally gives an overview of how Autumn’s work draws on and intersects with gothic texts and Victorian ideas of madness and gender and reflects on how second-wave feminist critics have linked madness and gendered oppression. She also considers the archetype of the (mad) scientist in Victorian and steampunk fiction and as an agent of patriarchal control in the asylum, allied to “confinement, surveillance, and pathologization” (p. 153). Through a productive analysis of Autumn’s staged rebellion against these discourses, Nally shows how the performer’s usage of spectacle and the aesthetics of the freak show also implicate her in re-iterating the same harmful stereotypes: there “is a danger here of slipping into some fairly common tropes of femininity, infantilization and madness without any real sense of irony” (p. 154). Such a reading is in line with and expands on Eckart Voigt’s article on Autumn (see Voigts 2013), for example by outlining the ambiguity and risks involved in Autumn’s use of a wheelchair to visualise mental illness, a choice with disablist connotations. According to Nally, though informed by personal experience, rebellion, and sympathy, the use Autumn’s performance makes of “voyeurism in relation to the abject,

monstrous visions of femininity onstage” (p. 166) undermines its anti-establishment project, by becoming complicit in the repetition and perpetuation of Victorian discourses linking femininity, deviance, and madness.

Chapter Four is concerned with the neo-Victorian graphic novel as yet another form of steampunk output, specifically Brian Talbot’s *Grandville* (2009-2017) and Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-present). Nally uses Linda Hutcheon’s notion of postmodern intertextuality and ironic nostalgia as a theoretical framework through which to examine how steampunk mobilises a self-aware, meta-textual, neo-Victorian collage in order to create new meanings. She illustrates how *Grandville* draws on a fin-de-siècle aesthetic to create a steampunk Paris, while also using anthropomorphism (the main characters in the graphic novels are all humanised animals) in order to complicate “simple nostalgic reflection” (p. 180). Most importantly, the graphic novel also draws on Victorian and Edwardian xenophobic rhetoric such as the ‘Yellow Peril’ in order to satirise and critique post-9/11 rhetoric, Islamophobia, and the War on Terror. Again, Nally skilfully connects the historical background through steampunk to contemporary contexts, and in so doing shows how steampunk’s counter-factual remix and defamiliarisation may re-use the neo-Victorian mode to speak to the present.

She contextualises the graphic novel’s hero LeBrock as a detective figure in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes, “a rational and authoritative individual” (p. 189), and emphasises his physical strength and ready use of violence, which seem modern additions to the male hero. However, Nally might have better substantiated her claim that LeBrock’s stereotypical masculinity is “undercut by Talbot’s characterisation”, namely the fact that he is represented as a badger, which configures him as tenacious and loyal, though simultaneously rendered vulnerable and “disenfranchised by his working-class heritage” (p. 193). The fact that LeBrock is also emotionally distant and that other characters in the story seem to parody the machismo of “lad culture” (p. 194) rather conjure up a type of masculinity painfully common in contemporary popular media and hence may only be semi-ironic.

Nally then reflects on gender and technology as a preamble for discussing femininity, the New Woman, and Mina Harker in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. She cites Harker’s leadership, education, and

independence as markers of the New Woman, as well as reading her aggressive sexual behaviour as evidence for Harker's renegotiation of gender relations, especially with an elderly and emasculated version of Rider Haggard's imperial masculinist hero, Allan Quatermain. Similarly, Nally interprets Harker's struggles with patriarchal structures as "represent[ing] the ways in which women are silenced or otherwise devalued" (p. 204), noting how the graphically narrated psychological rape of the character is designed to "address the toxic masculinity which we might more obviously associate with twenty-first century discourses around rape culture" (p. 203). While I agree with Nally that the "value of steampunk narrative [...] is that women's agency is written back into the history, albeit fantastically and retrospectively" (p. 203), Harker strikes me as a highly ambivalent and potentially flawed example of female empowerment. For one, Harker's aggressive 'seduction' of Quatermain, which Nally outlines here – "She then proceeds to undress in front of the bewildered older man [...] whilst he feebly protests [...] and in a graphic representation of their sexual encounter, Mina climbs on top of the aged Quatermain" (pp. 200-201) – suggests that consent is beneath the Strong Female Character, which is problematic. Moreover, the fact that Harker, whose assertiveness and independence threaten masculine identities (as Nally identifies) is continually under threat from that same toxic masculinity, render her portrayal highly ambiguous, especially because patriarchal revenge or punishment for her transgression is then narrated in a detailed, graphic, and "highly sexualized" (p. 203) manner. Not only does such a portrayal use trauma to undermine her perceived defiance of patriarchy, but the voyeuristic narration also makes readers complicit in much the same way as Emilie Autumn's performance does. It is not entirely clear how Nally judges these ambiguities. While she convincingly argues that ironic nostalgia creates the "capacity to interrogate representations of gender, technology, and race", "collapses the notion of progress (from a period of inequality and injustice to our enlightened contemporary moment)" and "holds an uncomfortable mirror up to some of our own racial and sexual prejudices" (p. 208), the examples presented in this chapter warrant more nuanced discussion.

This is also true for the last chapter, in which Nally turns towards steampunk romance fiction in order to show how that genre can lapse back into conservative and heteronormative portrayals of gender "despite the

visibility and ostensibly positive message of the fiction under discussion” (p. 217). The genre of romance is certainly not known for its radical challenge to gender stereotypes, and Nally’s reading of Kate McAlister’s *Steamed* (2010) illustrates how “the fantasy space of the romance novel”, while offering women a “sexual outlet”, may also produce nothing much more than “a comfortable nostalgia” (p. 218). She strengthens this argument by using post-feminist theory, “which seeks to articulate choice and lifestyle as part of an emancipating agenda, whilst at the same time paradoxically presenting some very conservative visions of what it is to be a woman” (p. 217). Given that Nally claims that the romance heroine’s “radical potential is often foreclosed by the recourse to heteronormativity and ultimately conventions of femininity” (p. 222), it would have been helpful had she defined her notion of “conservative”. Is femininity as such considered conservative, and are love and marriage included in Nally’s idea of lifestyle choices? Since feminist and post-feminist media and theory have become highly complex in recent decades, these positions were not immediately clear to me.

My own experience with fourth-wave feminism might also explain my surprise at Nally’s reading of Gail Carriger’s *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-2012). Nally certainly identifies flaws in this frivolous, Wodehousian supernatural series, such as the male hero being linked to animalistic violence (Lord Maccon is a werewolf), or the half-Italian heroine Alexia Tarabotti being presented as a “racialized other” (p. 230). However, Nally’s reading is geared towards showing that Alexia’s perceived empowerment remains ultimately illusory, because she marries and conforms to a traditional role of “domesticity and femininity”, doing “very little to challenge the status quo” (p. 227). Such a reading does not account for the fact that, throughout the series, Alexia is also an agent of the crown, who travels independently across Europe, at one time as an outcast and ‘fallen woman’, or that she is shown saving London from a destructive mechanical octopus only shortly before giving birth to the couple’s child. While Alexia, like many real Victorian women, must often articulate her position in relation to traditional gender norms (cf. Montz 2011), she also repeatedly and readily defies them where they do not suit her purpose, for example by fainting comically to evade unwanted questions or using her fortified parasol to defend herself. In so doing, Alexia also parodies gender conventions, at least to the same extent as does Doctor Geof’s art.

Moreover, Nally's claim that Carriger constructs a heteronormative status quo not only makes demands on the series, which none of the other materials discussed in this study would be able to meet, but it also fails to take into account that Alexia is coded as bisexual. This means that while her marriage to Lord Maccon may appear to be heteronormative, it cannot be because the heroine is not exclusively heterosexual.

Nally does not comment on the fact that Lord Maccon, with his animalistic and gruff features, is also presented as a loyal and loving husband who considers his wife to be his equal. This might simply have been beyond the scope of the study, considering that Nally foregrounds queer identities in the remainder of this chapter. She productively analyses the 'deviant' gender identities of the cross-dressing lesbian Madame Lefoux and the gay, effeminate vampire Lord Akeldama in the context of fin-de-siècle culture, citing Havelock Ellis, Radclyffe Hall and Oscar Wilde's dandyism to provide context for how these steampunk queer identities are encoded in the steampunk text. However, in concluding that this serves to render queer identities "one-dimensional" (p. 234) and legible against a conventional, heteronormative status quo, Nally ironically overlooks the many other, less visibly coded queer identities in Carriger's series, such as Lefoux' lover Angelique, a feminine lesbian, or Professor Lyall, the unassuming professor-type who passes as straight for a long time, but is later revealed to be gay. Together with Biffy and the other gay dandy drones, Alessandro Tarabotti, the bisexual adventurer, and Alexia herself, these characters provide a range of complex queer identities, which decidedly undermine a heteronormative status quo in different ways. By representing a spectrum of queer identities less legible within a Victorian gender discourse about 'invert' lesbians and effeminate dandies, Carriger's fiction, I would argue, challenges rather than reiterates them. This may further be illustrated by taking into account Carriger's adjacent publications, set in the same steampunk universe: in the series surrounding Alexia's daughter (*The Custard Protocol* series, 2015-2019), we find in Primrose and Madame Sekhmet two lesbian women who are coded as traditionally feminine, and in Anitra a trans-woman who passes as feminine. Carriger further challenges the heteronormative conventions of the romance genre by publishing two tie-in novellas that focus, respectively, on Lefoux' lesbian romance (*Romancing the Inventor*, 2016), and Lyall and Biffy's gay romance (*Romancing the Werewolf*, 2017).

In this chapter, Nally provides a valuable and critical reflection on the romance genre and its post-feminist pitfalls, as well as skilfully outlining the Victorian background against which queer steampunk identities are drawn. However, while McAlister's novel affirms her reading, Carriger's works demand further study, perhaps particularly with regard to ironic nostalgia and parody, whose mechanisms Nally has so productively illustrated in previous chapters. Her conclusion that "steampunk fictions can be interpreted as both conservative and revolutionary in these contexts, subjecting the sexualized subject to visibility, but also stereotype and ultimately critical surveillance" (p. 241) is merited, but a discussion of gender and especially queer identities in Carriger's fiction must also account for its diversity of representation, especially considering that so much of other steampunk media stay silent on queerness.

Nally's study is an important and valuable contribution to the field of steampunk studies, as it expands and reflects on opportunities and dangers integral to the steampunk mode, while also providing a nuanced analysis of material which complements neo-Victorian gender studies in new and productive ways. It effectively contextualises steampunk against its Victorian intertexts and situates it in the overlapping contexts of neo-Victorianism, the current political and cultural moment, and gender criticism. What Nally's study also illustrates is that steampunk gender, caught up in neo-Victorian and post-feminist contexts, is fraught with complications and contradictions, mostly perhaps where femininity and the feminist project are at stake. Steampunk, with its aspect of counter-factual retro-speculation and remix, has the advantage of being able to reimagine gender in historically inaccurate ways and may also poke fun at stereotypes through irony and parody, but like neo-Victorianism and popular culture at large, it also seems to struggle to formulate alternatives without recourse to those same stereotypes. Especially regarding masculinity, there seems to be a lack of vocabulary with which to articulate critique beyond parody, whereas portrayals of women must stand up to three generations of feminist and post-feminist critique. For this reason, Nally's study, with its broad and nuanced overview of a variety of materials and subcultural practise, is an important contribution to the discussion of gender in neo-Victorian and steampunk scholarship: What are our stakes in the neo-historical and retro-speculative re-evaluation of Victorian gender, and how do our current

understandings of femininity, queerness, and perhaps especially masculinity inform or limit such endeavours?

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