The Servant Problem:
Review of Sarah Waters's and Laura Wade's *Tipping the Velvet*

Benjamin Poore
(University of York, England, UK)

Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, adapted by Laura Wade
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The recent stage adaptation of Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) by Laura Wade, directed by Lyndsey Turner, makes for a fascinating comparison with both the source text and the 2002 BBC television adaptation. The novel, the serial and the play are all, in their different ways, revealing of the period in which they were made. It is now eighteen years since the first publication of *Tipping the Velvet*: a lifetime in political terms (indeed, eighteen years is the same length as the successive Thatcher and Major administrations of Conservative rule in the UK, from 1979 to 1997 respectively). After considering some of the paradoxes of the theatrical adaptation of this story of performance and the stage, the second part of this review essay sets out to highlight these differences by focusing on the way the final third of the novel is adapted, and on what happens to one of the minor characters, Zena Blake.

Tipping the Velvet, as many readers of this journal will know, is the story of Whitstable oyster-girl Nancy Astley's sexual awakening as she falls for a music hall male impersonator, Kitty Butler, and graduates from being her dresser to her partner on and off stage. Betrayed by Kitty and their manager, Walter Bliss, Nancy runs away and has a series of adventures, picaresque, grim and poignant, before discovering true love in Bethnal Green with the socialist reformer Florence Banner. As a cultural text, however, *Tipping the Velvet* can be seen as one of a select breed of adaptations that, over time, has transferred into the medium that it is

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ostensibly about. A prime example of such a precursor is the musical *The Producers* (2005), which, having begun as a Mel Brooks film about a deliberately disastrous stage musical, was adapted into a stage musical about the disastrous stage musical (and thence a film adaptation of the musical).

Since *Tipping the Velvet*'s publication in 1998, Sarah Waters has become a high-profile author, of course. Whereas Heather Emmens notes that in media coverage of the BBC adaptation, Waters's name was effectively erased and Andrew Davies, the adaptor, repeatedly re-inscribed as the text's author (Emmens 2009: 137, 139), there is no hint of such erasure in the publicity for the play. The published script is credited to Waters, "adapted by Laura Wade", even though Wade now has a considerable profile herself, having written the play *Posh* (2010) which she then adapted into the film *The Riot Club* (2014). Waters, having moved away from Victorian settings into the 1940s for her most recent novels, has since co-written a stage play of her own, *The Frozen Scream* (2014).[1] *Fingersmith* (2002), Waters's third neo-Victorian novel, was also adapted for the stage at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015. So *Tipping the Velvet*, like *Fingersmith*, becomes a stage play a decade or more after it was adapted for television.[2]

Waters and Wade's *Tipping the Velvet* premiered in September 2015 at the Lyric Hammersmith, London, and transferred to the Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh the following month. It is worth stressing from the outset that Sally Messham, in her professional stage debut as Nancy Astley, carries the show extraordinarily well, whatever the peculiarities of the production, and whether or not she evokes the "slender, white-faced, unremarkable-looking girl" of Water's text (Waters 2000: 4). Indeed, Messham does not really have to, because she is both the subject of the narrative and also, at times, presenting the narrative, as the self-aware star of the show. From the start, she already possesses a vivid, wilful presence: a very different creature from the novel's Nancy before her awakening. Wade's adaptation uses a music hall frame, with the action mostly introduced, narrated, interrupted and accelerated by a music hall Chairman (played by David Cardy) who addresses the audience directly, and who at times draws their attention to the play's historical setting. For example, Diana Lethaby's Sapphist club is described as situated in

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> [a]n unassuming townhouse just up from Piccadilly, these days it's one of those sandwich shops – you've probably stopped there for a chicken-avocado and flat white – and back then just a small name-plate and a narrow door. (Waters and Wade 2015: 68)

The music, similarly, has one foot in the past and one foot in the present; there is a live band stationed at stalls level before the stage, and the musicians occasionally leave their instruments to play characters on the stage. Nancy sings both when performing in the music hall and as part of the story. The music is twentieth-century pop, often delivered as if by a music hall 'masher' of the 1890s: 'Kiss' by Prince (1986), 'Twentieth Century Boy' by T Rex (1973), 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' by Bonnie Tyler (1983); and the Stooges' 'I Wanna Be Your Dog' (1969) for the Diana Lethaby sequence, for example.[3] The effect is diverting, at times dizzying, and sometimes played for laughs: Nancy's desperate voyage through Smithfield Market is evoked by a chorus of pigs' carcasses singing Bronski Beat's 'Smalltown Boy' (1984). The Chairman also draws attention to his ability to speed up the narrative, to fast-forward to the good parts. His summation of the story so far at the beginning of the second act is a classic (neo-)Victorian patter sequence, and every time the stage directions say "*Clack!*" (the sound effect of his gavel), we know he's about to interrupt. "It's quicker than the bus, this", he remarks at one point, and later, "what's the point of having this (his gavel.) [*sic*] if we can't scoot forward a few hours" (Waters and Wade 2015: 104, 115).

Yet both the musical adaptations – the retrofitted cover versions – and the Chairman's *Clack!*, for me, indicated problems with the adaptation's framework that it attempted to address simply by being self-aware or knowing. As Peter Bailey has argued, music halls cultivated an attitude of knowingness in their audiences (Bailey 2003: 128, 132-133), so there is a performative justification for striking such attitudes. Nevertheless, the cultural gulf that the production was attempting to bridge seemed too wide. This was because, firstly, the difficulty with the music is that it wasn't a simple quid pro quo. The songs ranged from Screamin' Jay Hawkins's 'I Put A Spell On You' (1956) to Miley Cyrus's 'Wrecking Ball' (2013), covering roughly sixty years of popular music; Nancy's triumphant feminist speech at the socialist rally is built around Nancy Sinatra's 'These Boots

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Are Made For Walkin'' (1966). Such a range of material is well fitted to the task of providing reference points for a broad demographic range attending the theatres during the show's run. However, it does not correspond with the immediacy and faddishness of the late-Victorian music hall, where songs were written and performed for local communities and specific performers, character types, genres and subgenres, and if a song or routine became popular then it would quickly spawn parodies and imitations (Kift 1996: 45-53).[4] Without wishing to necessarily imply that the popular culture of the music hall was more rooted and authentic than the pop song in the age of mechanical reproduction, I would suggest that for much of the audience much of the time the modern songs are evoking eras and movements of which they have no first-hand experience; they are pre-mediated moments from cultural history. So while on one level it is a celebration of the power of music to bring audiences together across generations, on another level it points to what we have lost in a globalised digitised culture. The range of music evoked in the adaptation perhaps also indicates that popular music is no longer as culturally significant as it once was, when young people identified fiercely with particular musical tribes and styles (glam; rock and roll; garage rock). Everything can now be shuffled on and off like a period costume.

The second problem is with the Chairman constantly moving things on. It is as if the adaptation has set itself the task of striving to include every incident from the novel in the play. But this is completely unnecessary, not only because, as Thomas Leitch has argued, no matter how hard an adaptation tries, 'the book will always be better than any adaptation because it is always *better at being itself*' (Leitch 2007: 16, original emphasis), but also because the adaptation has already declared by its very format that it is a knockabout, irreverent music hall take on the story. So why make itself a slave to narrative incident, as if it is attempting to be completely faithful to the novel, and as if the whole effort of being so is utterly exhausting? In any case, as I will go on to argue, the actual omission of a narrative payoff for Zena Blake creates a quandary for the play. In addition, as Catherine Love has argued in an insightful review of the production, using a music hall frame limits the adaptation, because music hall "has only the one tone. That's the problem with music hall: it's designed as a vehicle for broad comedy and thigh-slapping entertainment. But emotional nuance? Not so much" (Love 2016: n.p.). Moreover, as Love observes, the Chairman is

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> two parts East End geezer, one part sleazy uncle. His telling of Nancy's Sapphic adventures is painfully patronising, enclosing everything on stage within the voracious male gaze […] why can't this female narrative, told by a female creative team, reject patriarchal frameworks entirely? (Love 2016: n.p.)

Hence, oddly, the Chairman makes it possible for the same male appropriation of the story to happen in 2015 as happened in the 2002 screen adaptation. There, in Heather Emmens's reading, Waters's text was appropriated by the tabloid press and by male broadsheet commentators alike, with Andrew Davies, the television adaptor, inscribed as the text's author, insisting in pre-publicity that "men are going to love it" (qtd. in Emmens 2009: 137).

Certainly, as Love also acknowledges, the Chairman is eventually put in his place. Nancy tears down the red curtain, destroys part of the stage, and wrestles the gavel out of his hand, taking control of the *Clack!* and dismissing the Chairman (Waters and Wade 2015: 124-125). But the fact that this anti-theatrical rampage still takes place *on a stage* suggests that we have not escaped the performative gaze that has been configured throughout as male; we are still in the world of representations. "Please don't make me go back on the stage", says Nancy to Florence, both of whom are still, already, on the stage (Waters and Wade 2015: 125). Furthermore, Love draws attention to the coyness of the show's ending: "Nancy wrestles back her story with just enough time to hide it away again, as the heavy velvet curtain falls on her and Flo's private happiness" (Love 2016: n.p.). If we combine this point with the way that sex between Kitty and Nancy is handled in the first act, a strange pattern starts to emerge. Nancy and Kitty have sex for the first time, according to the stage directions, "in the form of an acrobatic aerial skills routine. It's beautiful and tender but also taut and urgent" (Waters and Wade 2015: 39). In the Lyric Hammersmith production, this sequence was performed to Nick Cave's 'Into My Arms' (1997). Two audience members next to me reacted incredulously to this representation of sex, as if it was an arthouse cliché, an evasion, rather than a provocative performance (and indeed, Emma Rice and Tom Morris's adaptation of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* [2006], in the same

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venue nine years earlier, had included a rather more explicit display of aerial sexuality).[5] The strange pattern – coded metaphors for sexual activity, the discrete curtain descending on private bliss, the knowing double-entendres of the Chairman – seems to be less of a liberated take on Victorian mores, and more of a re-Victorianising of the frank description present in Waters's novel.

Nancy and Florence's happy ending is also achieved when Nancy rejects a repentant Kitty, who has come to try to rekindle the affair. In the play, this takes place after Nancy has saved the day by helping Ralph with his speech on "the Woman Question" (Waters and Wade 2015: 98),[6] at a rally at Conway Hall which follows a Socialist Solidarity March. In the novel, the event was a huge socialist rally that took place at Victoria Park, and Nancy re-encountered all her past lovers there: Kitty, Diana Lethaby, and Diana's former servant, Zena Blake. So, despite the Chairman's affectation of an exhaustively rendered narrative, considerable streamlining is undertaken with the plot of the source text for this adaptation. For example, as well as there being no explicit narrative closure with Diana and Zena's separate stories, in the stage version the baby Cyril is not the son of Florence's dead lover, Lilian, and there is no Mrs Milne the landlady, and her vulnerable daughter Gracie, for Nancy to dishonourably abandon in exchange for sexual servitude at Felicity Place with Diana. The problem for the representation of Zena, I want to argue, is that she is expelled from the story after serving her purpose in the 'Monsieur Dildo' cuckolding scene that ends Nancy's time with Diana, but such an expulsion sits uneasily in the stage play with Nancy's later adopted socialism and feminism. We know that Zena used to be in a reformatory before she entered Diana's service, and Zena tells Nancy in the play that she was "sent there on a charge of tampering and corrupting" (Waters and Wade 2015: 73), so her prospects on the street without a job and a character seem bleak indeed. Whereas in the novel and the television adaptation, Nancy and Zena initially set out together, with Zena abandoning Nancy in the lodging house that night, in the play the actor playing Zena, Sarah Vezmar, simply walked offstage and re-joined that actor-musicians. Admittedly, Zena could therefore be interpreted as providing the musical underpinning to Nancy's rousing 'These Boots Are Made For Walkin'' speech; but equally, her sudden disappearance and silencing as a character subtly undermines the content of

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Nancy's speech about a "better, fairer society" (Waters and Wade 2015: 117).

Perhaps anticipating, when writing the novel, such perceptions of Nancy's shallowness and exploitation of others in order to reach her socialist lesbian utopia (see Wood 2013: 312, 315; Koolen 2010: 390, 392), Waters appears to go out of her way in the source text to show us that Nancy is forgiven by Zena, and exonerated of the charge of robbing a vulnerable girl of her livelihood. When she sees Nancy at the festival, Zena is "plumper and handsomer" than she was before and is clearly enjoying her freedom to flirt with several girls at once without commitment – she disapproves of "romantic" girls, we learn (Waters 2000: 447, 449). These details seem to have been included to reassure the reader that Nancy did not irreversibly damage Zena, her sexual appetites, her life chances, or her ability to trust, as a result of the vengeful act of lovemaking that Nancy initiated at Felicity Place. We learn that Zena's plan to save enough money to emigrate to the colonies, which had been made impossible by her dismissal, has since been abandoned through choice (Waters 2000: 447). And Nancy has already been made to feel remorseful about her treatment of Zena by Florence's tone of moral disapproval when she related the story earlier: "What happened to *her*?" Florence asks, a question Nancy doesn't seem to have asked herself up to that point (Waters 2000: 431, original emphasis). Nancy and Zena shake hands and part as friends at the festival, although there is still the hint of a utilitarian motive in Nancy's remark, "Yes, well – you must at least come round some time and tell [Florence] you've forgiven me: she thinks me a regular brute, over you" (Waters 2000: 452).

Andrew Davies's TV adaptation uses slightly different tactics to attempt to dispel this 'servant problem'. At Felicity Place, Nancy and Zena quickly become confidants, and Zena mentions that Diana has had sexual contact with her: "I think she just wanted to make it clear, like. That she could do what she wanted with me," she says, to which Nancy replies sympathetically, "Oh yes, I can believe that alright". (Sax and Davies 2002: Part 2: 44:47; 45:54). Here, Nancy and Zena have an evident shared understanding of Diana's dominating tactics. In the scene where they are discovered *in flagrante*, the sexual act is rendered as flat and conventional as a saucy seaside postcard by Zena's *Carry On* film language – "Oh, Miss! What a thing to do!" (Sax and Davies 2002: Part 2: 55:30) – and the

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irruption of a brash pastiche music hall song, 'Human Nature' (2002), to end the episode.[7] When Part Three opens, Nancy is presented as rather the victim of the two; she recalls, in voiceover, thinking that night that "I had found a good pal in Zena Blake" (Sax and Davies 2002: Part 3: 3:34), and when she awakes to find Zena gone, the news is broken to her by a cackling crone, shot from a low angle to make the rude awakening all the more grotesque. Although towards the end of the final episode, Nancy gets to sing a valedictory music hall song, the spoken interlude of which begins, "I've had a funny sort of life…" (Sax and Davies 2002: Part 3: 53:23), Zena is not included in the flashback sequence that accompanies it. Despite this sudden exit from the story, the present-day viewer might draw a kind of metatextual comfort from the knowledge that Sally Hawkins, who played Zena, has gone on to have a very successful film and television career, including the role of Sue Trinder – the character presented as carrying out a fraud against a wealthy heiress – in the 2005 BBC adaptation of *Fingersmith*.

In contrast to the television adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*, both the novel and the play use Nancy's treatment of Zena to show how Diana's cruelty has rubbed off on her; trapped in her life of luxury, she has become bored and vicious. In the play, Zena is the victim of imperious and bullying behaviour after Nancy's attempt at friendly chat leads to her enquiry as to whether she really is Nan King, who used to appear in the halls with Kitty Butler (see Waters and Wade 2015: 72-76).[8] The result of the telescoping of scenes in the dramatic text is that Nancy and Zena's relationship is shot through with eroticised master-and-servant dynamics from their first extended conversation. Nancy's sudden harsh attitude towards Zena – "You want me to tell Mrs Lethaby you've been asking me questions?"; "These slippers haven't been warmed!" – is evidently a result of her feelings about Walter and Kitty, as the cutaway to Walter and Kitty's father-and-son musical hall act is inserted into the scene at Felicity Place (Waters and Wade 2015: 76; also see 74). Nancy's harshness is itself shown to be an arousing role to play, as when she tells Diana seconds later, "I want to fuck" (Waters and Wade 2015: 76), albeit one that stems from her ability to 'punch downwards'– to use the modern vernacular – at Zena.

This is also one of the points, for both novel and play, at which the narrative's embrace of social and sexual role-playing becomes most complex. Nancy's actual class status is much closer to Zena's than to Diana's; as Mandy Koolen comments on the novel, Nancy feels an affinity

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for Zena, because "she too is a class 'other' in this affluent space" (Koolen 2010: 388). And in some ways, as a former cross-dressing prostitute, Nancy might be considered lower than a reformatory girl, whose encounters did not, as far as we know, lead to money changing hands. Yet, in her new role at Felicity Place, Nancy is both a working-class curiosity – a "Whitstable Native" who thrills Diana's circle by being "exquisitely blunt!" (Waters and Wade 2015: 71, 72) – and a naughty boy from a well-to-do family, dressed in fine suits and told she will have no dinner and that she must go upstairs "until she is sorry" (Waters 2000: 316), when she breaks Diana's house rules (see Waters and Wade 2015: 81). Wade's dramaturgy insists upon the connection between Nancy the (albeit, sexually fulfilled) kept woman, and Kitty, sitting on Walter's knee in a sailor suit, pretending to be a little boy (see Waters and Wade 2015: 74). In other words, the play at this moment positions us in a maze of competing liberation narratives: are we supposed to be rooting for the birth of feminism, for the sexual revolution, or for the dictatorship of the proletariat? These social tensions and ambiguities come to a head in the play when, as in the novel, Diana at her fortieth birthday party demands to see if Zena had "frigged [her]self a cock" at the reformatory and Nancy is referred to as a servant, a label she indignantly denies (Waters and Wade 2015: 80, 81).

Zena's ejection from Felicity Place – and from the narrative of the play, but not the novel – is handled distinctly in each text. Given the more picaresque, freewheeling tone of the play, Wade perhaps felt it necessary to make Zena more cynical and less vulnerable than Waters does in the novel. While they drink champagne in the bedroom, Nancy and Zena mock Diana and her coterie. Zena complains about how many times she has had her "bum felt", and remarks of Diana, "She thinks she don't look a day over thirty, and yeah, her face is alright, but you take a look at her neck" (Waters and Wade 2015: 83). By contrast, Waters's Zena refers to "them wicked ladies" in a childlike way, and Waters's description of Zena undressed emphasises her thinness and the distinctive colouring of a domestic servant's skin: "a coarser red from her elbows to her fingertips, and palely white – almost bluish-white – on her torso, upper arms, and thighs" (Waters 2000: 320-321).

Wade's stage adaptation – by having Zena Blake transform, as it were, at the stroke of midnight, back into the actor-musician – seeks to fold Zena's experience back into the performing world. Not to worry, the

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production seems to be saying: it was only play-acting. In doing so, the adaptation avoids the awkward question about Nancy Astley's exceptionalism. The suggestion is that she is not bound by ordinary rules, because she can transform herself, unlike the lumpen proletarian Zena. Nancy has imagination and style and sass, and therefore (the implication goes) should not be held to the same moral standards as other people, and should be protected from the consequences of her actions. In the play, when Nancy finally finds Florence in Bethnal Green, she is egged on by the Chairman to tell a progressively more melodramatic lie – accompanied by snatches of modern-day power ballads – until Florence exclaims, "I can't bear it" and gives in, allowing her to stay (Waters and Wade 2015: 95). The audience is co-opted into this joint enterprise to exploit Florence's good nature, because without it, the show cannot go on.[9]

In the final section of this review essay, I want to think through the consequences of Nancy's individualism – her representative quality, in tension with her specialness – by returning to the three different endings in the novel, television serial and play. The novel's final sequence, as mentioned previously, takes place at the socialist rally in Victoria Park. Using the (perhaps slightly contrived) conceit that Kitty, Diana and Zena are all at the rally for their different reasons, Waters devises a situation where Nancy must choose, once and for all, whether to return to Kitty or to embrace her adopted family and community in Bethnal Green. The setting, with its tents, crowds, and competing attractions, is reminiscent, deliberately perhaps, of Victorian pleasure gardens, or even of John Bunyan's Vanity Fair from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where the outcome presents a measure of Nancy's progress towards a secular good life in rejecting the worldly models of her erstwhile lovers. As Cheryl A. Wilson has argued, in choosing Florence, "Nancy does not have to hide her feelings, as she did with Kitty, or live in a state of constant performance, as she did with Diana" (Wilson 2006: 302). Yet it is still important to note that the novel closes with "a muffled cheer, and a rising ripple of applause" from the speakers' tent (Waters 2000: 472), following Nancy and Florence's public kiss; as Wilson acknowledges, these are also "the sounds of the music hall" (Wilson 2006: 302), and it seems to me that Waters, with these final words, is admitting that Nancy is still engaging in a form of performance, albeit a more muted one. Indeed, as Koolen suggests, Nancy's relationship with Florence is built initially on deception; she lies and "seems to perform the

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role of political activist [but] not because she is committed to socialism" (Koolen 2010: 392).

In the television adaptation, the Workers' Rally and the public declaration of love on a park bench are substituted by a reprise of the music hall 'masher' routine. An impresario, Frobisher, persuades Nancy to return to the stage as Nan King, with star billing. Kitty visits her in rehearsal at the theatre and makes her offer to continue a clandestine relationship, and Nancy seems unsure whether to choose her or Florence. Nancy also helpfully points out to Ralph that "[t]he theatre's dark on Sundays – you could hold your meeting there", and so a Victoria Park rally of thousands becomes an indoor meeting of a few hundred (Sax and Davies 2002: Part 3: 46:38). In a reversal of the scene in the first episode where Kitty throws her rose to Nancy, at the end of her act Nancy has the choice to throw her rose to Kitty in the box or to Florence in the stalls, opting for the latter. The addition of a brief final scene where Nancy is about to introduce Florence to her family – and, it is at least implied, to come out as a lesbian – creates an anachronistic effect. In a way, more than the novel or the play, this also shifts the focus to the personal and the domestic. Socialism was, in this version, a useful tool to help Nancy find a lover and to find her authentic self, who is now empowered to reveal her sexual identity.

In Wade's stage adaptation, the action is, of course, actually taking place in a real theatre, but the denouement of what Wilson describes as the narrative's five-act drama (Wilson 2006: 303) is set not in a theatre or a park, but Conway Hall (Waters and Wade 2015: 98). In choosing each other, Nancy and Florence embrace a love that is "so real I can't think why I ever wanted anything else", but not only do they say this while still on the stage, they also disappear by means of the Chairman's gavel: "Nancy lifts the gavel and clacks it. Blackout" (Waters and Wade 2015: 125, 126). One interpretation of this closing move is that the essential structures have remained in place, but they just happen to be in women's hands. Feminism and capitalism work together; there is no revolution. The audience are not ejected from the theatre by the cast and crew, for example, and nor do Nancy and Florence choose to leave through the stalls, disappearing into the city and into 'ordinary' non-performative life, to name two possible alternatives that might have disrupted the structural expectations of theatre.

Tipping the Velvet's exploration of cross-dressing, role-play and queer sexuality seems tailor-made for analysis in terms of Judith Butler's

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theory of the performativity of gender, and various critics engage to some extent with this theoretical framework (see Wilson 2006; Koolen 2010; Wood 2013). However, my reading of the three endings of the novel, serial and play suggests that rather than being liberated by the performative potential of gender and sexuality, in all three texts Nancy remains trapped within the nexus of performance. In the novel, she forswears the stage only to be met, after she intervenes to save Ralph's speech, with talk of a possible lecture tour (Waters 2000: 460-461). In the screen adaptation, she is drawn back to the music hall like a moth to a flame, for reasons not unconnected to her lingering feelings for Kitty; only at the last moment does she decide to honour her relationship with Florence. The related question of whether Nancy will now continue her career on the music hall stage as a permanent rival to Kitty Butler, or whether she will instead break her new contract with Frobisher, is not answered by Davies. In the stage adaptation, as I have argued, the ending – as well as the prior visual rhetoric of aerial sex, patter songs, singalongs and saucy banter – traps Nancy and Florence within the theatrical frame even as they deny its validity.

Hence, I am not as optimistic as Wood about the message *Tipping the Velvet* sends about identity – at least, when these three versions are taken together – when she proposes that "Nan continually negates fixed, coherent identification, instead playfully negotiating a variety of (spatially) contingent identities" (Wood 2013: 312). Wood insists that Waters "refuses a representation of gender and sexuality as entirely mutable or purely individualistic"; Waters's idealised East End prioritises community and "a place of belonging alongside performativity" (Wood 2013: 312). By contrast, as we have seen, Koolen emphasises the lies that Nancy had to tell to gain entry to this community of trust (Koolen 2010: 392), and in Wade's adaptation, the audience is invited to enjoy the spectacle of Nancy ramping up the pathos in order to deceive Florence and obtain permission to stay. Waters herself has remarked, disarmingly, that in comparison to Angela Carter, "the politics in my novels are […] submerged, and poorly thought out, really" (Waters qtd. in Dennis 2008: 42). Reading against the grain of the story of *Tipping the Velvet*¸ then, I wonder if it is possible to see Nancy not only as reflective of the identity politics of the 1990s, but also of a form of individualism that became acceptable to the liberal left during the years of the New Labour ascendancy.

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In the novel, when Nancy has to convince Florence that she loves her and not Kitty, she remarks, "Oh! I feel like I've been repeating other people's speeches all my life. Now, when I want to make a speech of my own, I find I hardly know how" (Waters 2000: 471). So, just a few hundred words from the end of the novel, there is still some doubt over whether Nancy will be able to find a convincingly authentic voice with which to win Florence over. For all the talk of rallies, debates and a lecture tour, the novel makes it clear, Nancy has not become a socialist convert, and appears to have little interest in political theory; as Florence says, Nancy is being praised for simply repeating her speeches "like a dam' parrot!" (Waters 2000: 461). Looking and sounding the part come first, and, with luck – but after the novel's conclusion – Nancy will adopt the ideology of socialism, too.

If we place the novel in the context of the mid-to-late 1990s in which it was written and published, the labour movement in the UK had just emerged from a prolonged period in the political wilderness as a result of three successive general election defeats. When Tony Blair was elected leader of the Labour Party in 1994, he was hailed as a figure who could make Labour electable once more. Yet, from the outset, some expressed concerns that his slick performances at conferences, in parliament and on television lacked political authenticity. After Labour's first election victory, Norman Fairclough characterised Blair as "an accomplished showman, an actor" (Fairclough 2000: 8). He also highlighted the degree to which New Labour's ideology was effectively created by rhetoric rather than substance (Fairclough 2000: 3-4, 67-68, 157; see also Jones 1999: 31). Like the third part of Waters's novel, New Labour rhetoric promoted the warm, fuzzy ideals of "family" (Fairclough 2000: 42-3; Jones 1999: 22) and "community", interpreted very broadly to include non-traditional family structures and groupings that had not previously been regarded as communities (Poole 2007: 25-26). Also central to New Labour rhetoric were conceptions of individual responsibility adapted from Thatcherism, and the need for workers to be "flexible" and to "modernise" (Fairclough 2000: 16, 39-40). So Nancy, set against the background of the 1990s rather than the 1890s, stands revealed as, in part, New Labour's ideal citizen: mobile, unencumbered by a past or ideological baggage, self-reliant, able to work flexibly in a range of roles – and occasionally, inevitably – required to win at the expense of the less talented and qualified, like poor Zena. Yet Nancy

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is also revealed against this backdrop to be a version of Blair himself, a consummate performer who speaks the language of a "comrade" (Waters 2000: 472), but whose appeal is to sentiment rather than political ideology.

As I have suggested, Wade's adaptation partly succeeds in diluting this effect, because the cause Nancy extols alongside Ralph is feminism, rather than socialism, and of course she is the more accomplished of the two in reflecting women's concerns, goals and frustrations, because she has the lived experience of being one. Ironically, then, a story about a cross-dressing, role-playing, board-treading chameleon ends, in this production, on a note of gender essentialism. Nancy's biological sex conveniently acts as guarantor of her sincerity and authenticity in the Conway Hall speech, where Ralph's cannot. But perhaps, after all, it is Zena who has the last laugh in the theatre production. While Nancy and Florence are trapped on the stage, framed by language – whether it's the drop-down scroll with the lyrics to her feminist patter song, or by the Chairman's demands – the actor-musician playing Zena has long since achieved the trick of slipping off the stage and re-joining the band. She embodies neoliberalism's flexible worker, returning to the position of actor-musician, level with the stalls, in that liminal zone both inside and outside the performance.

Notes

1. The play is based partly on the works of C.C. Gilbert, rather than being connected to Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's 1856 play *The Frozen Deep*.
2. *Fingersmith*, directed by Aisling Walsh, was screened by the BBC in 2005.
3. This set of musical choices might even be the beginnings of a trend in neo-Victorian theatre for the foregrounding of anachronistic music – see, for example, the Bristol Old Vic's adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (2014) and its prominent use of 'Crazy' (2006) by Gnarls Barkley.
4. Furthermore, Dagmar Kift states that "[i]t was the characters and their songs with their references to their listeners' experiences and feelings, the catch-phrases, the *ad-lib* spoken commentary and patter between the verses (where performers sometimes stepped outside the character) and the commonly sung refrains which transformed shifting crowds into attentive audiences and created a particularly feeling of community" (Kift 1996: 52). Kift also notes that the music hall male impersonator routine, from which Kitty and Nancy make their livelihood, originated as a parody of the male *lions comiques*,

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"demasking the pretentiousness of the whole character" by means of a "counterfeit version" (Kift 1996: 51).

5. And indeed, the American edition of *Tipping the Velvet*, from which the references in this article are taken, features on its front cover two women perched on a swing, naked except for boots and striped tights.
6. In the novel, Ralph's speech is not specifically on the 'Woman Question', but on socialism more generally.
7. The end titles credit Andrew Davies as the lyricist, with Terry Davies as composer of the original songs based on the titles in Waters's novel.
8. In the novel, Zena recognises Nancy as Nan King, without having to be told, but she does not know about Kitty and Walter's new act. It then falls to Billy-boy, Nancy's old friend from the Britannia music hall, to explain that Kitty and Walter are now performing together (see Waters 2000: 286-289).
9. To the play's credit, despite the music hall's ironising frame, Florence is quite unflinching in her criticism of Nancy when she discovers the truth, not so much from a sense of personal hurt, but because inventing self-serving fictions is potentially harmful to real-life victims of such abuse (see Waters and Wade 2015: 103-104).

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