"In Which Parasols Prove Useful":
Neo-Victorian Rewriting of Victorian Materiality

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Abstract:
This article argues that Neo-Victorian and Steampunk literatures offer a new vision of Victorian materiality that depends not on the presumed oppression of the female form but rather on the usefulness and purpose of everyday items of dress. Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995) and Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-present) present heroines who manipulate the traditional understandings of controversial items such as parasols, veils, gloves, and crinolines to present Victorian women's fashions not as oppressive but rather as subversive and even transgressive of social paradigms.

Keywords: fashion, Steampunk, Neo-Victorian, dress, Gail Carriger, Neal Stephenson, Victorian, accessories.

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Neal Stephenson's 1995 novel *The Diamond Age; or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*, presents a neo-Victorian world in which the invention of the Matter Compiler, or M.C., allows for the easy production and accessibility of digitally-constructed material goods – clothing, medicine, even food. Much like the historical era on which it is based, this neo-Victorian world responds to the proliferation of machine-made items by fetishising the handmade; and, again like the Victorian era, only the rich and affluent can afford these desirable items. Paradoxically, in a de-naturalised world, items linked to the human body, because produced by embodied rather than mechanical agency, become markers of comparative greater self-worth and status, none more so than clothes which publicly signal the wearer's social standing. The siblings Harv and Nell, two working-class "Thete" children who exist on the periphery of society, examine a piece of fabric found in the washed-up trash on the beach. It is the first time either child has seen real fabric up close; both are more familiar with Nanobar, the nearly indestructible synthetic fabric easily available through the M.C. in a preset number of colors and styles. In contrast, the woven cloth, Harv discovers, is easily damaged and destroyed; as Harv begins "worrying at it with his toothpick, he teased something loose" (Stephenson 1995: 55). His

sister watches horrified as he pulls the "string" she believes is "coming out of it," but when Harv "gripped the end of the thread beneath his thumbnail and pulled", they discover that the fabric does not *have* threads, but in fact is *made* of threads entirely (Stephenson 1995: 55). Without a historical referent for handmade or pre-digital fabric, Harv is unable to fully comprehend the separate as the whole, seeing the fabric as nothing but "inhuman audacity" (Stephenson 1995: 55). For Harv, only a machine could conceive of something so simple and so complex all at once.

Like the fabric Harv and Nell dissect, neo-Victorian fiction, ultimately, "*is* threads. Threads going under and over each other" (Stephenson 1995: 55), every thread a piece of Victorian history and a contemporary understanding – or misunderstanding – of the Victorian era. Like Harv, we can only conceive of its "inhuman audacity"; we cannot see the fabric – that is, the everyday reality of the Victorian era – for the threads – namely the bits and pieces of materiality, the period's traces, with which we are inundated.

Yet the threads *are* there, weaving under and over each other, connecting politics to fashion, people to trends, corsets to reform, with each connection demonstrating the utilitarian as well as ideological nature of that very materiality. Regardless of its perceived (or sometimes misconceived) cultural purpose, items of clothing like the corset, for example, are symbolic both of gender politics – the threads connecting clothing to women and their socio-cultural functions – and of the historical evidence of daily life – the fabric of 'everydayness' which mundane dress like underwear, represents. Simultaneously forms of literature and an aesthetics, Steampunk and neo-Victorian literature determine to recreate the Victorian era, whether as straightforward historical fiction, historiographical metafiction, futuristic re-imagining – such as Stephenson's already mentioned award-winning novel – or reconstructions of the era anachronistically informed by contemporary social mores – as in the case of Gail Carriger's bestselling *Parasol Protectorate* series. Above all, both genres are rooted deeply in material culture, as the present-day rage for Victorian aesthetics depends heavily on tangible objects to 'world-build'.

In particular, these kinds of novels create the neo-Victorian world by re-imagining Victorian fashions and accoutrements, such as the parasol, the corset, gloves, and the veil – all material items that have at one point or another been demonised or fetishised in the Victorian and/or contemporary

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imagination and, indeed, in terms of prevailing aesthetic norms then and now. Both Stephenson and Carriger's novels offer visions of Victorian fashion that demonstrate its significant and healthy, one might even say *essential* afterlife. Their recreations of historical Victorian fashions, albeit with some subversive twists, show elements of nineteenth-century clothing and accessories as being indispensible items, necessary for Victorian *and* neo-Victorian women's self-constructions (and constructions by others), as well as contributing to a genuine understanding of the Victorian era itself. In this essay, I argue that when neo-Victorian literature refuses to assume mere aestheticism for its material objects – that is, refuses to employ them merely for frivolous stylistic period 'effect'– and instead repurposes significant fashionable items for technological usefulness and for the protection of female bodies, it presents nineteenth-century middle-class women's clothing as a marriage between form and function. This 'union', or perhaps 'threading' together emphasises fashion's everyday status, its symbolic power as cultural capital, and its historically subversive and transgressive, as much as restrictive and conventional, properties.

Understanding neo-Victorian literature's approach to materiality forces an audience to take for granted its irreverent yet earnest approach. Steffen Hantke argues that "[p]artly due to its close ties to science fiction, Steampunk focuses on technology as the crucial factor in its understanding and portrayal of Victorianism" (Hantke 1999: 247). The "steam" part of the name certainly supports this argument, as does Steampunk and other neo-Victorian literature's desire to rethink technology for societal and even moral advancement. But neo-Victorian's fascination with – indeed, its obsession with – the materiality of the Victorian era would argue that, if not absolutely equal with technology, fashion and its accoutrements are at least just as crucial for understanding Victorianism. The novels simply revel in the fashions. Even Rebecca Onion, who argues that "Steampunks seek less to recreate specific technologies of this time than to re-access what they see as the affective value of the material world of the nineteenth century", sees this material world rooted not in parlours and dress shops, milliners and haberdashers, but in the fetishising of "cogs, springs, sprockets, wheels, and hydraulic motion" (Onion 2008: 138-139). While textiles and materials are important aspects of the visualisation of these neo-Victorian subcultures – clothing and dress often offer the tangible aesthetic of the Steampunk movement, items to which people point and say this or that is Steampunk –

they are not usually regarded as equal to their technological counterparts. The focus on technology is what makes Steampunk *smart*; a focus on clothing would be what makes it *popular*. And, as in any good subculture with any decent-sized fanbase, what makes something popular is also what destroys its integrity, that is, its individuality and difference.

Over the past several years, critics have attempted to define Steampunk and neo-Victorianism, searching for the elusive singular definition for movements and literatures that resist singularity. In their introduction to the 2010 Steampunk special issue of this journal, Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall suggests that defining Steampunk remains "a predictable but difficult task"; moreover "one common element arguably shared by all steampunk texts, objects, or performances is the one on which [*Neo-Victorian Studies*] is predicated: the invocation of Victorianism". This "invocation" rings true particularly in what Bowser and Croxall argue are "stylized Victorian-era objects or costumes" (Boswer and Croxall 2010: 1). The Steampunk movement, while resisting singularity, defines itself through the literally recycled or else imitated materiality of the earlier era. Onion argues that the very addition of steam into advanced technology presents the "punk" side of Steampunk, what she reads as a "counterculture practice" (Onion 2008: 139). Yet the intent focus on corsets and bustles and other assumed feminine trappings of Victorian materiality suggests an allegiance *with* Victorian tropes, rejecting irreverence in favor of aestheticism. Corsets *are* sexy; bustles *are* beautiful. To deny the appeal of such fashionable and romanticised items to a twenty-first-century audience is to deny their appeal to their 'own' nineteenth-century one, because the Victorians, too, saw them as sexy and beautiful, as an encumbrance and as, quite simply, *clothes*.

An interest in fashion is often associated primarily with the feminine, which is thus often relegated to trivial or unimportant concerns. Yet Anne Hollander's *Seeing through Clothes* argues that we, in fact, spend so much of our time clothed that attire and not nudity is the 'natural' state of dress (Hollander 1993: 84).[1] To see clothing and material adornment as essential parts of culture, inescapably tied to the definition of that culture (and in turn defining culture), is to understand dress, particularly in conjunction with the Victorian era, as something inseparable from the men and women on whose bodies it is displayed. Bowser and Croxall note, "Paradoxically, while ornate surfaces litter our constructions of the Victorian period, figures of depth are most often attached to the literature of

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the period," and cite the realist novel and its developed characters as the critically agreed upon success of the era (Boswer and Croxall 2010: 24). It is my argument that the ornate surfaces are equally as important in the understanding of the period as to our construction of the period, seeing the development and meticulous detail of clothing within these novels as instrumental in character development. It is no accident, then, that with this obsession with dress and accessories, the 'things' of Victorian England, neo-Victorianism becomes defensive of its interest in these seemingly surface concerns, and attempts, with increasing originality, to demonstrate its interconnection with depth.

The Fashion System, Roland Barthes's semiotic study on the language used to describe women's clothing, offers a particularly useful argument about the interplay between image and text. Barthes argues of fashion magazines that

> two different garments are being dealt with here. The first is the one presented to me as photographed or drawn – it is image-clothing. The second is the same garment, but described, transformed into language […] this is a written garment. In principle these two garments refer to the same reality […] and yet they do not have the same structure, because they are not made of the same substances and because, consequently, these substances do not have the same relations with each other. (Barthes 1983: 3)

Barthes' argument about image-clothing versus written garment can be applied to historical fact and fictional recreations of Victorian women's clothing. The historical fact of the dress is the image-clothing; it existed, in time, and was visually recorded in photographs and dress patterns. Yet the written garment, that which is recreated for neo-Victorian literature, has been "transformed into language." While the principle is still the same – "these two garments refer to the same reality" – they no longer possess "the same structure", not least because they no longer convey the same meanings or serve identical (cultural, ideological, practical) purposes. The recreation, the written garment, exists separately from the historical everydayness of the image-clothing because it is, in reality, something altogether new. It contains over a century of assumptions about and reassessments of the

Victorian era. Ultimately, most of those beliefs and re-appraisals involve fashion's perceived oppression of Victorian women.

By their very nature, accessories are considered mostly useless. They are thought to provide decoration alone. But to look at what accessories do, to explore the threads that tie together the fabric of real life, as Harv and Nell do in *The Diamond Age*, is to see that they very much have meaning. The use of feminine accessories as tools is hardly unique to neo-Victorian literatures, as the Victorian themselves already adapted and reconstructed fashionable accoutrements into more accommodating or useful items. One need only recall Mr. Rochester asking Jane Eyre if she has "an umbrella that [he] could use as a stick" (Brontë 1999: 184), when she startles his horse on the lane, or how Fred uses part of an umbrella to fashion a play wedding ring in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.[2] Purses, deriving from the portable pockets attached to dresses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provide portable storage space for feminine necessities, which in neo-Victorian fiction may even include weapons or items that may be utilized as such. Shawls keep women warm in public and private spaces, as well as providing barriers against the intrusive male gaze, while shoes serve a steadying purpose, protecting feet from the unevenness of the ground. Even pretty ribbons keep hair away from the face and out of the eyes. Bonnets and hats shield the head from the elements and protect the face from extreme heat, wind, sun, or cold. The corset, so long eroticised in contemporary culture, had to work as foundational support for outer layers of clothing, and even cumbersome crinolines could be seen to have a practical function in, quite literally, creating more space for women to occupy. Parasols, of course, also protect the body from the sun, and the often-contentious veil protects a woman's face, much as do suncreams and sunglasses today. Arguably, it is this idea of 'protection' as it relates to actual and re-imagined Victorian women's bodies that neo-Victorian literatures attempt to dismantle and reconstruct.

Neo-Victorian literature takes the Victorian era and reconstructs it to make it compatible with the sensibilities of the twenty-first century by altering Victorian aesthetics and making the past move fashionably forward; women appear to be 'freed' from the traps and bindings of the Victorian era at the same time as they embrace its aesthetics and ideals. I deliberately use the term 'reconstruct' rather than 'deconstruct' to avoid confusion with deconstruction theory. Further, I argue that the goals of neo-Victorian

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novels and its fashions are not *de*constructive but rather *re*constructive, in so far as neo-Victorianism does not take material items apart merely to see how they work and to try to make them work better. Rather, neo-Victorianism takes material items apart with the intention of putting them back together again in some recognisable semblance of its original construction, albeit a repetition with variation. The inherent aesthetic is the same for both Steampunk textual and material objects; it is about recreating the past's materiality with a new purpose and for a new audience at the same time as recreating the Victorian period with an appreciation for its specificity and difference from today. Further, there is clear meaning and intent invested in this process, as neo-Victorianism's goals are often many, most prominent among them to make material and functional items beautiful and useful.

By presenting fashion as both useful and beautiful, as utilitarian and personally fulfilling, these novels reveal the importance of fashion to the very Victorian women on whom these women are based, however loosely. Both texts fall squarely the realm of science fiction, giving writers and readers the chance to re-imagine worlds as they were as well as how we might wish them to be or, in this case, to have been. These novels are successful at portraying the Victorians' past and their future, presenting a Janus-faced vision of the era. For though evidently informed by twentieth/twenty-first-century concerns such as class and gender-based equal rights, neither Stephenson nor Carriger offer post-feminist heroines who eschew the social expectations of their societies. Rather, Carriger's Alexia and Stephenson's Nell work *within* the ideological constraints of their eras, functioning within the established parameters in order to transgress and, in both cases, eventually subvert the social paradigm, as did their historical Victorian counterparts. In particular, Alexia and Nell work specifically with fashion and the accoutrements of feminine dress to offer a current understanding of Victorian women's fashion not as oppressively beautiful or frivolously ornamental but rather as beautiful *and* useful. When one sees the words "useful" and "beautiful" together, one might very likely think of William Morris's edict to his readers in *The Hopes and Fears for Art* (1919): "HAVE NOTHING IN YOUR HOUSES THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW TO BE USEFUL OR BELIEVE TO BE BEAUTIFUL" (Morris 2003: n.p.). While specifically referencing the Decorative Arts, those we keep in our houses rather than lavish on our persons, Morris's suggestion certainly applies to fashion as well. But neo-Victorian literatures take out

the "OR" and replace it with 'and', as the literatures revel in demonstrating exactly how fashion can be used for alternative purposes within the bounds of neo-Victorian societies.

Form and function, fashion and utilitarianism; neo-Victorian literatures see the subversive potential in Victorian women's fashion and, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, explore possibilities for agency and self-assertion inherent in clothing and its accessories. The first chapter of Carriger's novel *Soulless* (2009) entitled "In Which Parasols Prove Useful" offers two likely readings: firstly, one might assume that parasols are, in fact, not very useful at all, and secondly, when needed, they could become quite useful indeed. The opportunity for fashion and function in the form of a particularly useful parasol comes in that opening chapter. Carriger's heroine, Miss Alexia Tarabotti, has her evening interrupted by the appearance of a vampire who seeks to take advantage of her appearance "in a low-necked ball gown" (Carriger 2009: 1). When he attempts to bite her neck, her Victorian sensibilities are disturbed by his lack of manners, and she chastises him for trying to indulge in her blood without a proper introduction (Carriger 2009: 2). When the vampire has the audacity to fall into the treacle tart Miss Tarabotti was so looking forward to enjoying for dessert, she decides to employ her parasol, which she admits "was terribly tasteless for her to be carrying", especially "at an evening ball", though she "rarely went anywhere without it. It was a style entirely of her own devising: a black frilly confection with purple satin pansies sewn about, brass hardware, and buckshot in its silver tip" (Carriger 2009: 3).

Carriger's novel privileges ingenuity; its Victorian heroine takes something expected and makes it, through the addition of technology, hardware, and the inevitable Steampunk brass, something unexpected and necessary. Its design, too, is particularly intriguing. Alexia makes no attempt to disguise either the femininity of the parasol or its more utilitarian purpose. The mere fact that she is carrying a parasol at an evening event, when it would not be needed, demonstrates that she has turned it into something quite necessary; indeed, she even expects that she might have to protect her person. Already, it is fulfilling its purpose by proving to be "Useful". Described as a "black frilly confection", the parasol is decorated with "purple satin pansies", an entirely unnecessary addition to what might otherwise be simply a tool or weapon. Yet Alexia carries it to the ball despite its "terribly tasteless" presence, makes visible the brass hardware

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augmenting the parasol, and utilises fully the buckshot located in its tip,
which she uses to repel the vampire's attack. Noting that "[t]he buckshot
gave the brass parasol just enough heft to make a deliciously satisfying
thunk", Alexia follows the defensive maneuver with an admonition for the
vampire to mind his manners (Carriger 2009: 3). When she has subdued the
would-be assailant with several whacks in delicate and inopportune places,
she "pull[s] a long wooden hair stick out of her elaborate coiffure. Blushing
at her own temerity, she rip[s] open his shirtfront, which was cheap and
overly starched, and poke[s] at his chest, right over the heart" (Carriger
2009: 3-4). This hair stick, which she prefers to think of as a "hair *stake*"
(Carriger 2009: 4, original emphasis), is another useful accessory, as it ends
the vampire's life in the traditional manner of an impalement through the
heart.

Carriger's novels have proven to be enormously popular, not only
among neo-Victorian enthusiasts but also among the more general reading
public, as her books were listed on the *New York Times* Bestseller list not
once but twice in 2010. Her series' success is due in part to her novels
offering contemporary readers what they want to see: Alexia Tarabotti,
damsel, saving *herself* from distress. Somewhat later in the novel, in fact, a
friend refers to Alexia's actions in fashion terminology, claiming that Alexia
had "'parasoled' a man" (Carriger 2009: 42), thus turning this seemingly
useful feminine article into an active verb, and a violent one at that. Hantke
argues that "what makes the Victorian past so fascinating is its unique
historical ability to reflect the present moment" (Hantke 1999: 245). The
problems of today are the problems of yesterday, and thus reflected in the
fascination with and rewriting of the Victorian past. Carriger's rewriting of
the Victorian past presents a woman who does not reject fashion in favour
of feminism but in fact quite enjoys both; Miss Tarabotti goes to great
lengths to put forward her best fashionable leg without sacrificing her own
progressive, even transgressive desires.

It is this word 'trappings' that invites examination, considering how
fashion has become something women often are told they must fear and
reject in order to be feminists. Many neo-Victorian literatures *reject*
Victorian fashion in favor of alternative, anachronistic dress; their female
characters wear trousers, forgo corsets, and cut off their hair despite the
comparatively few historical precedents for such events. In her resonantly
titled article 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the

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Victorian Woman', for example, Helene E. Roberts argues that "[t]he clothing of the Victorian woman clearly projected the message of a willingness to conform to the submissive-masochistic pattern, but dress also helped mold female behavior to the role of the 'exquisite slave'" (Roberts 1977: 557). While nineteenth-century women's dress could be problematic, as already noted, so too is the assumption that *clothing* and *dress* were responsible for shaping the social and political problems women encountered. This conjecture expresses an attitude of disdain for women's fashion which, as critics such as Sharon Marcus have discussed, was often worn by women to garner attention from and appreciation of other women as much as men (see Marcus 2003 and 2007). Therefore, to make the argument that women's clothing 'enslaved' women implicitly contends that women were being enslaved by other women and not, as articles such as Roberts's seem to suggest, by the patriarchal political structure of Victorian England.

Even Carriger, for example, offers characters, such as Frenchwoman Madame Lefoux, who wear men's trousers and hats. The Bloomer costume was radically unpopular and American at that, while the corset was a necessary if problematic item of underclothing, and although short hair experienced a brief, sympathetic trend during the French Revolution, it grew long again shortly thereafter. Moreover it was often associated with visible punishment for transgression and social exclusion, as in the case of female prisoners and asylum inmates. Recent neo-Victorian writers, especially those writing Steampunk literature, seem to find it difficult to conceive of feminist action while maintaining a traditionally, even stereotypically feminine appearance, despite the wealth of historical evidence to the contrary. Linda M. Scott's *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*, takes a casual yet earnest approach to answering the question as to whether fashion must always exist separately from feminism, and, perhaps more importantly, why feminists *en masse* insist that the 'feminine' is anti-feminist (Scott 2005). Monumental events in women's history such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882), the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1886) and most especially the universal vote for women in England (1928), were fought for by women who wore – quite fashionably, in fact – the very 'trappings' so shunned by contemporary Steampunk writers. Yet again and again, the common belief that women were 'trapped' by their fashions and accessories appears in several discussions about the

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materiality of the nineteenth century, and is often carried through to neo-Victorian fiction and Steampunk costume/roleplay in particular.

Dress has symbolic value as well as aesthetic and practical purposes. Likely the longest-lived article of women's clothing, dating back thousands of years in various cultures across the globe, the veil, for instance, is most often associated with the confinement, exclusion, or protection of women in certain religions and cultures. Ilya Parkins sees the veil as both "a material garment and a discursive construct" (Parkins 2007/2008: 77), while Bahar Davary identifies a variety of cultural beliefs about veiling: it protects women from prying male eyes in public, it allows women in some cultures to move freely in the city and on the streets without fear of social repercussions and aspersions to one's character, and it suggests certain understandings about traditional and non-traditional female sexuality, mainly those of chastity and virginity (Davary 2009: 49). It is no accident, then, that the veil would be an article of clothing manipulated, fetishised, and repurposed in various contemporary cultures and subcultures. One only need think of American weddings in which a woman wears a veil, either fashionably, on the back of her head, or 'traditionally' over her face as she walks up the aisle, or of various Steampunk or goth regalia, which place miniature or accent veils on hats, fascinators, or other accoutrements. The veil, often a symbol of women's exposure or oppression, resembles the parasol in that it constitutes an article of clothing with an original utilitarian purpose, which is rethought and discussed by neo-Victorian writers in terms of what it represented to Victorian culture. It seems that veiling is accepted as a standard part of Victorian women's dress; not even necessarily fashionable, the veil was commonplace throughout the nineteenth century. An examination of the fashions of the 1880s in C. Willett Cunnington's 1930s compendium on *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* reveals that, while the veil seems to have been "[s]lowly passing out of favour" the decade before, the new focus on hats rather than bonnets brought it back "in[to] favour" and allowed it to make a triumphant and fashionable comeback (Cunnington 1990: 352, 358). Cunnington argues that the hat becomes so popular among English and American women because they "regarded the hat almost as symbolic of emancipation" (Cunnington 1990: 352). The bonnet, old-fashioned and demure, provided a feature the hat did not: shade. Fashion may sometimes be ludicrous, uncomfortable, or even in the case of *haute couture*, seemingly unwearable, but often it is also

dictated by necessity. Veils continued to rise in popularity, being short or long, plain or spotted, worn fashionably over the nose or "pinned at the back of the neck", colored to match the headwear or secured with fantastical pins "in the shape of a cross, rake, shovel, hatchet, sword, dagger, etc." (Cunnington 1990: 359).

Cunnington is careful to note that the veil was used in outdoors fashion, a distinction from the more intimate setting of the parlour, the ballroom, or the shop. This distinction, however, marks it as public wear – like current expectations for the veil – as well as protection wear, perhaps both symbolic and literal. As its function is to shield the face from the sun and wind, the smells and smoke of London, New York and other major industrialised cities, the veil's importance rose in the late-nineteenth century to becoming a necessary article of clothing. As indicated by its various textures, colors, and designs though, the necessary had to be fashionable as well. I focus specifically on the 1880s here, because this and the previous decade with their bustles, corsets, hats, and proto-Suffragettes, are the period that neo-Victorian writers seem to be the most fascinated by. Much of the fashion featured in neo-Victorian literature, Gail Carriger's book included, focus on 1870s and 1880s styles. But these decades also represent a transitional moment for Victorian women, as the city becomes more open to them through work and school, their involvement in inner-city philanthropic work, and the rising Women's Movement. A bridge between the confining yet freeing 1860s crinolines and the 1890s shirtwaists, the 1870s and 1880s bustles and veils seem both liberating *and* restrictive to neo-Victorian writers, and thus perfect to challenge expectations of Victorian fashion.

To accommodate the forward-thinking Victorians in the Steampunk world she has created, Carriger's second novel *Changeless* (2010) explores the way fashions must change to accommodate new technologies of travel, particularly the dirigible. Alexia's dirigible outfit must take into account both fashion and function, and hence the very real practicality of wearing Victorian dress in the air. Imagining it described in a society fashion rag, Carriger offers the following vision of Alexia's costume:

> *The lady herself wore a floating dress of the latest design,*
> *with tape-down skirt straps, weighted hem, a bustle of*
> *alternating ruffles of teal and black designed to flutter*

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> *becomingly in the aether breezes, and a tightly fitted bodice.*
> *There were teal-velvet-trimmed goggles about her neck and a*
> *matching top hat with an appropriately modest veil and*
> *drop-down teal velvet earmuffs tied securely to her head.*
> (Carriger 2010: 145)

To further ensure the fashionability of Alexia's outfit, Carriger remarks, "*More than a few ladies walking through Hyde Park that afternoon stopped to wonder as to the maker of her dress*" (Carriger 2010: 145). The outfit in this scene presents both the Victorian aesthetic of the current time – tight bodice, bustle with several ruffles trailing down – and the repurposing that neo-Victorianism undertakes. The skirt has "tape-down" straps to keep it from fluttering upwards, thus improperly exposing the lady's legs. The hem, too, is weighted for the same pragmatic reason, whereas the bustle's ruffles were "designed to flutter becomingly in the aether breezes". While recreating the Victorian fashions of the time, Carriger also considers how modernity can and will affect our understanding and requirements of fashion and dress. Her fashionable approach combines practical considerations with social considerations – the veil is "modest" because Alexia's society requires modesty as well as feminine propriety.

In the same scene in which Alexia wears her floating dress, she is attacked and nearly killed on the dirigible. During her fall, she is

> stopped with an abrupt jerk and flipped upside down […].
> The reinforced metal hem of her dress, designed to keep her
> copious skirts from floating about in the aether breezes, had
> wrapped fast around a spur that stuck out of the side of the
> ship […]. (Carriger 2010: 173)

Alexia observes that "this was probably the first and last time in her life she would have cause to value the ridiculous fashions society foisted upon her sex" (Carriger 2010: 173), but despite this cynicism, she is protected *by* her fashions rather than *from* them. The Steampunk ingenuity that has redesigned Alexia's dress so as to best suits the new technology is certainly fascinating, but it still pales in comparison to the changes wrought by the more advanced technological strides made in women's fashions in the far-flung futures of some neo-Victorian tales.

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The Diamond Age is not shy about its use of the 'trappings' of Victorian fashion, particularly as a significant number of its characters belong to the "Neo-Victorian" phyle of Atlantis/Shanghai.[3] One of the reader's first introductions to this futuristic vision of the Victorian era is at a birthday party held for Princess Charlotte, to which the elite of the phyle are invited. Queen Victoria II herself attends "in a floral dress that explored the labile frontier between modesty and summer comfort, accessorized with a matching parasol", which gives cause for the "telescope-wielding fashion columnists onboard *Aether*" to declare that "the parasol was back" (Stephenson 1995: 16, 17). The parasol, along with earlier mentioned crinolines, watch chains, and snuffboxes (Stephenson 1995: 12, 13) works as much to assure that the setting is appropriately and recognisably Victorian as does the reference to Queen Victoria II. Even the attitude the narration takes toward female fashion is shockingly Victorian. Early in the novel, the narrative notes that Gwendolyn Hackworth, Artifex John Hackworth's wife, "hadn't packed a parasol, but she was untroubled; she'd always had a kind of natural, unconscious alamodality" (Stephenson 1995: 17). There was a consistent belief in the Victorian era regarding the 'natural' understanding of fashion among middle-class and upper-class women, most often in response to concerns about the rise in secondhand clothing sales of their cast-offs to working-class women. But gloves are the true signal that this is a *neo*-Victorian novel:

> Fiona Hackworth had been wandering through the Royal Ecological Conservatory bracketed by her parents, who hoped that in this way they could keep mud and vegetable debris off her skirts. The strategy had not been completely successful, but with a quick brush, John and Gwendolyn were able to transfer most of the dirt onto their white gloves. From there it went straight into the air. Most gentlemen's and ladies' gloves nowadays were constructed of infinitesimal fabricules that knew how to eject dirt; you could thrust your gloved hand into mud, and it would be white a few seconds later. (Stephenson 1995: 12)

Stephenson carefully constructs his futuristic Victorian society in this moment, maintaining the greatest signals of the Victorian era – manners,

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social navigation, and a middle-class abhorrence of dirt – with the expectations for science fiction – technological advancement. But this technological advancement is not merely performative; rather, it fulfills the expectations of the Victorian era at the same time as it rethinks those expectations for a future society. These innovative gloves offer a necessary function for a seemingly unnecessary item of clothing. Gloves, it seems, might be rather useless, until one sees in them the possibility for cleanliness and the protection of hands.

In *The Diamond Age,* Nell, the street urchin turned Victorian lady, moves within the ranks of the self-named Neo-Victorian society with ease, panache, and fashionable know-how. She utilises the technological advances afforded to a woman of her current social standing and century; this vision of late twenty-first-century Shanghai sees civilization far flung into phyles aligned not by nation or by race but by political and community allegiance. Nell, born as a thete, or lower-class citizen, is able through education, luck, and imitation to become a New Atlantean, or Neo-Victorian lady. Stephenson's novel understands that rank and file is less about birth and heredity and more about careful and precise facsimile, achieved in part through fashionable appearance.

When going out in public, Nell adheres to the social expectations for a woman of her age and adopted class. She wears

> a fairly normal-looking sort of dress […]. [H]er skirts, sleeves, collar, and hat saw to it that none of the young ruffians of the Leased Territories would have the opportunity to invade her body space with their eyes, and lest her distinctive face prove too much of a temptation, she wore a veil too. (Stephenson 1995: 331)

Like her nineteenth-century English predecessors, this citizen of New Atlantis must abide by the social codes and expectations that determine a woman's modest presentation of self while in public. But also like the women on whom she is modelled, Nell uses fashion to her utmost advantage; the veil she wears is not merely a material shield, but rather "a field of microscopic, umbrellalike aerostats programmed to fly in a sheet formation a few inches in front of Nell's face" (Stephenson 1995: 331). The 'umbrellas' open outward so that Nell retains vision but her "distinctive

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face" is shielded from anyone for whom it might "prove too much of a temptation". Stephenson re-imagines Victorian women's fashion not in terms of social progress but rather in terms of technological advance. Nell's need for modesty and for protection are what guide her fashionable choices.

One might question, then, why the veil remains a necessity in the far-flung future of Stephenson's world. In visions of an alternative past or future, whether retroactive like Carriger's novels or technologically progressive like Stephenson's, the common belief and hope is that society will redeem itself. Neither novel is dystopian; neither portrays a crumbling world in which one must destroy the paradigm to save humanity. But both present an alternative vision of Victorian England that recognises both its strengths and problems, successes and failures, without nostalgic innocence or naivety as to the period's social iniquities. As Jess Nevins argues, "Steampunk is a genre aware of its own loss of innocence. […] If the worlds of the Steampunk writers are not dystopian, they are polluted, cynical, and hard. […] Accompanying this lack of innocence is an anger and a rebellion" (Nevins 2009: 5). By presenting a futuristic vision of the veil as an item of protection, Stephenson challenges common assumptions about women's modesty in the Victorian era. The veil may be an item of clothing offered and supported by the current mores of her society, but Nell *chooses* to wear the veil, to protect her privacy and, as Stephenson is careful to note, her body also, from "the harmful rays of the sun" and the "deleterious nanosites that might otherwise slip unhindered into the nose and mouth" (Stephenson 1995: 331), given the current nanosite war in Nell's Shanghai. The umbrella aerostats "could be programmed to dangle in different ways – always maintaining the same collective shape, like a fencing mask, or rippling like a sheet of fine silk, depending on the current mode" (Stephenson 1995: 331). The use of the word "mode" is purposeful here, as it references both 'function', as in a technological device, and 'style', from the French word for fashion. Nell can choose to change the direction of the umbrellas depending on her current need or the function required and on the current fashion in dress. This veil allows Nell free access to the public sphere, and its futuristic construction has a solid basis in material reality. The veil was a necessary garment for women wanting to venture into the public realm, but not solely for the modesty it seemingly offered.

It is in choice that rebellion exists; neo-Victorian novels present Victorian fashions not as the innocent, demonised, or fetishised articles of

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clothing as they have so often been seen, but rather as *workable* items employed in the female subject's own interests. Fashions have roots in necessity *and* beauty, exhibiting both form and function, and if one is not at first influenced by the other, soon, it will be. Carriger and Stephenson, representative of contemporary authors remaking the Victorian age in their own science fiction and far-flung futuristic or retro image, offer two different but very similar views of Victorian fashion: how much they are *needed*, and how much they are *wanted*. Nell and Alexia's fashions have a dual life in that they existed as useful and beautiful actual fashions in the real Victorian era (if not exactly in the forms in which they are re-imagined in the novels) and are made to live again, giving even greater use, delight and satisfaction in the neo-Victorian ages created by their authors.

In this afterlife of fashion we see the life of the times; it is these items' repurposing that reveals their very real purpose to nineteenth-century women. While Victorian women did, in fact, exist within an often restrictive, not to say coercive fashion system, they still had choice and control over their clothing, as do their neo-Victorian counterparts. Most importantly, Victorian women *existed* within a fashion system; that is, they lived within it, functioning and fashioning their lives while, through, and in spite of wearing corsets, gloves, crinolines, and veils. They moved within the public sphere, holding parasols aloft or wielding them as weapons, both for self-adornment and the protection of their bodies. As neo-Victorian writers reconstruct nineteenth-century women's fashion for twenty-first-century aesthetics and expectations, the nineteenth-century women who lived within those clothes did the same, for their own personal aesthetics and expectations, for mobility, to subvert social expectations, and to transgress limitations placed upon them by a structure larger than the people who existed within it. To assume otherwise is to see the threads of history, but not the fabric they form - to do as Harv and Nell do, pulling the threads out but never comprehending the *human* audacity that weaved them together.

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Notes

1. Hollander states that "[n]akedness is not a customary but rather an assumed state, common to all but natural to none, except on significantly marked occasions" (Hollander 1993: 84).
2. Also, not to be forgotten, is the use of the umbrella as a feminine weapon, which can be seen in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles* (1891) and in Elizabeth Peters's neo-Victorian series starring Amelia Peabody (1975-ongoing), who also appreciates the extended reach of hefty parasols for purposes of both defence and attack.
3. Neal Stephenson's Neo-Victorian phyle of Atlantis/Shanghai is comprised of literal New Victorians who live in his world. This of course is differentiated from the concept of "neo-Victorianism" as a genre of writing, and will be distinguished as such through the capitalisation of "Neo".

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