"Pronouns are problematic": The Trans* Body and Gender Theory; Or, Revisiting the Neo-Victorian Wo/Man

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Abstract:
This article reads the representation of trans* subjectivity in Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005) and considers its implications for neo-Victorian studies. My argument is twofold. Firstly, I contend that Stace's novel restages responses from trans* studies to Judith Butler's early theorising in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Woman* (1990) on issues of gender and embodiment, something also explored by Butler in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993). Secondly, I propose that, by reading *Misfortune* more fully through a trans* studies lens, Stace's novel elucidates greater insight into trans* identity than hitherto has been recognised. In situating these points side-by-side, I consider the ways that neo-Victorian studies could engage more widely with the nuances of debates relating to – and issues arising from – gender theories, and consider how this flourishing genre engages more widely with LGBTQIA+ politics than is often explored.

Keywords: Judith Butler, embodiment, gender, gender fluidity, *Misfortune***,** queer, Wesley Stace, trans*, transgender, trans* studies.

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In *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Jeannette King proposes that neo-Victorian fiction "provides an opportunity to challenge the answers which nineteenth-century society produced in response to 'the Woman Question'" (King 2005: 6). King's study generates invaluable insights into the way in which neo-Victorian texts often represent first-wave feminist concerns relating to women's social, educational, and legal positions. Equally, however, her approach overlooks how the representation of women in neo-Victorianism more broadly also speaks to debates arising from later feminist movements and contemporary culture. Today, feminism – if such a singular incarnation even still exists – sits alongside queer *and* trans* politics to address women's inequalities in theory and social practice.[1] Indeed, in recent years, feminist, queer, *and*

Neo-Victorian Studies
13:1 (2020)
pp. 75-99

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

trans* movements have expanded the meaning and signification of the category 'woman' itself, adding intellectual knowledge to an intersectional understanding of women's oppression. In addition, as Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah indicate, "transgender issues [both] problematize the political efficacy of the category 'woman'" in its former guise and generate mechanisms for inclusivity in queer, feminist and trans* nomenclature (Stryker and Currah 2014: 6). Accordingly, neo-Victorian representations of gender crossing and trans* figures are an important textual space to examine both past and present theoretical debates and modern socio-cultural politics.

In this regard, Wesley Stace's novel, *Misfortune* (2005), is exemplary. The novel tells the tale of hero/ine Rose Old who, having been discarded on a rubbish dump as a new-born infant, is found by the neurotic Lord Geoffrey Loveall – the wealthiest man in England – and adopted and raised by Geoffrey as the heir to the Loveall family estate, Love Hall. While the plot initially sounds like a fantastical rags-to-riches story, Geoffrey is a tormented soul; he has been troubled since childhood by the death of his beloved sister, Dolores (or 'Dolly'). So, in a twist to Rose's fate, Geoffrey decides to raise the child as the female – rather than male – heir to the Loveall fortune, recasting Rose in the guise of his lost 'Dolly'. Consequently, from infancy, Rose is raised as a young female, cross-dressed, and passed off as a girl by her adoptive parent. In Rose's words, "she" was "reborn" (Stace 2006: 73). Although Rose's gender crossing is one forced upon her, Stace's reimagining of trans* subjectivity in the nineteenth century represents a range of topics at the centre of trans* politics and scholarship today, including ongoing activism surrounding the legal, medical, social, and embodied experience of trans* people more widely.

This article, therefore, seeks to widen readings of gender fluidity in *Misfortune*, and my argument is twofold. Firstly, I propose that the novel restages theoretical debates concerning gender and embodiment raised by trans* studies scholars in response to Judith Butler's canonical text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). While "transgender" – as a term – often functions as a "catchall term for gender variation" that considers how sexuality, gender, identity and embodiment "are thought to be conjoined and how – and to what ends – they may be reconfigured", not all trans* scholars embrace Butler's influential views as outlined in *Gender Trouble* due to the significance of embodiment in trans* subjectivity (Stryker and Currah 2014: 6). Importantly, Butler, of course,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

went on to acknowledge and explore the varied ways that gender is embodied in her subsequent book, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) and has expanded on this in her later works, including *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). However, trans* studies scholars continue to generate insights into how, for some trans* subjects, gender is embodied in ways beyond that which postmodern theorising enables, and explicitly critique aspects of *Gender Trouble*. Such a point is significant to neo-Victorianism because, as I will show, Stace's novel – like other neo-Victorian representations of LGBTQIA+ identities and politics – has largely been analysed only in relation to Butler's early theorising and in ways that overlook an engagement with the critique of such theorising in trans* studies. Secondly, and building on this, I contend that Rose's tale of trans* womanhood offers far wider insights into trans* issues and experiences than have hitherto been recognised. Although published in 2006 before *Time* magazine's momentous recognition of a "transgender tipping point" in contemporary culture in 2014 (Steinmetz 2014: cover), Rose's complex experience of gender crossing highlights numerous issues and challenges present in trans* narratives that have been illuminated by trans* studies scholars, reimagining them, of course, in a nineteenth-century context. In unfolding this argument, this article begins by first reflecting on the relationship between Butler's early work, queer theory, and neo-Victorianism, before then moving on to a theoretically informed reading of gender, embodiment, and trans* subjectivity in *Misfortune*.

1. Neo-Victorianism, Gender Crossing and Queer Theory

The congruence of neo-Victorianism and queer theory exists for several reasons, one of which is, as Sarah Gamble notes, that neo-Victorianism "flowered alongside developments in gender, particularly the inception of debates concerned with queerness and performativity" (Gamble 2009: 128). After all, Butler's *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990, the very year that A. S. Byatt won the Man Booker Prize for *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and "catapulted neo-Victorian fiction into the mainstream" (Hadley 2010: 2). In this respect, the plentiful coupling of Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian fictions with Butlerian theory by many scholars is apt (see Yates 2009/2010: 192-199, Neal 2011: 1-22, Davies 2012: 114-138, and O'Callaghan 2017:

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

1-46). In addition, the growing popularity of queer theory and its reclamation of non-conforming gendered and sexual subjects aligns closely with neo-Victorianism's project to recover dissident histories omitted from mainstream nineteenth-century culture. And, of course, the 1990s were *the* moment in which neo-Victorian fiction, like queer theory, entered mainstream popularity, the latter thanks not only to Butler's pioneering text, but also to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Teresa de Lauretis' special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* from 1991. Despite the powerful work of these other theorists, however, it is Butler – "the so-called 'queen of queer theory'" (Alsop et al. 2002: 4) – who entered popular culture, gaining her own fanzine, *Judy*, and a range of paraphernalia that established her as a popular icon.

Since the turn of the new millennium, the number of neo-Victorian narratives concerning nineteenth-century gender crossing has continued to grow beyond that offered by Sarah Waters in the 1990s. Kylie Fitzpatrick's *The Ninth Stone* (2008), Sandi Toksvig's *Valentine Grey* (2012), William Klaber's *The Rebellion of Lucy Ann Lobdell* (2013), Emma Donoghue's *Frog Music* (2014), Barbara Ewing's *The Petticoat Men* (2014), Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), and onscreen productions, including Rodrigo Garcia's *Albert Nobbs* (based on George Moores's 1927 novella) and, more recently, Sally Wainwright's *Gentlemen Jack* (2019) are just a few examples of the diversity of neo-Victorian LGBTQIA+ texts. In addition, as Ann Heilmann's most recent monograph shows, there is a plethora of works devoted to James Miranda Barry, a real-life figure whose life has been persistently adapted due to speculation about his sex, and for whom an extensive "Barry archive" exists in fictional, theatrical and filmic terms (Heilmann 2018: 14). Heilmann's study focuses on how neo-Victorian reimaginings conceptualise Barry's life as a transgender subject, with Heilmann concluding that the ontological and epistemological "instability in [Barry's] own self-representation" fails to be fully reflected in the plethora of neo-Victorian life-writings devoted to his story, which often reduce him to "gender subversion" (Heilmann 2018: 10, 9). Heilmann's findings are important, particularly in understanding the limitations of rendering gender fluidity in neo-Victorian texts as subversive, and in elucidating the conceptual dangers that the portrayal of trans* lives can often fall into.

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However, as Heilmann focuses solely on biographically informed texts relating to Barry's life, her valuable findings are also – to some extent – narrow, not least because her analysis is arguably more focused on using the "Barry archive" to conceptualise genre, leading her to conclude that neo-Victorianism is a "transgenre" (Heilmann 2018: 14, 8). Moreover, while Heilmann usefully examines the transgender politics emerging from textual reworkings of Barry's life and her analysis draws on feminist, queer, *and* trans* studies perspectives to resist an either/or theoretical quandary, her examination sometimes glosses over the epistemological and ontological differences between these discourses, thus overlooking some of the gender and sexual politics at stake and the conceptual critiques of queer studies by trans* scholars and thinkers such as Jay Prosser, Like Namaste, and Sally Hines, among others. As Heather Love reminds us, although "queer studies and transgender studies are linked through shared histories, methods, and commitments to transforming the situation of gender and sexual outsiders[,] the conceptual fit between them is not seamless" (Love 2014: 174-175). The theoretical frameworks share common emancipatory goals, but they also have important differences. Specifically, as Love indicates,

> Queer has proven less useful than transgender studies in accounting for embodiment. Trans studies makes accounting for material experience and making space for new forms and experiences of embodiment central (in this aspect, one sees significant links between transgender and disability studies). Queer is deeply tied to the intellectual formation of poststructuralism, particularly as it developed in literary theory and psychoanalysis. The field of transgender studies also was influenced by this framework […] but it has tended to be more methodologically inclusive and diverse. (Love 2014: 174)

Applying Love's ideas to textual analysis, queer readings also sometimes render "the specificity of transgender bodies and narratives opaque" (Hager 2018: 40). Moving away from Heilmann's study, but continuing the point, the nuance, then, with which gender theory is applied to 'queer neo-Victorianism' – particularly if 'queer' is taken as an umbrella term to encompass a range of LGBTQIA+ texts, experiences, and subjectivities –

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needs to be considered more fully. While such a statement is not intended to diminish the vibrant scholarship that has already been conducted on representations of gender fluidity in the field, and there remains a need for wider queer analysis in neo-Victorian studies, there is a risk that 'queer neo-Victorianism' might become a catchall for *all* LGBTQIA+ texts, both reducing and homogenising these texts through readings informed by recognisably 'queer' frameworks.

The slowness with which neo-Victorianism has discussed gender fluid texts and contexts in relation to trans* theory replicates the concurrent slow movement in Victorian studies. As Lisa Hager notes in her award-winning article in a recent special issue of *Victorian Review* dedicated to trans* subjectivities, "Victorian studies has largely ignored the critical possibilities offered by transgender studies for a more complex understanding of gender itself" (Hager 2018: 37), a statement that is, I propose, applicable to neo-Victorian studies too. In a neo-Victorian context, such a "complex understanding", as Hager puts it, should usefully move beyond readings of gender fluidity and non-conformity as subversive or mere performance (to which Butler's early work is often mistakenly reduced) and think about how trans* characters and narratives offer insights into trans* lives and experiences. Readings might also further calls to think about how neo-Victorian texts 'talk back' to critical theory, demonstrating how the genre's reflective capabilities often represent in fabulation a lived experience which theory simply cannot do (see Hager 2018: 37; Davies 2012: 1; O'Callaghan 2017: 2). Finally, as I argue here, neo-Victorian texts are able to restage discursive theoretical debates and tensions.

The significance with which a wider configuration of LGBTQIA+ debates might be nuanced in neo-Victorianism is made apparent with respect to a consideration of Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* (2019–). Set in 1832 in Halifax, West Yorkshire, Wainwright's BBC drama brought to life the translated diaries of nineteenth-century landowner, industrialist, and diarist, Anne Lister. *Gentleman Jack* follows Lister's attempts to update her inherited estate, Shibden Hall, and to find 'true' love with another woman at a time when same-sex desire was prohibited socially. Wainwright's script is based on extracts of Lister's collected life-long diaries, parts of which – famously – are written in code so that Lister could document her lesbian relationships. In the drama, the figure of Ann Walker, Anne's primary love interest, refers to her relationship with Lister as queer,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

but she does so in a distinctly negative way, positing her romance and sexual relationship with Lister as something unnatural or strange. Wainwright's deployment of the term 'queer' is self-conscious and knowing, drawing on the Victorian usage of 'queer' to denote the odd and peculiar, while also functioning as a shorthand for homosexuality to a contemporary audience (see Llewellyn 2010: 210). For academic audiences, such usage also evokes 'queer theory'.

At the same time, though, Wainwright's use of the term inadvertently engages modern disputes surrounding the vocabulary and specificity of LGBTQIA+ politics. On the one hand, her terminology acknowledges implicitly that 'lesbian', as a term used today to describe a woman whose primary desire is same-sex oriented, did not exist in the nineteenth century.[2] But on the other, it overlooks the views of modern lesbian-feminist scholars who actively resist the nomenclature of 'queer' on the basis that 'queer' implicitly privileges male homosexuality, subsumes female same-sex desire within a wider rubric, and eradicates the female body (Jeffreys 2003: 6). With the absence of the term 'lesbian' in the drama itself, the aforementioned linguistic shorthand – 'queer' – coupled with plentiful scenes of explicit sexual representation to elucidate Lister's lesbianism, thus replicate the specific concerns of lesbian-feminist scholars, while arguably dramatising lesbian desire for a mainstream heterosexual audience and gaze.

With this tension in mind, it is apt that the significance and specificity of 'lesbian' within LGBTQIA+ vocabulary and politics with respect to Anne Lister was also evident in the public debates concerning the English Heritage plaque dedicated to the real-life Lister's memory.[3] In July 2018, a plaque was placed at the Holy Trinity Church in York by the York Civic Trust, to commemorate the church's blessing to privately celebrate the bond between Lister and Walker on 30 March 1834. The plaque originally described Lister in suitably queer terms, as gender-nonconforming.[4] This is partly because Lister was referred to as 'Gentleman Jack' by the inhabitants of Halifax, and she was also called 'Fred' by another lover, Mariana Belcombe. The wording on the plaque was met with a backlash, however, as 2,000 people signed an online petition against the apparent erasure of the word 'lesbian'. There were criticisms that the phrase 'gender-nonconforming' had nothing to do with sexuality, and the plaque was subsequently changed to include the word 'lesbian', thus affirming Anne's

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same-sex orientation. Arguably, the use of 'gender-nonconforming' was an attempt to maintain a sense of fluidity and resistance within Lister's identity – calling her a 'lesbian' fixes her sexuality in a way that 'queer' resists, and, as noted, 'lesbian' was not a word that Lister herself would have used. This debate, then, demonstrates the significance of the tensions between queer theory and other gender theories, particularly lesbian feminism, a long-standing point of division that continues to find expression in scholarly criticism and activism and, of course, neo-Victorianism (see O'Callaghan 2017: 48-51).

The point I wish to stress from this discussion, though, is that not all neo-Victorian LGBTQIA+ texts can or should be homogenised as 'queer'. Neither should they be read solely in relation to Butler's early theorising in *Gender Trouble*, because despite its richness and usefulness, not all experiences can be reduced to any singular theoretical text. There are nuances, experiences, and often aspects of political diversity that Butler's early text does not fully account for, limitations that, as noted, Butler is aware of and responded to in *Bodies That Matter*. Moreover, as Alona Ferber indicates in her *New Stateman* interview with Butler, "[i]n the three decades since *Gender Trouble* was published, the world has changed beyond recognition [and] Butler herself has moved on from that earlier work, writing widely on culture and politics" (Ferber 2020: n.p.). By recycling and arguably homogenising all non-conforming genders and sexualities within and against this early queer theoretical rubric, neo-Victorian critics risk impoverishing an understanding of the vibrancy with which neo-Victorian works conceptualise gender crossing and a broader spectrum of LGBTQIA+ politics.

The need for further theoretical nuance in neo-Victorian readings is particularly important with respect to trans* subjectivity. As Prosser reminds us, "we must make changes to our theoretical paradigms if we are to make room for the materiality of trans narratives" (Prosser 1998: 5). With this in mind, it is interesting that despite the amenability of *Misfortune* to trans* gender theories and politics, existing readings of Rose's story have been somewhat limited. Indeed, without intending to diminish the valuable insights produced by a range of scholars, Rose's gender fluidity has consistently been configured in relation to 'queerness' and particularly Butler's postmodern feminist theory presented in *Gender Trouble*. Gamble, for instance, has stated that the indeterminacy of Rose's gender identity

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

"preserves her as an icon" of Butler's conception of "gender trouble", and that *Misfortune* "displays the process of the discursive formation of gender" via the narrative games that Stace employs in the structure and presentation of Rose's story (Gamble 2009: 136). Likewise, Emily Jeremiah has argued that Rose's "queer Bildungsroman" echoes "Butlerian thought [by] offering numerous instances of gender trouble" at the level of genre (Jeremiah 2007: 132). In a similar vein, though not explicitly mentioning Butler, Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn propose that Stace "queers" Rose's "quasi-intersex condition and 'intermediate' identity" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2012: 38). Moreover, while acknowledging that *Misfortune* "has much in common with contemporary trans/gender novels", Heilmann and Llewellyn do not elaborate on their point or Rose's transgender narrative, and instead go on to misread Rose as male by using the pronoun "him" throughout their prose (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2012: 41), a point I shall return to. Elsewhere, while acknowledging how Stace's novel "dramatizes the dangers of trying to manipulate subjectivity to serve a personal agenda", Helen Davies wonders whether readers should "presume that Rose is 'originally' male and her compelled adherence to the script of femininity a mere 'copy'" (Davies 2012: 170), words informed by the broader Butlerian framework adopted in Davies's monograph. An exception, however, can be found in Georges Letissier's recent analysis of *Misfortune*. Letissier begins the task of reading Rose as a trans* figure, but he goes on to situate Stace's novel within a queer theoretical framework, concluding that Stace's "queered version of the Bildungsroman" is exemplary of transgender identity, but only with respect to Butler's conception of "nomadic identity" and insights from Sedgwick's "nonce taxonomy" (Letissier 2017: 31). For Letissier, Stace's representation of "spatial displacement initiates an experience of defamiliarization through the travels of transgender characters" (Letissier 2017: 16).

As this overview indicates, even when acknowledging trans* subjectivity in *Misfortune*, scholars have resisted engagement with trans* politics and trans* studies discourse, continuing, it seems, to gravitate around ideas of 'queerness' and, with the exception of Letissier, relying by and large on ideas emerging from Butler's *Gender Trouble*. However, as Julie Serano states in *Whipping Girl*, not only has trans* studies significantly developed in recent years such that feminism and queer theory are not "the only two groups (outside of psychiatric/sexology discourses)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

routinely talking about transgender people" (Serano 2016: xii), but Butler's early theorising in *Gender Trouble* and queer theory more broadly has, as noted earlier, been problematised by some trans* studies scholars for eliding the corporeality of sex and gender within trans* experience. Despite Butler's later theorising in *Bodies That Matter*, Prosser argues that transgender has too often become a "key queer trope" and reduced to Butler's early work, when for many trans* subjects the "materiality of the sexed body" and "identity and bodily integrity" are often fundamental aspirations, and trans* subjectivity is more complex that Butler's early theorising sometimes fully accounts for (Prosser 1998: 6). So, by way of beginning to think further about trans* subjectivities in neo-Victorianism, I turn now to Stace's novel and a consideration of how it restages tensions and debates concerning gender and embodiment emerging from Butler's early theorising made by trans* studies scholars.

2. Queer vs. Trans* Tensions in *Misfortune*

In *Misfortune*, the complexity of Rose's gender fluidity is foregrounded from the beginning of the novel, in a section entitled 'Anonymous'. The implication of anonymity may suggest that, as Butler's early work proposes, the narrator is somewhat resisting the power of labels and identity politics that work to categorise individual subjects within heterosexist structures. By the end of the section, however, it becomes clear that the narrative voice belongs to Rose, who has deliberately disguised herself from the reader as a third-person omniscient narrator called "God" because, as Rose later suggests, "there was no I […] with which to speak" (Stace 2006: 77). Rose's refusal of the agentic 'I' replicates Danielle M. Seid's assertion that trans* subjects often articulate "a struggle" with meaning, "a struggle in which the trans person often 'loses' to dominant discourses" in such a manner that reveals how "the terms that would make a trans person intelligible are already predetermined" (Seid 2014: 177). In other words, Rose's initial indeterminacy is an expression of the moment when, as Seid puts it, "the trans person is subjected to the pressures of a pervasive gender/sex system that seeks to make public the 'truth' of a trans person's gendered and sexed body" and the complexity with which such an approach "profoundly impacts trans people's lives" (Seid 2014: 176).

Stace's play with categories of sex and gender identity shows how the normalcy of sex-gender categories demonstrate, as Butler argues in

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Gender Trouble, that "the denaturalisation of gender can also be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms" (Butler 1990: 85). However, the actions of individual characters in the early parts of Stace's book do not necessarily interpret sex-gender categories in such a negative manner as *Gender Trouble* presumes. Instead, as much as Stace destabilises gender-sex categories, the novel's early narrative also works concurrently to stabilise them, something that reflects Hines's point that while "some" trans narratives respond "to postmodern analyses of gender fluidity and correspond with the deconstructive practices of queer theory, other trans narratives articulate embodied practices that conflict with ideas of gender mutability" (Hines 2007: 4). For instance, from the outset of Part One, Stace lulls the reader into accepting that the baby of the story is biologically female, because the first reference to the child implicitly affirms the baby's biology via female pronouns:

> He looked down at the baby.
>
> She was a tiny red ball, now wrapped in Hood's stained waistcoat for warmth (and to preclude any further messing of the interior of the carriage) and enthroned on the most comfortable of cushions she started to cry. (Stace 2006: 23)

Although the baby's anatomy is not attended to here, the omniscient view of Geoffrey's thoughts and vision illuminate how *he* genders the baby. Exposing a cisgender logic, "she", the reader also presumes, is biologically female, and "she" will be a replacement for Geoffrey's lost sister, Dolores (quite literally becoming his 'Dolly', itself a gendered image). Despite Rose's contention that "pronouns are problematic", a statement which foregrounds Stace's own awareness of the evolving nature of trans* politics in 2006, capturing something of Rose's trans* and non-binary thinking at different points in the narration, she ultimately indicates how, in her origin story, her sex and gender were conferred (Stace 2006: 82). Despite her perinatal biology, she was perceived as female. In this way, *Misfortune* replicates Claudia Castañeda's point that "[t]ransgender childhood bears the mark of the simultaneously fixed and molten status of the child and child-body with regard to gender development" (Castañeda 2014: 59).

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Geoffrey's actions on returning to Love Hall also serve – problematically – to reaffirm the binary categories of sex and gender. He requests a meeting with his mother, the tyrannical Lady Eleanor Loveall, a woman who stubbornly clings to life simply to witness an heir to Love Hall: "No! She would not give in gracefully until the dynasty was secure" (Stace 2006: 36). Lady Eleanor's battle for the future of Love Hall derives from the complex dynastical history of the Loveall family; Geoffrey needs an heir to ensure that the property is not passed over to the Loveall family nemesis, the Osberns. In a late-night meeting with his mother, Geoffrey reveals Rose as the Loveall heir: "My lady, may I present the next Lady Loveall" (Stace 2006: 38). Lady Eleanor does not judge or deride Geoffrey's desire to raise the abandoned baby as his daughter, but she is confused by the "pantomime" (as she reductively terms it) of the baby's sex:

> 'Geoffrey', said his mother with a horrible condescension. 'You sought to surprise me. Now it is time for *you* to be surprised, for *you* to meet someone. May I introduce you to the new *Lord* Loveall, Geoffrey? The baby you have found is a boy.' (Stace 2006: 42, original emphasis)

Here, the primacy that Lady Eleanor gives to the baby's anatomy, which also serves to mock her son's misguided self-assurance, reifies the category of sex. Of course, reflecting Butler's ideas in *Gender Trouble*, Lady Eleanor is happy for the baby's gender to be troubled – "you have done well", she tells her son (Stace 2006: 41). And yet, she is equally adamant that, as Butler herself later came to suggest in *Bodies That Matter*, the baby's corporeality cannot be elided: "Call the baby anything you will, but look at this, look! Proof, even to *you*", she says, showing him the child's genitalia (Stace 2006: 42, original emphasis). Eleanor's words clearly reflect Butler's point that gender does not need to follow "the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes" (Butler 1990: 9), but equally, recalling Prosser's views, Stace refuses to overlook the significance of the sexed body in understanding trans* identity. Instead, this scene evokes Sandy Stone's assertion that for trans* subjects, "the chaos of lived gendered experience" meets "in the battlefield of the trans* body" (Stone 1991: 230). Aptly, Stace reiterates the ontology of Stone's point through the family's maidservant, Anstace Crouch, who reinforces the inescapability of the sexed body, a

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

point emphasised when, moments later in the same scene, Crouch lifts the baby upside down and exposes its genitalia to the room: "There hung the small but unmistakable pink twig" (Stace 2006: 42).

Despite Geoffrey's trauma regarding Rose's anatomy – he flees from his mother's room howling "Dolores! Dolores!" (Stace 2006: 42) – Rose, through childhood, initially comes to show Butler's view that gender (or the illusion of gender) is, as Butler puts it, "a kind of imitation for which there is no original […]; a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (Butler 1990: 23). To facilitate his plan to pass Rose off as the legitimate female heir to Love Hall, Geoffrey concocts an agreement with Anonyma Wood, the Hall's librarian, to present Rose as a by-product of their 'relationship' though this too is a falsehood. As he intends Rose to be a replacement for Dolores, the gendered 'script' for Rose's life is thus intended to reify Rose as 'female' and 'feminine':

> At such-and-such an age, she [Anonyma] would commence my musical introduction; he [Geoffrey] would tutor me in etiquette and deportment a year later. Languages and literature would, of course, be left entirely to my mother, with the understanding that at the age of sixteen I should set out on a Grand Tour of Europe, in her company. (Stace 2006: 108)

By aligning Rose's life with the traditional routines expected of young men *and* women in the nineteenth century, Stace is not only parodying Victorian gender norms but exposing what Butler critiques as "the heterosexual matrix", a stable construction of sex and gender in which gender (only ever) mirrors the categories of sex, and sex and gender systems are necessary to configuring normative heterosexual subjects (Butler 1990: 6). Moreover, Stace gestures to Butler's assertion that when theorised as independent of sex, gender becomes a free-floating artifice, the consequence of which is that – as signified through Rose – "*masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one" and "*woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler 1990: 9, original emphasis). Yet, concurrently, Geoffrey's plan relies on a complex investment in aspects of biological determinism to ensure that Rose *will* be(come) female, the very belief

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system that Butler sought to destabilise in *Gender Trouble*. Put another way, Stace problematises a wholesale engagement with Butler's early theorising by emphasising aspects of essentialism on which some trans* narratives rely. As Prosser indicates, some trans* subjects do not always move away from categories of sex, but rather, trace "somatic progression towards the goal of sexed embodiment" (Prosser 1998: 67). While such gendered decisions are made *for* Rose and not *by* her at this point, *Misfortune* nonetheless complicates the notion that trans* figures are inauthentic, a derogatory view based on the presumption that biologically born men and women have a prerogative to masculinity and/or femininity based on experience.

Anonyma's collusion with Geoffrey subjects Rose to what might be perceived as both a restaging of the limitations of Butler's early theorising in conjunctions with an illumination of trans* ideology. Using Rose as a subject, Anonyma implements and "test[s]" the gender theories of the fictional poet, Mary Day, to whom Anonyma bears a reverential sense of duty (Stace 2006: 98). According to Day, androgynous and non-binary subjectivity is the ultimate utopian state: "The separation of the two sexes represented deterioration from the original perfection and fruitfulness of the imagined undivided sexuality" (Stace 2006: 97). In theory, her ideas affirm Butler's own contention that "there is no 'proper' gender […] proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property" (Butler 1990: 5). Moreover, in a concept called "Feminisia", Day imagines a realm "after life and beyond death" where men and women "would exist in equality" (Stace 2006: 98). It is, in other words, an idealised gendered imagining. Through Day's theories, Anonyma regards Rose as a tabula rasa. For her, the child is non-binary and androgynous until they are agentic enough to choose their gender. In this way, Anonyma recognises the role of agency in partaking of gender identity. In practice, though, Anonyma suggests that, although Rose was born biologically male and her father intends to raise her as a female, this is only a temporary position until Geoffrey overcomes "his current agitations" and "accept[s] the idea of a son" (Stace 2006: 99). Moreover, in Anonyma's eyes, Rose's gender-neutral identity is a short-lived proposition, and androgyny is not a permanent state, but rather a holding identity until traditional sex and gender behaviours are nurtured into dominance. Through these competing narrative discourses, Stace portrays tensions between Geoffrey's performative conception of

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

gender, his mother's focus on essentialism, and Anonyma's socially constructed ideology, all of which highlight the power attributed to the corporeality of gender as co-existent with lived experience. Of course, as we shall see, both Geoffrey and Anonyma's plans fail somewhat, since Rose discovers her anatomy and ultimately assumes agency over her own trans* gender. Indeed, as Stace goes on to show, when Rose is old enough to understand her gender, she refutes biology and chooses to identify as female in a way that echoes trans* women's experiences, a point I shall return to. Tellingly, however, as an adult, Rose is sceptical of theories that solely advocate the social construction of gender because they negate agency and bodily autonomy: "Has this been entirely discredited yet? If not, it will be" (Stace 2006: 98). Rose's words thus echo Kendall Gerdes's view that, unlike postmodern feminist theorising and queer theory, "transgender studies is inextricably invested in the question of intentionality", for the agentic (and adult) subject is in charge of their gender (Gerdes 2014: 149). In continuing my reading of *Misfortune*, I now turn from how the novel restages trans* responses to Butler's early theorising to how Stace portrays a range of issues at the forefront of trans* studies and politics.

3. Representing Trans*

Stace's portrayal of Rose's adult years depict a range of issues and obstacles expressed by trans* activists and trans* studies scholars in the articulation of trans* subjectivity, including, for instance, experiences concerning the material and cultural significance of the body in the expression of gender and identity. As Rose grows older, she develops a sense "of being a stranger, an imposter inside my own skin" (Stace 2006: 136), words that point uncomfortably to what is often described as 'wrong body syndrome', a dated and cissexual means by which trans* subjects have been pathologised historically through medicine and science. As Ulrica Engdahl explains, "the wrong body is envisioned as a state in which gender body and gender identity do not match; hence a disparity between body (materiality) and self (subjectivity) is embodied" (Engdahl 2014: 267). While 'wrong body syndrome' has been widely critiqued in trans* studies, trans* scholars have nonetheless grappled with ways of configuring the overlapping experience of self, body, sex, and gender. Here, the phenomenological notion of "the lived body" has become one means of bringing together "a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

is body-in-situation" (Young 2005: 16). Stace's portrayal of Rose's experience in puberty evokes such insights on "the lived body" experience (Young 2005: 16). As Rose develops physically into adulthood, she becomes aware of her preference for seemingly 'masculine' traits and ventures. Rose tells the reader that during sports games she yearned to run faster, throw further, and hit balls harder than female gender norms permitted (see Stace 2006: 175). She also notes that these childhood sporting interactions were her "first practical experiments" with gender that pandered to "the tomboy in me", words which begin to hint towards Rose's trans* subjectivity (Stace 2006: 175, 177). Moreover, Rose's cross-dressing games with neighbouring friends Stephen and Sarah, in which they alternate the role of heroic victor, bad tyrant and damsel-in-distress, also evoke theoretical expressions of trans* experience. These games not only teach Rose the "scripts" – as she calls them – of heterosexual romance, but specifically those traits typically afforded to masculinity (Stace 2006: 175). Indeed, Rose reflects on her enjoyment at playing the "upright hero […] good Lord Ose", who would "always rescue Sarah" and cement victory "with a victorious kiss" (Stace 2006: 174-175). Importantly, Rose comments that she "had made Lord Ose flesh: it was a role I was born to play" (Stace 2006: 174-175). These words again emphasise trans* politics by pointing toward gender fluidity *and* battles with biological determinism as concurrent experiences.

Reflecting some trans* narratives, Stace also uses Rose's corporeal awareness during puberty to explore what in trans* studies is conceptualised as the "reveal", namely, "the moment in which a trans character's trans status is discovered" in one way or another (Seid 2014: 176). Through *Misfortune,* however, Stace subverts the way in which the "reveal" is often associated with ideas of deception that reinforce the myth that trans women are "female mimics" who deliberately mislead others (Serano 2016: 248). Instead, in exposing such transphobia, Stace emphasises what Serano asserts as the "need to take personal responsibility for our own presumptions" (2016: 248). In the novel, Rose describes how, following her friend Sarah's relocation to Love Hall, the children shared a bed at night in which they would kiss and touch each other. Despite it being impressed on Rose never to undress in front of others, she is enchanted by Sarah and becomes aroused when touching her friend, asking, "why, when we were so close,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

were we becoming so different?" (Stace 2006: 186). It is through touching Sarah that Rose discovers that women have alternate genitalia to men:

> But where? My southward progress continued and I thought, *I'd have a handful of myself by now!* […] but where was hers? […]
>
> In fact, where *was* hers?
>
> And then my hand was between her legs. Nothing.
>
> Nothing!
>
> My mind started to race […] There was nothing, only damp, warm absence. (Stace 2006: 219, original emphasis)

The reference to Sarah's physical "absence" evokes Freudian psychology, in which women's physiological and psychological difference from men is understood as a lack, something Freud suggests results in penis envy. Here, Stace is satirising Freud's assertion, as the young Rose goes on to interpret Sarah's "absence" as part of the 'normal' bodily development for women: "*Oh, my God. Is this what happens?*", she asks, or "Worse. Had it been *removed*?" (Stace 2006: 219, original emphasis). As a consequence of these insights, Rose concludes that "I was more complete" (Stace 2006: 219). By including such poignant insights, Stace not only prepares the reader for Rose's to discover her own 'reveal' but draws attention to the way in which the "trans body is contested, and competing 'truths' vie for dominance" (Seid 2014: 176).

Rose's actual 'reveal' occurs largely as a result of the transphobic actions of the aforementioned Love Hall housekeeper, Crouch, who has been knowledgeable of Rose's biological sex since Geoffrey's pronouncement of the baby. Crouch consistently – and cruelly – reminds the Lovealls of the inescapability of biology by ominously crafting the word 'BOY' around the interior and grounds of Love Hall. Later it is Crouch's graffiti on the property's driveway coupled with Rose's further 'discovery' of Sarah's bodily difference that leads Rose to uncover the enforced fluidity imposed upon her:

> I crawled blindly toward the understanding of something that had been too horrific even to contemplate[.] Could it be true? […] I needed no more information. It was unthinkable, and

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

> yet I felt calm: it was the calm of decisive thought [.] I had to let myself listen to what my body shouted. It had known all along. I had known. (Stace 2006: 223-224)

Rose's response, particularly her emphasis on calmness, is important, for it moves her away from pathologised notions of trans* individuals as experiencing gender dysphoria, yet this is not to suggest that Rose's transition is easy. To the contrary, Stace depicts Rose as struggling with her body, especially her genitals, from which she now feels disconnected, something that Stace foregrounds during an early sexual encounter, when Rose states that "I was unable to be what my body designated" (Stace 2006: 359). Indeed, reflecting the complexity of trans* experience and what Sally Hines describes as a "developing self-awareness" articulated in many trans* narratives (Hines 2006: 57), Rose grapples with the meaning of her situation, asking "Who am I?", and reflecting that perhaps her "whole life wasn't real" (Stace 2006: 227). However, in seeking to understand "the new Lord Lovall" (Stace 2006: 234), a title that Rose realises she has inherited following Geoffrey's death, Stace illuminates some of the micro ways in which trans* subjects work "through the stages of transition" (Hines 2006: 58):

> I may have been male but to my self was female: my voice, my way of drinking tea, my way of sitting – nothing was properly masculine, nor could I handle the props in a manly manner […] it isn't just the clothes that maketh the man, whatever they say – and so I was no more a man by disguising myself in men's clothes. I was betwixt and between, and I had to define myself more clearly. (Stace 2006: 240)

As Rose indicates here, her transition involves a rethinking of how she embodies gender.

Rose's decision to leave Love Hall comes about of her own volition and in response to the pressures placed on her by her wider family, particularly the Osbern side, who seek control of the Loveall family fortune. Here, *Misfortune* echoes Hines's empirical findings that "a shift in […] family life is a significant theme in many participants' narratives of

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

developing a transgender identity" (Hines 2006: 55). Once the news of Rose's fluidity is known within the family, the Osberns situate her trans* gender in dialogue with the legality of her inheritance as a means of manipulation. As she notes,

> [i]n public they [the Osberns] said I was a confused innocent, forced by a perverted mind to wear the clothes of the wrong sex[.] Privately, they agreed that my sanity was the only thing between them and the low. I dangled by a thread, and they sharpened their knives. (Stace 2006: 269)

By showing how Rose is delegitimatised by the Osberns, *Misfortune* represents Serano's point that "trans* people's gender expressions, identities and bodies are viewed differently (and less legitimately) than those of people who are not trans" (Serano 2016: xvii). In doing so, Stace exposes how such behaviour is often really a "cissexist attempt to create an artificial hierarchy" that functions reductively (and transphobically) to revalidate non-trans "gender as 'real' or 'natural'" (Serano 2016: 13).

Stace also uses Rose's departure from Love Hall to draw attention to the traumas that trans* persons often experience simply for being trans*. As Heilmann and Llewellyn note, Rose recounts incoherently how she had been subjected to sexual violence from "predatory" men whose "pack mentality […] conceals homosexual desires" (Stace 2010: 39). Importantly, Rose articulates such "traumatic memories of sexual abuse suffered on [her] journey by reciting popular women warrior ballads about female cross-dressers" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 38-39), and she identifies as and with these female subjects: "Catherine Thornton", "Jane Thornton", and "Rebecca Young" (Stace 2006: 301, 303, 305). In bringing together tales of female cross-dressers with Rose's trans* narrative, Stace situates Rose's trans* woman narrative within a broader female frame, thus endorsing an inclusive feminist perspective that validates trans* women as women within feminist history. What is more, in doing so, Stace foregrounds the prevalence of trans*-misogyny in violence against trans* women, and later, through his portrayal of Rose's mental anguish following an attempted suicide, raises an awareness of the concerns of LGBTQIA+ charities that self-harm and suicide rates among trans* persons are disproportionately high. As a recent report from Stonewall indicates, "[m]ore than one in four

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

(27 per cent) trans young people have attempted to commit suicide and nine in ten (89 per cent) have thought about it. 72 per cent have self-harmed at least once" (Stonewall n.d.: n.p.).

Through insights gained during Rose's physical and psychological recovery, *Misfortune* advocates the value of agency and autonomy in relation to trans* identity, something that Rose had been denied since birth. Recalling Anonyma's advocacy of Day's "Feminisia", Rose comments that, "I was naturally male, but I could be whichever gender I chose" (Stace 2006: 240), words which also evoke trans* self-affirmation. In pointing towards self-identification, Stace is not suggesting, however, that trans* subjectivity is a simplistic choice. Rather, the novel evokes contemporaneous legislation in the U.K., namely, the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which enabled trans* subjects to acquire a Gender Recognition Certification giving them legal recognition of the sex appropriate to their identity. In *Misfortune*, Stace gestures to the legislative landmark through a trans*-specific twist on Simone de Beauvoir's legendary epigram "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1949: 295), when Rose declares that "boys and girls were therefore made, not born, and I would be made" (Stace 2006: 98).

By the end of the novel, Rose embraces her trans* subjectivity fully. Although, as she says, she had been subject to a pejorative "civil ruling that had proclaimed me male" (Stace 2006: 387), Rose rejects the idea that she is transgressing a gender binary at all. Instead, Rose accepts that while she was perinatally male, her gendered preference is 'feminine', and she identifies as a woman, or, more specifically, as a trans* woman, which, as Serano clarifies, describes "any person who was assigned a male sex at birth, but who identifies and/or lives as a woman" (Serano 2016: 11). Rose's 'natural' clothes are female attire, and she wears sweeping dresses and full-length veils, but also enjoys sporting a lavish beard. Through his description of Rose, Stace implicitly evokes the bearded ladies of Victorian freak shows, such as Josephine Clofullia and Julia Pastrana, in order to contest non-conforming femininity as freakish. Notably, despite sexual encounters with members of each sex, Rose's sexual identification is more complex. Stace suggests that, as a trans* woman, Rose primarily desires women. She vehemently rejects an invitation to the Inslip Club, a private club where men could enjoy the company of men, on the basis that she does not identify as a man, and ultimately enters into a relationship with Sarah, thus

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

demonstrating that sexuality and gender are not always co-dependent categories (see Stace 2006: 383). Stace validates Rose's trans* womanhood through her comment that "you cannot impersonate what you are" (Stace 2006: 384), thus affirming trans* women as authentic. Moreover, Rose is clear that in coming to accept her trans* identity, "what you see now is me" (Stace 2006: 384). Indeed, that Rose *is* a 'she' by the end of the text – and not a 'he', as Heilmann and Llewellyn switch to designating her in their reading of *Misfortune* – is further confirmed by the faux appendix that Stace includes in the back of the novel that provides details of Rose's grave:

> ROSE OLD OR MISS FORTUNE
> 1820-1918
> SHY OF HER MAIDEN CENTURY
> LOVED BY ALL
> "YOU CAN NOT IMPERSONATE
> WHAT YOU ARE."
> VOILÀ! (Stace 2006: 522)

By including such a memorial at the end of the text, Stace both belies any ambiguity about Rose's trans* identity and celebrates trans* women, a sexual minority who, as Serano notes, are perhaps more "maligned and misunderstood" than any other grouping (Serano 2016: 11). As suggested by Rose's memorial, her legacy is one of positivity that turns attention away from how individuals perform their own genders to instead celebrate diversity and inclusivity.

4. Rose's Conclusion

While Rose recognises that her trans* subjectivity "may represent a challenge to others", ultimately, she is "perfectly happy with who I am" (Stace 2006: 384). In this way, *Misfortune* offers a wealth of insights into trans* studies topics and social challenges, including the mechanisms of disclosure and the politics of 'the reveal', transphobia, questions of agency, legitimacy and authenticity, self-affirmation, bodily autonomy, and of how trans* identity often challenges any presumptions about sexuality. Above all, the novel, as noted, valorises trans* women as women.

While Rose's tale *could* be read solely along the lines of early Butlerian theorising as outlined in *Gender Trouble*, Stace's *Misfortune* also

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

demonstrates the ability of neo-Victorianism to restage debates *between* modern gender theories, expressing a scepticism towards a wholesale engagement with postmodern theorising via a renewed focus on embodiment. In this way, the novel represents what Hines conceptualises in trans* studies as "a tension between the queer conceptualisation of identity as fluid, and the subjective investment in identity, showing the complexities between rejecting and holding onto identity" (Hines 2006: 64). In this respect, *Misfortune* exemplifies neo-Victorianism's concurrent capacity to reshape histories, cultures, and theories of gender, as well as offering important insights into the ontological conceptualisations of sex and gender. By being attentive to the politics of gender fluidity in neo-Victorian texts, scholars can not only engage with a wider range of theoretical discourses but begin to parse out a fuller range of neo-Victorian gender identities and sexualities.

Notes

1. The asterix (*) or star in my use of 'trans*' throughout the article, denotes the multiple meanings at play in the terms 'trans' itself. As Avery Tompkins explains, while the asterix can "operate as a wildcard character in computing and telecommunications", in relation to "transgender phenomena, the asterix is used […] to open up transgender or trans to a greater range of meanings" (Tompkins 2014: 26).
2. Importantly, in Lister's diaries (or rather, in the parts translated so far), there is only one documented use of the term 'queer', but it had – as Anne Longmuir notes – a "specific sexual meaning" for Lister, and was probably "a corruption of the quin or querme" (Longmuir 2006: 152).
3. This point was raised by Sophie Franklin and Claire O'Callaghan during their talk 'Queering the Victorians: Anne Lister and the Brontës' at the 'I am not made like any other I have seen: Interpreting Anne Lister and the Brontës' event held at the Bankside Museum in October 2019, organised by the Brontë Parsonage Museum and Calderdale Museums.
4. For an image of the original plaque see [Anon.] 2018.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319181

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