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“The Doer is Merely a Fiction Added to the Deed: The Deed is Everything” (F. Nietzsche). Tales of “Doing Gender” in *Tipping the Velvet*

“[...] the oyster, you see, is what you might call a real queer fish. Now, a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite!”, writes Sarah Waters (2006: 51) in *Tipping the Velvet*. Such sexual flexibility of the molluscs is not just Waters’s literary creation. In fact, while oysters have *separate* sexes, they may *change* their sex once or more times during their life span. Waters makes this “queer fish” a symbol of gender fluidity in *Tipping the Velvet*. Nan Astley, the main character of the novel, works in an oyster-parlour, and she is like an oyster herself. She becomes a cross-dresser. She is “now, a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy.”

Nan’s cross-dressing is in the foreground of the novel to such an extent that it is unclear whether Nan Astley or cross-dressing is the main character of *Tipping the Velvet*. Although Nan often wears masculine clothes her *cross-dressing* does not signify her being *transgender*. At this point a distinction between cross-dressers and transgender people should be made. While these two categories overlap they cannot be used interchangeably. It is a well-known fact that a person who is transgender usually cross-dresses. In this case, wearing clothes of the opposite sex is an element of the transgender person’s identity. This person usually feels that his/her biological sex does not correspond with his/her psyche. Thus, a female who claims that inside, in her psyche, she is really a man will try to “fight” with her femininity by wearing men’s clothes. However, people cross-dress for many other reasons and then they are called “cross-dressers,” not “transgender people.” They may treat cross-dressing as disguise, like Achilles, who dresses up as a woman not to be forced to take part in war. Cross-dressing may also be an element of the carnival, which is a time of transgression and suspending of the laws of normativity. This is the time of breaking the boundaries, as for example wearing clothes characteristic for the opposite sex. In this case cross-dressing is a ritual and a symbolic change in behaviour, which gives people freedom to act the way they would

never do in their everyday existence. Brazil is frequently called by cross-dressers “the Promised Land” because of its carnival which is the time when “men appear in high heels, fishnet stockings, ruffle-and-lace dancehall girl outfits, with lips smeared with bright lipstick and wearing thick layered wigs” (Yarborough). Cross-dressing may also be an element of a performance. Drag queens and drag kings wear clothes of the opposite sex to entertain the audience by toying with gender stereotypes. This type of entertainment, because of its visual attractiveness, is frequently shown in films, such as: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything* (1995), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2000), *Split: Portrait of a Drag Queen* (1992) and many others.

Nan Astley’s numerous acts of cross-dressing reveal all different shades of this phenomenon. It is her who assigns meaning to the masculine clothes she wears and when cross-dressing she plays multiple roles. Also the act of cross-dressing as the main character of the novel plays various roles: it acts as a disguise, a drag king’s costume and an element of a masquerade. Constant interaction of these two main characters – Nan and cross-dressing – is a crucial element of Nan’s journey of self-discovery, which begins in the Mecca of disguise, in the theatre.

At the beginning of the novel Nan’s identity seems to be well-defined and she appears to be pleased with her “oyster girl existence.” However, Nan’s *seemingly* fixed identity gets into motion when she sees a male impersonator, Kitty Butler, performing on stage in a music hall. Afterwards, Nan begins to imitate Kitty and becomes a cross-dresser. But Nan’s cross-dressing is not a mere enactment of stereotypical masculinity; Nan’s cross-dressing (both on-stage and off-stage) means playing *multiple* roles: a male impersonator (a mirror reflection of her lover), a renter,¹ a kept-woman and “the angel of the house.” Through cross-dressing and playing these “roles” Nan goes beyond socially accepted norms and refuses to be “culturally intelligible” (Lloyd 2007: 35). The notion of “cultural intelligibility,” coined by Judith Butler, was later summarized by Lloyd (2007: 36) as a reference to “the production of a normative framework that conditions who can be recognized as a legitimate subject.” This framework presupposes direct correspondence between sex, gender and sexuality, which means that a girl’s gender is feminine and that she desires a man. This kind of relations exists within the “heterosexual matrix” in which gender is culturally intelligible. Any disruption in this chain of relations makes the

¹ Renter – a synonym of rentboy, a male prostitute.

subject culturally unintelligible and unable to live a "liveable life." However, seeing gender as performative challenges this heteronormative concept of gender and broadens our understanding of identity as such. Gender performativity allows for playing with gender by breaking the chain of relations between sex, gender and sexuality.

This is what Nan Astley does in *Tipping the Velvet*. Her life is a constant performance of a cross-dresser outside the heterosexual matrix. She opposes "girling," citing gender norms (Wolfreys 1999: 573) and she does not follow the heteronormative set of relations between sex, gender and desire. In each case of role-playing Nan breaks this chain of relations differently. Nan is constantly *performing* her gender, wearing masks and assuming identities which prove to be illusory temporary constructions. Nan's identity is *multiple* and *fragmented*. Is there anything of essence in her identity behind all the masks? This paper will discuss Nan's cross-dressing as a subversive *act* which proves gender to be performative; thus, gender is not "being" but "becoming." It will analyze the process of Nan's construction of her gender identity through constant breaking of the chain of relations between sex, gender and sexuality.

Nan's process of creating her identity begins with *imitation* of the male impersonator, Kitty. The mechanisms of this stage of her development resemble "the mirror stage" described by Jacques Lacan. Kitty embodies an ideal that Nan aspires to, the "self" she wants to become. By imitating Kitty, Nan hopes to reach this ideal so she becomes Kitty's "mirror reflection." When Nan dresses up as a boy, Kitty says:

She looks like a boy. Which I know she's supposed to. But, if you follow me, she looks like a *real boy*. Her face and her figure and her bearing on her feet. That ain't quite the idea now, is it?
(Waters 2006: 119)

This description indicates that Nan resembles a boy *too much*, which was not the desired effect. Nan has to perform masculinity in a feminine way. That is why she covers her face with make up and wears feminine shoes. Thus, it is hard to say whether Nan enacts masculinity or femininity. It appears that she acts a *girl* who acts a *boy*. Wearing masculine clothes she flutters her eyelashes and she pouts her lips. After Nan's first performance in a music hall she feels reborn and it is her point of transition into a new way of living. She says:

I had glimpsed the truth about myself and it had left me awed and quite transformed. The truth was this: That whatever success I might achieve as a girl, they would be

nothing compared to the triumphs I should enjoy clad, however girlishly, as a boy.
I had, in short, found my vocation. (Waters 2006: 123)

Soon, she changes her surname to “King,” which emphasizes the fact that being a drag king becomes an integral part of her identity. She makes a departure from “quoting” the Victorian norms to “quoting” the non-normative male impersonation. At this stage of her life cross-dressing means imitating Kitty’s behavior and lifestyle. They enact masculinity together on stage, which reflects the lack of heteronormative coherence between their sex, gender and desire. They are both dressed up in masculine clothes and thus there is no coherence between their sex and gender. Moreover, they kiss each other, which shows a lack of correspondence between their sex and desire. Also the relation between gender and desire is non-normative because they are both of masculine gender in the act, so kissing they go beyond the heterosexual matrix. An additional element of gender confusion and blurring the boundaries between femininity and masculinity is the “girlishness” of the “boyishness” that both Nan and Kitty enact. This complicates the reception of their joint act. Much as they may be perceived as two men kissing on stage, their “girlishness” is visible enough to notice that they are actually two girls kissing. What is more, Nan’s masculinity off-stage influences her desire for Kitty. At one point she says, “I seemed to want her more and more, further into boyishness I ventured” (Waters 2006: 124). It appears that off stage the chain of relations between sex, gender and sexuality is broken in a different way than on the stage. There is a correspondence between Nan’s gender and sexuality (a masculine person desires a feminine woman) and only the relation between sex and gender is non-normative (a masculine girl).

Is Nan’s life less liveable than before when she lived within the heterosexual matrix? Quite the contrary. Going beyond the norms, Nan and Kitty are in the centre of social life, admired and cheered by crowds. In this world Nan finds self-confidence, charisma and freedom of expression. Becoming a mirror reflection of the woman she loves, Nan learns to love herself. She confesses, “I had fallen in love with Kitty; now, becoming Kitty, I fell in love a little with myself” (Waters 2006: 126). However, the foundation on which Nan constructs her new self is Kitty, she is still a mere copy of her lover. “I was her foil, her echo. I was the shadow which, in all her brilliance, she cast across the stage” (Waters 2006: 127), Nan says. When Kitty betrays her, the foundation of her new, male impersonator’s identity is smashed into pieces and, thus, the whole construction is shattered. All that remains are Nan’s male impersonator’s clothes.

After leaving Kitty and her male impersonator's profession and lifestyle, Nan perceives the life she has abandoned as "pieces of some other person's history" (Waters 2006: 184). Nan detaches herself from her former identity of a male impersonator and wants to begin a new life. After some period of recovery she goes for a walk but she discovers that she "was a solitary girl, in a city that favored sweethearts and gentlemen; a girl in a city where girls walked only to be gazed at" (Waters 2006: 191). She feels disgusted by this new life of hers. She discovers that being a lonely *girl* in London is a dreadful experience. "If only I were a boy" (Waters 2006: 191), she says to herself sadly.

But soon she reminds herself of her masculine costumes and dresses up as a man. She realizes that finally she feels secure walking down the street. Masculine clothes seem to serve as a shield protecting her from being merely an object of male gaze. Nan also indulges in being attractive for other women. When a woman says to her, "Well now, pretty boy, you look like a lively one. Fancy payin' a visit to a nice little place I know?" (Waters 2006: 194) Nan calls it "the success of that first performance" (Waters 2006: 195) and admits that it made her regain her self confidence. Again, Nan's cross-dressing proves to be a rite of passage in her life and signifies her *new role*. This time she is also a male impersonator only now her *stage* is no longer a music hall but the streets of London. Similarly to her previous role, she starts playing with her gender identity and at some point she is uncertain whether she enacts masculinity or femininity. Talking about the lady who keeps a room for her where she can change into her masculine clothes she says, "she was never quite sure if I were a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out of his frock. Sometimes I was not sure myself" (Waters 2006: 195). She admits that the boundaries between being a girl and "acting" a boy are blurred for her.

However, this attitude to her masculine role changes when she is mistaken for a boy by a man who offers to pay her money for having sex with him. She gives the man a positive answer and she excuses herself by claiming that her masculine disguise is part of an *act*, not her *real* self. At this point Nan seems to make a clear distinction between her *being a girl* and *playing a boy*. She confesses, "I spoke but it was as if someone else were doing the speaking, not me" (Waters 2006: 198). That is how she begins her "career" as a renter. At this stage of her life, cross-dressing appears to be a point of departure from emotional estrangement and financial crisis leading her to regained strength and independence. Cross-dressing enables Nan to create a world of illusion in which she is free to act the way she would never do in her real life; she treats her new profession as a performance, playing various male characters who are not Nan

Astley. Thus, she makes a clear distinction between *being* and *doing*. Her role of a renter is just an illusion, something that she *does*, not someone she really *is*. Her actions prove gender, as well as desire, to be performative. Nan enacts her masculinity so well that she is constantly treated as a boy. When she touches men she enacts the man's desire for another man. A chain of relations between sex, gender and sexuality is broken in a different way than in her previous role of the male impersonator; in the role of the renter the relation between sex and sexuality corresponds to the one prevalent in heterosexual matrix (a girl has sex with a man) but the relations between sex and gender (a girl is masculine) and gender and sexuality (a masculine person having sex with a man) are outside the heterosexual matrix. The two roles (of the male impersonator and the renter), are constructs of identity that make Nan feel reborn and transformed. But soon, Nan's new construction is again swept away.

The moment she meets Diane Letherby and becomes her kept-woman, Nan enters the world of luxury. Diane dresses Nan in expensive male clothes to make her act as Diane's "boy." When they go out together, Nan plays Diane's boyfriend. On the surface, it signifies going beyond the heterosexual matrix, because her masculine gender does not correspond to her feminine sex. However, the relation between her gender and sexuality falls into the category of heteronormativity; Diane is feminine and Nan is masculine, which makes them look like a heterosexual couple. If they went out together, both wearing dresses, they would be ostracized and called "toms," a Victorian word for lesbians. Nan's cross-dressing makes their lesbianism less noticeable. Thus, paradoxically, the non-heteronormative practice of cross-dressing is conditional to being perceived as acceptable by the heteronormative society. But is it being acceptable enough?

The role of Diane's boy is very different from the role of a renter, even though in both cases Nan cross-dresses for money. When being a renter Nan feels free and independent. Being Diane's "boy" Nan is treated like her possession. It may seem that Nan's role of a "boy" is a step backwards: from freedom to dependency. However, this new role has made an equally significant contribution to her self-development as her previous roles. After all, her enslavement is, in many respects, a juxtaposition to her past freedom, and gives Nan a new insight into her personality. Being a kept-woman she enters the unfamiliar world of complete submission. Nan discovers her ability to be compliant and yielding, which are the features perceived by Victorians as characteristics of a perfect wife. She plays a seemingly masculine role of a "boy" but she does not really enact stereotypical masculinity (existing in heteromatrix) by the way she lets

herself be treated by Diane. Soon, when she betrays Diane with their maid and is immediately ejected from Diane's house, Nan feels no regrets. This episode of her life is just another temporary construction and Nan's experimental creation which, like the previous structures, is also subject to disintegration.

After Diane ejects her, Nan becomes homeless. She resolves to find Florence, a girl she used to be attracted to before meeting Diane. Soon, she reaches Florence's house and she moves in. She starts playing another role – that of "the angel of the house." She does cleaning, cooking and babysitting. She wants to fit in her new role, so she buys herself a flowery frock which seems to be expressive of her return to "quoting" Victorian norms of femininity. However, it seems that her constant enactment of masculinity over the past few years makes this re-transformation impossible. Nan says,

I looked extraordinarily awful. The clothes I had bought, they were the kind I'd used to wear in Whinstable. I had been known then as a handsome enough girl. But it was as if wearing gentleman's suits had magically unfitted me for girlishness, for ever – as if my jaw had grown firmer, my brows heavier, my hips slimmer and my hands extra large, to match the clothes Diana had put me in. (Waters 2006: 381)

It seems that Nan's performed masculinity has been inscribed in her body. Nan has been *doing* her gender and the result of her *deeds* is palpable. It may symbolize the superiority of *doing* compared to *being* and it may even indicate the lack of *being* as such. Nan is still playing a role ("the angel of the house") but this is the only role which is not inextricably linked with cross-dressing. In this role, Nan has freedom to make a choice whether she wants to wear feminine or masculine clothes. Nan eventually decides to cross-dress but her masculinity is no longer an imitation or illusion. This is the role she identifies with; she "collects" multiple fragments of her identity coming from her previous roles and incorporates them into her new role. Her past constructs of identity may signify "the journeying consciousness on its way to absolute knowledge described by Hegel" (Lloyd 2007: 15). The "absolute knowledge" is obviously never achieved. What is achieved? Is it "liveability"? It is more than that; not "liveability" but multiplicity, not constancy but fluidity, not regularity but many different irregularities.

Sarah Waters tells a story of a constant performance of a cross-dresser and a constant performance of cross-dresser's clothes. Both these characters lack the essential identity as they both constantly change their roles. While masculine clothes are supposed to play the role of stereotypical masculinity they fail to do so. Gentleman's suits enable Nan to act as a kept-woman and "the angel of the

house,” which are typically feminine roles. It is Nan who assigns the meaning to her garments, not the other way round. Thus, we may ask the question: how can masculine clothes indicate the essential gender identity (masculinity) if they lack this essence themselves? When they hang on a hanger they may have this “essence,” but when being worn by a person they not only transform this person, but they are also transformed by him/her. Thus, Nan and her garments create a unity the nature of which changes in various stages of her life.

Before Nan fell in love with Florence her roles were illusory temporary constructions. She was a performer, a “doer” devoid of fixed gender identity, which is illustrated by Nietzsche’s sentence later quoted by Judith Butler, “The doer is merely a fiction added to the deed, the deed is everything” (Nietzsche qtd in Butler 2006: 53). Each of Nan’s roles seems to be just “a fiction added to the deed.” She assumes the masculine gender role and enacts it. What is more, her enactment of masculinity is often done in a feminine way so her boyishness and girlishness merge. Nan is “once a she and once a he, as quite takes it fancy.” Her gender identity is subject to constant transformation, not *being* but *becoming*. The roles appear in her life in the sequence of contradictions; Nan’s life of a male impersonator is connected with emotional dependence on Kitty, which is later contrasted with her independence as a renter; the freedom of a renter is juxtaposed with her enslavement as a kept-woman, which is finally set against her regained freedom as “an angel of the house.” All Nan’s roles prove to be subversive acts questioning gender norms generated by the heterosexual matrix. She makes an attempt to go beyond a strict feminine vs. masculine division and to find her own way of living in which the boundary between femininity and masculinity is blurred. Cross-dressed, she explores various worlds, both outside and within herself. She is the “doer,” the agent; she actively shapes her identity. Through the oscillation between the two polarities, between construction and demolishing, she realizes what kind of self she wants to create. It is both “a he” and “a she.”

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