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Performance anxiety and costume drama: lesbian sex on the BBC

Amber K. Regis

Terry Castle's famous invocation of the 'apparitional' lesbian exposes the insidious obscurity of "deviant" female sexual desire in modern culture. The lesbian is forced to occupy 'a recessive, indeterminate, misted-over space'; she is paradoxically 'elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot—even when she is there, in plain view'.[1] But why might this be so? All the better, it seems, to contain her threat. The lesbian's body and desires circulate beyond patriarchy; they circumvent 'the moral, sexual and psychic authority of men', undermining the dominance of normative heterosexuality.[2] The lesbian can only appear, therefore, to the extent that she is 'simultaneously "de-realized"'—apparitional because 'sanitized […] in the interest of order and public safety'.[3] Studies of lesbian representation in contemporary popular culture testify to this heavy mediation. Tamsin Wilton speaks of the 'fleeting moments' and 'flickering shape' of the lesbian on screen, invariably immortalised in heterosexual roles or subject to the heterosexual gaze.[4] Similarly, Yvonne Tasker identifies the 'heavily coded and "disguised"' recurrence of lesbian tropes in popular film, but she offers a more optimistic reading: 'hints of perversion' speak to the pervasiveness of lesbian desire.[5] Here Tasker reveals an important consequence of the lesbian's apparitional status: her ability to return, to haunt. For Castle, the lesbian retains a 'peculiar cultural

power': she is provocative, inciting containment and sanitation, and despite her cultural invisibility, she is 'legion': 'To be haunted by a woman […] is ineluctably to see her'.[6]

In our living rooms, on our televisions, the lesbian has certainly enjoyed greater visibility in recent years, returning to haunt us in the form of soap opera kisses and American imports dedicated to The L-Word. The 1990s appear to have been a watershed moment, with the emergence of what Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge have called 'lesbian chic', a glamorised opening up of mainstream opportunities for lesbian representation.[7] One surprising manifestation on British television has been the appearance and subsequent recurrence of lesbian-themed costume drama, particularly on the BBC. But why so surprising? Classic serials have been a staple of "Auntie" BBC since the early days of radio broadcasting, forming part of its avuncular (tanticular?) public service ethos to inform, educate and entertain.[8] The roots of contemporary costume drama thus lie in conservative traditions, designed 'not only for our amusement but also for our betterment'.[9] As such, the genre has long remained a bastion of polite, traditional values, associated with middle-class audiences and constitutive of a culturally hegemonic 'heritage Britishness'.[10]

This chapter explores the strategies and rhetorics used to frame and enable representations of lesbian characters and lesbian sex in BBC costume drama. My primary case study is Portrait of a Marriage (dir.

Stephen Whittaker, 1990), a dramatised account of Vita Sackville-West's tempestuous relationship with Violet Trefusis. As an adaptation of life writing (part-biography, part-autobiography), Portrait is relatively unique among costume dramas, but this also raises particular concerns over authenticity: the series' depiction of "real" lesbian lives and "real" lesbian sex. How does Portrait marry its controversial subject matter with its participation in conservative traditions of quality programming? To what extent does the lesbian remain apparitional, obscured by the series' use of a legitimating, heterosexual framework? Broadcast twelve years later, Tipping the Velvet (dir. Geoffrey Sax, 2002) enjoyed less troublesome source material; it was an adaptation of fiction, not life writing. As such, the series exceeded its predecessor in terms of sexual content and explicitness, but a legitimating framework continued to be used—in this case, metatheatrical artifice. Tipping was not, therefore, an unqualified triumph for tolerance and increased visibility. Rather, it demonstrates the survival of anxieties that contain and mediate "authentic" lesbianism.

Adapting Vita's confession

Nigel Nicolson discovered his mother's autobiography after her death in 1962. The document was a confession, an account of Vita's lesbian relationship with Violet Trefusis, and Nigel published it in 1973 as part of a larger work entitled Portrait of a Marriage. As this title suggests, the work

developed new emphases; it was to be ‘a panegyric of marriage’, an account of Vita’s relationship with Harold Nicolson, Nigel’s father, and a description of ‘one of the strangest and most successful unions that two gifted people have ever enjoyed’.[11] Portrait was thus a work of composite life writing: Vita’s autobiography was reproduced ‘verbatim’, but set within chapters of biography provided by Nigel, re-telling, questioning and extending her account.[12] On its first publication, therefore, Vita’s autobiography was already adapted. Nigel’s embedding of her text within a heterosexual framework was an appropriative act—a transformative mode of adaptation involving a ‘decisive journey away from the informing source’.[13] In an unpublished memoir of 1985, Nigel reflects on his motives and treatment of the text:

> But I determined that in order to reduce the impact of Vita’s confession, I must continue the story of their marriage till its happy end. It would become a sort of joint-biography of two people. I would make it very clear that the crisis of Violet actually deepened their love for each other. It was the love story of V. & H., even more than that of V. & V. But of course I foresaw that the public would ignore the latter part, and make hay with the Violet part.[14]

Nigel’s appropriation was intended to contain the threat of lesbian desire, to reduce the significance of ‘V. & V.’ and replace their story with the

privileged narrative of 'V. & H.'. The confession is seen to require adaptation, and yet Nigel's unpublished memoir makes clear his anxiety that lesbian desire will escape containment—that Vita's story will be misappropriated, with the public "making hay" with the confession.[15]

Adapting Portrait: "quality" and authenticity

Portrait of a Marriage was transformed into a sumptuous four-part drama and broadcast on BBC 2 between September 19 and October 10 1990. Much of the action occurs in flashback, with a telephone call from Violet disrupting the "present" of 1940s war-time Britain: childhood memories and scenes from Vita and Harold's courtship are followed by an extended flashback, a sustained re-telling of the events of 1918-1920 and Vita's affair with Violet. Portrait was adapted for the small screen by the novelist and screenwriter Penelope Mortimer, and she chose to focus almost exclusively on Vita's relationship with Violet. The series was thus an adaptation of the confession alone, eliding much of the material added to Vita's story by Nigel's biographical chapters—his concern that the story of 'V. & V.' would escape containment thus proved remarkably prescient.

As a classic serial and costume drama, Portrait laid claim to be quality programming. As Jerome de Groot has argued, costume dramas are invested with 'an instant cultural value'—a recognition of prestige derived from their typically canonical source material, high production

values and depiction of saleable, 'heritage Britishness'.[16] Prestige is similarly tied to the genre's claim to historicity: an audience must accept 'the validity of the programmes' representations of the past', even if it adheres to a 'popular conceptualisation' rather than holding a mirror to history.[17] For de Groot, the dual recognition of source text and historical setting requires a delicate balancing act: the audience must 'keep two separate concepts in tension—the idea of authenticity and that of fiction'.[18] This model applies specifically to adaptations of novels, a mainstay of costume drama. While the audience concedes the unreality of characters, they expect the narrative to unfold 'within [a] framework of authentic historical representation'.[19] For example, Elizabeth Bennett depends on nothing exterior to Pride and Prejudice for her thoughts and experiences, but we expect the clothes she wears and the spaces she inhabits in the famous BBC adaptation (dir. Simon Langton, 1995) to be historically accurate. Portrait, however, unsettles and complicates this paradigm. The series does not negotiate competing claims to fiction and history, but rather makes a redoubled claim to authenticity. As composite life writing, the source text participates across genres that claim a truth-value. On screen, therefore, Portrait promises an accurate portrayal of "real" lives in addition to its authentic historical framework.

The series thus blends into the genre of television biopic. Broadly defined, biopic 'depicts the life of a historical person, past or present' and, according to George F. Custen, the form is 'embroiled in the same

controversies about truth, accuracy, and interpretation' that surround literary biography.[20] As such, we might borrow from theorists of documentary to suggest that biopic, with its claim to truth, is a contractual genre. As viewers, we expect the relationship between documentary and 'the real' to be 'direct, immediate and transparent'.[21] In turn, documentaries construct a 'meta-language' to signify and guarantee their authenticity.[22] For Annette Hill, this reciprocal arrangement is a 'contract of trust': programme makers "agree" to depict reality, while viewers accept this claim to referentiality.[23] As a dramatised reconstruction, biopic does not share in this seemingly unproblematic relation to real life—any 'contract of trust' is undoubtedly more complex. Yet, as audience members, we retain an expectation that what we see is an accurate re-telling of events; according to Custen, biopics '[provide] many viewers with the version of the life they [hold] to be the truth'.[24] As a result, the BBC's Portrait constructs a comparable meta-language designed to guarantee authenticity. Exterior shots of Sissinghurst and Knole locate the on-screen Vita and Violet within the same spaces occupied by their real life counterparts, while interior shots reveal the careful reconstruction of period detail and living space—scenes that appear to take place in Vita's writing room were, in fact, filmed on set. But Portrait's meta-language is also pervasive and subtle. In episode 3, for example, the camera sweeps across an open photograph album. The displayed images depict David Haig and Janet McTeer, in costume and in role, as Harold and Vita

respectively. These photographs demonstrate a strikingly literal pose of authenticity, recreating a number of iconic images: McTeer holding a baby, imitating a 1914 photograph of Vita with her son Ben; McTeer with upturned stare, imitating a photograph of Vita taken in the early 1920s; Haig and McTeer standing together, hands in pockets, imitating a 1932 photograph of Harold and Vita at Sissinghurst. Paradoxically, the adaptation performs referentiality, dramatising its relation to real, historical persons.

Portrait on screen was thus subject to two distinct legitimating discourses: quality programming and authentic representation. At first glance, the latter appears to reinforce the former. As television biopic and adaptation of life writing, the accurate portrayal of "character" and events seems part of the series' high production values. And yet, a potential conflict is thrown into relief by the lesbian content of the source material. How might lesbian sex in Portrait impact on the conservative, 'heritage Britishness' of costume drama? Would this "product" be devalued as a result? Could authenticity undermine perceptions of quality? Portrait negotiates these competing claims, shaping its representation of lesbian sex accordingly.

Screening "quality" sex in Portrait

Portrait was broadcast two years after the implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act—an amendment prohibiting the "promotion" of homosexuality in public institutions. This nebulous yet far-reaching legislation served to silence debate and inquiry; it was aimed, in particular, at schools and schoolchildren, where the teaching of homosexuality 'as a pretended family relationship' was explicitly censured.[25] It should thus come as little surprise that a costume drama whose raison d'être was a lesbian relationship courted controversy. But as Mandy Merck has argued, Portrait was broadcast in a pervasive context of repression. The series coincided with the Conservative Party Conference bemoaning the rise of divorce and single-parent families, the publication of a government "white paper" providing 'for greater powers to extract maintenance payments from absent fathers' and the drawing up of new proposals 'to retard divorce' on the part of the Law Commission.[26] Portrait thus appeared at a time when the nuclear family seemed under threat. Responding to this climate, Elizabeth Wilson argued that the series had more to say about heterosexuality than it did about homosexuality:

> Brideshead for dykes (aka Portrait of a Marriage) is over. But, if everyone hates lesbians, why screen it at all? […] But, could it be that gay love is the lens through which heterosexual society is desperately peering at its own problematic practices? […] Although the message is usually that heterosexuality, or just men, wins out

over love between women in the end, these narratives also hint that not all is well in the world of heterosexuals.[27]

Wilson exposes concerns over the visibility of lesbian sex—was Portrait a further manifestation of declining morality and defunct values? But her notion of a 'lens' through which heterosexuality is scrutinised suggests an underlying conservatism—homosexuality may act as 'a strange, illicit, subliminal utopia […] by contrast with the clapped-out world of heterosexuality', but it does so at the cost of finite, mediated expression. Order is restored and normative heterosexuality 'wins out'.[28] But how does this work in Portrait? What strategies enable the depiction of lesbian sex, and how is order restored?

Portrait was more explicit than Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit, the first BBC drama to depict lesbian sex (broadcast nine months earlier). In Oranges, nudity and the suggestion of sex was limited to a single sequence in the second of three episodes: Jess and Melanie kiss and lie naked together, cue the use of de-realising slow-motion and dystopic, non-diegetic organ music (techniques that recall the drama's fantasy sequences). In Portrait, by contrast, each of the series' four episodes contained scenes of nudity and sex (or, at least, their suggestion). There was not, however, a comparable leap forward in explicit content—no more human flesh was on display, with both series restricted to the acceptable terrain of breast and buttock. Indeed Jennifer Harding bemoans the

reticence of Portrait, with sex scenes comprised (in the majority) of 'lingering passionate kisses and (non-genital) stroking in the afterglow'.[29] One marked difference, however, was the series' strategic contextualisation of lesbian sex.

Hilary Hinds has explored the 'romantic idealism' that characterised popular and critical reactions to Oranges.[30] Sex was perceived in terms of youthful naivety—Steve Clark, writing in the Sunday Times, described the relationship between Jess and Melanie as 'almost Disneyesque in its innocent wonderment'—while delicate sensibilities were more concerned by the series' depiction of repressive religion.[31] If innocence had helped to contain the threat of lesbianism in Oranges, then the careful (re-)setting of desire in terms of heterosexuality served the same purpose in Portrait. I would not be the first critic—or the first audience member—to notice this marked heterosexualisation. Penny Florence describes Portrait as 'masculinist and heterosexist', noting in particular the absence of self-identified lesbians among the cast and crew.[32] But what is the evidence in terms of the series' aesthetic? Most notably, Vita is often seen in masculine dress, whether in full drag or trousers (the 'breeches and gaiters […] like the women-on-the-land' she describes herself wearing in her confession), or the masculine fashions of 1920s Britain.[33] Vita's costumes appear in stark contrast to the delicate lace, flowing dresses, shawls and pastel shades of the indisputably feminine Violet. As Jennifer Harding has observed, *Portrait*'s sex scenes are predicated on Vita's

performance of masculinity, on her 'theatrical "crossing over"'.[34] Vita is shown to identify as a man in her relationship with Violet and, as a result, she is invested with sexual agency. For example, in episode 2, we see Vita in full drag, dressed as a wounded soldier and later as a tango-dancing lover in the bars and cafes of the Parisian demimonde. Two sex scenes result from this 'crossing over'. In the first, Violet sucks and kisses Vita's toes. Having entered the room as the "wife" of a male-identified Vita, in the guise of a soldier, this scene can be read as a displaced act of fellatio—Vita is thus in possession of the phallus and the authority it confers. This is manifest in the episode's second sex scene: Vita, again in the guise of a soldier, stalks Violet in their darkened hotel suite, grabbing her and silencing her playful scream, kissing her and forcing her to the ground. Here Vita is physically and sexually dominant; her desire is active and tinged with violence, finding its counterpart in Violet's demure vulnerability.

But how does this heterosexualised performance contain the threat of lesbian desire? For Jennifer Harding, Portrait's repeated use of drag and butch/femme serves to regulate non-normative sexuality. Costumed and performed, lesbian sex becomes a temporary aberration—a finite imitation of the "norm". Lesbianism is thus ultimately 'brought to heel', bending to the responsibilities of marriage.[35] Portrait's reticence also serves to obfuscate lesbian sex. Again, Harding argues that the tendency to fade out sexual encounters produces 'a space usually filled by images

of heterosexual copulation. Viewers were directed towards thinking of heterosexual penetration or drawing a blank'.[36] Portrait does little, therefore, to challenge the dominance of normative heterosexuality—deviant desires are highly mediated and, to return to Elizabeth Wilson, heterosexuality 'wins out'. Gender might be performative, but sexuality remains tied: Vita's masculinity desires Violet's femininity. Thus lesbianism in Portrait is 'visible only though these particular enactments of butch/femme stereotypes'.[37]

In his study of biopic, George F. Custen suggests the intimacy of the small screen has encouraged an increasing concern with 'the lives of typical people'—television biopics 'enshrine normalcy'.[38] But it would be difficult to confuse Portrait with kitchen-sink drama, while the class privilege of Nicolson, Sackville-West and Keppel/Trefusis families elevates the series above the 'typical'. Despite this, the maintenance of norms is certainly key to Portrait's treatment of lesbian sex. For Custen, 'villains' in television biopic embody factors that threaten family life, and he includes homosexuality among these ranks.[39] Despite the series' containment of this 'villain' within a heterosexual framework, Portrait failed to 'enshrine normalcy' to the required standard of its American audience. The broadcaster PBS cut thirty-four minutes from the series, claiming the decision was based on efficiency: 'mostly for pacing and to move the story along'. But a second, 'softer' version was also made 'in accordance with the public's "concerns and sensibilities"', and local stations were able to

choose which version to broadcast.[40] The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation protested the decision. In an article for The Nation, one of their members, Charlotte Innes, claimed the cuts enacted a thorough curtailment of the women's relationship. Excised material included: 'a childhood scene suggesting that Vita and Violet's lesbianism was inherent and their love for one another mutual; a wonderful tender moment in which Violet sings to Vita; and several shots in which the two women are seen having fun together'.[41] In other words, they removed 'the pleasurable, enduring aspect of the relationship'.[42] These cuts reveal the protectionist aspect of television biopic identified by Custen, but the requirement to 'enshrine normalcy' was also integral to Portrait's status as quality programming. The series' careful screening of sex was intended to appease traditional audiences of costume drama, burying lesbianism within a heterosexual framework to protect the series' appeal to middle-class respectability. The result was a strange denial of lesbianism in the face of its presence. In the Radio Times, for example, the series' producer Colin Tucker was able to assert that 'lesbianism was irrelevant', universalising (and reducing) the story to 'a human triangle'.[43]

But one aspect of Portrait and its screening of sex remains problematic. I have argued that Vita is invested with sexual agency and this marks a clear break between source text and adaptation. The heterosexual framework adopted by the series follows the clear precedent set by Nigel's treatment of the confession: his reduction and containment

of 'V. & V.'. Thus far, book and costume drama appear to agree. But Vita's confession mediates sexual agency—the relationship is predicated on Violet's precocious sexuality and Vita claims to be seduced: 'She was infinitely clever […] it was all conscious on her part, but on mine it was simply the drunkenness of liberation'.[44] Vita's 'drunkenness' suggests the loss of rational self-control and, by implication, her lack of responsibility. Violet, however, is sexually aware, with her passive femininity being actively performed: 'She let herself go entirely limp and passive in my arms. (I shudder to think of the experience that lay behind her abandonment)'.[45] Nigel extends this trope in his biographical chapters. In his account of Vita's relationship with Virginia Woolf, for example, he uses evidence from letters to insist their relationship was 'a mental thing; a spiritual thing […] an intellectual thing'.[46] All this, however, is in start contrast to the television series' depiction of rape.

In episode 3, after Violet's marriage to Denys Trefusis, Vita intercepts the newlyweds on their honeymoon. She abducts Violet and takes her to a darkened room somewhere else in Paris. She shouts at her—'Bitch!' and 'Whore!'—then kisses her passionately, forcing her onto the bed. When Violet attempts to rise, she slaps her across the face. Forcing herself on top of Violet, she kisses her and tears her dress, forcing her hand up Violet's skirts and penetrating her: 'Is this what he feels like? Is it?'. Violet cries and struggles throughout, screaming at the moment of penetration. This is the series' most explicit scene in terms of sex and

violence, yet it remains on the periphery of the heterosexual framework. While the scene is a perverse imitation of heterosexual practice, it is not contextualised through a clear performance of butch/femme. The act of penetration is male-identified, but the scene is not made safe by a theatrical performance of masculinity—Vita does not “cross over”. She wears layered skirts and a long, flowing beige coat; in style and colour palette, the women appear remarkably similar. As such, this is the closest the series gets to sex between two feminine-identified women. And yet, it is also Portrait’s most negative portrayal of lesbianism. The demands of television biopic and quality costume drama require this to be so: lesbianism that escapes the series’ heterosexual framework must be rendered abject—it is allied to rape, an extreme, non-normative and “deviant” sexual practice.

Disputing authenticity

Portrait’s most outspoken critic was Nigel Nicolson. At first, he acknowledged the strange experience of seeing his mother’s story re-told, confessing to the Radio Times that he found it ‘all a bit spooky’ and was ‘particularly unnerved’ by the sight of Janet McTeer in Vita’s clothes.[47] The series’ performed reality, it seems, was uncannily accurate. But Nigel would later revise this assessment and he begins here, in his first post-broadcast interview, to distance himself from the production. In particular,

he is dismayed by the portrayal of his parents' marriage and he confesses to feeling 'embarrassed' by the 'intimate "very sexy" love scenes': 'I was conscious of looking away from some of the more erotic scenes, feeling I was a voyeur'.[48] Here Nigel averts his gaze from the screening of lesbian sex and, in subsequent statements to the press, he would attempt to avert the gaze of the public.

In an article for The Times entitled 'Portrait of a love betrayed?', Nigel repeated his objections, returning again to the series' too-explicit depiction of lesbian sex. He suggests the adaptation contravened a "gentleman's agreement" between himself and the series' producers. As evidence, he quotes from a letter written during a previous adaptation project, a copy of which was sent to the BBC:

> The story must be told with delicacy and with no overtly sexual scenes. By that I mean that Vita and Violet should not be shown making love. There must be no pawing or mutual undressing or passionate embraces… Their elopement was a crazy escapade, from which Vita just recovered in time, largely owing to Harold's extraordinary gentleness and understanding. At the end it might be suggested (I don't know how) that this crisis in their marriage made it all the more successful and secure. In other words, the drama might show the triumph of love over infatuation.[49]

Nigel concedes there was no contractual agreement and, placing the ethics of this issue aside, what this letter reveals is an assumption that he would retain control of his mother's text—that any adaptation would replicate his focus on 'V. & H.'. His letter attempts to censor the depiction of lesbianism; there should be no sex scenes, nor any physical expression of desire. Nigel thus sought to render the lesbian body invisible: 'Penelope Mortimer […] had little patience with my suggestion that the love between the two women should be expressed by look and gesture more than touch'.[50] Despite the clear heterosexualisation of lesbian sex in the BBC's Portrait, Nigel feared its stark visibility would inevitably undermine the dominance of his parents' marriage.

In order to wrestle back control, Nigel disputes the series' authenticity, setting the script in contradistinction to his book. Penelope Mortimer was 'determined to tell the story her way, not mine,' and thus an uncomfortable stalemate is produced: '"But it's my script," she said. "It's my book," I replied'.[51] Reasserting the authority of his source text, Nigel engages in 'fidelity criticism' (in which 'fidelity to the adapted text' is 'the criterion of judgment'), with the starkest example occurring in Nigel's memoir, Long Life (1997).[52] Material from the Times article is reproduced near-verbatim, but the issue of authenticity is more prominent. Significantly, Nigel questions the series' historical framework. He recounts the filming of a dining room scene—in which Vita sits far apart from her mother, discussing personal matters in front of three male servants—and

recalls his response: 'It would never have happened like that, I said. I was reminded that this was not fact, but drama. The scene suggested the period as most would imagine it to have been'.[53] As such, the adaptation is exposed as imagined history; performativity is emphasised, with the 'fact' of Vita's life contrasted to the fiction of television. The lead actors' performances are similarly exposed, despite tentative praise. Nigel is positive in his Times article: Cathryn Harrison's Violet is 'astonishingly true' and he is 'moved and startled by [Janet McTeer's] resemblance to my mother'. But praise is mediated by disclaimer and reservation, with Nigel emphasising the inevitable difference between adaptation (i.e. an actor's performance) and original: 'No actress or actor can portray with any exactness a person they have never met'.[54] Returning to this argument in Long Life, Nigel insists that authentic performance is impossible: 'the personality of an actor necessarily dominates the personality of the person whom he or she is trying to represent'.[55]

As a result of Nigel's 'fidelity criticism', disbelief is no longer suspended: McTeer remains McTeer, while the "original" of Vita can only be glimpsed through his source text. But how does this rhetoric revise the series' depiction of lesbian sex? With its authenticity undermined, sex and nudity is returned to the body of the actress: 'When I saw the rough cuts, I gasped inwardly at the sight of Janet and Cathryn in the nude (how they must have hated it!)'.[56] Here we are reminded that the bodies on screen, and the actions they perform, are part of the series' artifice. No longer

averted, Nigel's gaze is fixed on the bodies of McTeer and Harrison; he figures their response, and not the "characters" they play. In doing so, he extends the series' de-realisation of lesbian sex, further containing (his own) anxieties surrounding the public exposure of private lives and "real" sex.

Tipping the Velvet: an alternative framework?

It would be tempting to read the BBC's adaptation of Tipping the Velvet, broadcast twelve years after Portrait, as a product of increasing tolerance and greater visibility. Tipping was certainly more explicit: sex scenes did not fade out and the series' stars were shown to engage in a range of practices, from under-the-sheets cunnilingus to female-female penetration with a strap-on leather dildo. Sex also formed part of the series' promotional blurb; it was marketed as 'the most sexually explicit period drama ever shown on British TV' and screenwriter Andrew Davies described it as 'absolutely filthy'.[57] Progress appears to have been made with lesbianism emphasised, rather than denied, in public soundbites (compare this to Colin Tucker's 'lesbianism is irrelevant').

As an adaptation of Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian novel, Tipping was freed from Portrait's ties to "real" life and its redoubled claim to authenticity. Speaking in The Telegraph shortly before the first episode was broadcast, Waters revealed her source text was 'as much "historical

fantasy" as research', and in the Radio Times she described her urge to "queer" the period: to impose 'startling lesbian action' onto a 'familiar Victorian backdrop'.[58] Tipping thus unsettles paradigms of costume drama, undermining 'popular conceptualisation[s] of the past' (compare this to Portrait's faithful adherence to the period 'as most would imagine it to have been').[59] For Jerome de Groot, this necessitated the 'queering of […] genre'.[60] Tipping disrupts realist traditions in order to render non-normative sexuality visible, while artifice is signalled through a range of metafictive and metatheatrical devices. For example, a shot of Sarah Waters in the opening sequence of episode 1 provides an intertextual nod to the series' status as fiction; slow motion and fast motion disrupt representations of time and action—including a comically-frantic, speeded-up sex scene—while fades between scenes often take the form of a spotlight. This stylised production reinforced the series' pervasive concern with performativity, from the 'queer electric spaces' of the theatre—including stage, dressing room and players' lodgings—and the tableaux performed for Mrs Lethaby, to the social construction (and manipulation) of gendered, sexual roles, such as male renter or "angel in the house" (both performed by Nan).[61] Performativity enables a profusion of sexual identities and behaviours to be represented. As such, lesbian sex in Tipping was not dependent on butch/femme imitations, but rather sought to confuse this heterosexual logic. In episode 1, for example, a montage sequence depicts Nan as she learns her new role as a music hall "masher",

intercutting footage of rehearsal and on-stage performance. The kiss shared by Nan and Kitty on stage, while both are costumed in male suits, is a subversive moment of butch/butch desire contained by their acknowledged performance. But the kiss shared by Nan and Kitty in rehearsal is less easily quantified. As they rehearse, Nan and Kitty wear a combination of male and female dress, donning skirts and bowler hats, and thus their desires do not fit neatly into strict binaries of gender.

Tipping breaks the heterosexual frame employed by Portrait, but does this mean it was more successful as a representation of lesbian lives and sex? If explicitness is to be the measure, then the answer must be yes. But lesbianism in Tipping was contained by unreality. Where Portrait had raised anxieties due to its paradoxical performance of "real" lives and sex, Tipping was made safe by its 'innate inauthenticity'.[62] It was this that enabled Andrew Davies to "sell" the series' depiction of lesbianism—insisting 'We are not pornography, we are drama'—and which prompted much of the popular and critical response.[63] In an interview for The Telegraph, Rachael Stirling described the resulting atmosphere of titillation: 'you get all these male journalists asking you what it's like to kiss a girl. I just think, you're a bloody man, you tell me!'[64] Tipping had thus become a spectacle adapted for, and consumed by, the heterosexual male gaze—its playful representation of lesbian sex providing a frisson of excitement. In fact, it was widely reported that audiences clamoured for more. The Daily Mail asked 'Where was the blue Velvet?', claiming

viewers had complained, 'aggrieved that the sex scenes were too tame'.[65] Such a response suggests the series was not perceived as a threat to normative sexuality or traditional values, but any residual fears could be easily contained via a denigration of the series' quality. According to Jerome de Groot, those who considered Tipping offensive 'were mourning a particular type of conservative, culturally one-dimensional "classic" series'.[66] In The Independent, for example, the series' stylised production came in for criticism: 'This isn't a subtle or decorous adaptation at all—it's the equivalent of a Victorian playbill, all period typefaces and arresting changes of scale'.[67] Whereas The Telegraph drew an explicit connection between the series' screening of sex and poor quality: 'Tipping The Velvet apparently hoped that the lesbian angle would be sufficient to disguise the thinness of last night's material'.[68] For de Groot, this denigration forms part of a broader attempt to 'remarginalise […] lesbian identities'—to reinstate traditional (i.e. heteronormative) depictions of history and historical persons.[69] Thus Tipping can be safely exiled from the canon of costume drama—a poor quality, sexually-explicit "blip" in an otherwise consistent realm of quality BBC programming.

Tamsin Wilton suggests it is important for lesbians to 'break into' conventional cultural forms and thus 'destroy [their] monolithic heterosexism'.[70] From this perspective, all depictions of lesbianism in

costume drama are potentially subversive. But while the heterosexism of costume drama may have been unsettled, it has nonetheless remained intact. Depictions of "real" lesbian lives—in dramas claiming redoubled authenticity—have been tentative and sexually tame. Reliant on butch/femme pairings, they have heterosexualised lesbian sex. We are thus returned to the apparitional: in Portrait, lesbianism is contained, or 'ghosted', by the pre-eminence of marriage.[71] In terms of visibility, Tipping has been the most successful lesbian costume drama, achieving a level of explicitness still to be repeated or bettered.[72] But sex in Tipping was fully de-realised by the playful, metatheatrical production, while the series itself was subject to (potentially phobic) criticism. To return to Terry Castle, the recurrence of the lesbian figure in costume drama testifies to her 'peculiar cultural power'.[73] But we are yet to see her fully, unambiguous and unapologetic.

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[1] Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 31, 2.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Ibid., 34, 5.

[4] Tamsin Wilton, "On invisibility and immortality," in Immortal, Invisible: Lesbian and the Moving Image, ed. Tamsin Wilton (London: Routledge, 1995), 2.

[5] Yvonne Tasker, "Pussy Galore: Lesbian Images and Lesbian Desire in the Popular Cinema," in The Good, The Bad and The Gorgeous: Popular

Culture's Romance with Lesbianism, ed. Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge (London: Pandora, 1994), 172, 176.

[6] Castle, 7, 18, 46.

[7] Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge, "Introduction," in The Good, The Bad and The Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism, ed. Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge (London: Pandora, 1994), 1.

[8] Robert Giddings and Keith Selby, The Classic Serial on Television and Radio (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 1.

[9] Giddings and Selby, 1.

[10] Jerome de Groot, Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture (London: Routledge, 2009), 184.

[11] Nigel Nicolson, Portrait of a Marriage (London: Phoenix, 1992), xiii.

[12] Ibid., xiv.

[13] Julie Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation (London: Routledge, 2006), 26.

[14] Nigel Nicolson, "Unpublished Memoir TS" (1985). I am grateful to Adam Nicolson for his permission to quote from this source.

[15] For a detailed account of the publication and containment of lesbian desire in Portrait of a Marriage, see my article: "Competing life narratives: Portraits of Vita Sackville-West," Life Writing 8, no. 3 (2011): 287-300.

[16] De Groot, 184.

[17] Sarah Cardwell, Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 114; De Groot, 187.

[18] De Groot, 187.

[19] Ibid.

[20] George F. Custen, Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 3, 6.

[21] Bill Nichols, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4.

[22] Richard Kilborn and John Izod, An Introduction to Television Documentary: Confronting Reality (Manchester: Manchester University Pres, 1997), 134.

[23] Annette Hill, Restyling Factual TV: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres (London: Routledge, 2007), 137.

[24] Custen, 2.

[25] H.M Government, "Local Government Act 1988: Section 28," H.M. Government and The National Archives, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28 (accessed 13 April 2011).

[26] Mandy Merck, Perversions: Deviant Readings (London: Virago, 1993), 114.

[27] Elizabeth Wilson, "Borderlines," New Statesman and Society, November 2, 1990, 31.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Jennifer Harding, Sex Acts: Practices or Femininity and Masculinity (London: Sage, 1998), 134.

[30] Hilary Hinds, "Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit: Reaching audiences other lesbian texts cannot reach," in Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image, ed. Tamsin Wilton (London: Routledge, 1995), 63.

[31] Sunday Times, January 21, 1990. Cited in Hinds, 63.

[32] Penny Florence, "Portrait of a Production," in Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image, ed. Tamsin Wilton (London: Routledge, 1995), 124.

[33] Nicolson, Portrait, 99.

[34] Harding, 131.

[35] Ibid., 129.

[36] Ibid., 132.

[37] Ibid., 131—my emphasis.

[38] Custen, 221, 226.

[39] Ibid., 226.

[40] Ben Macintyre, "Lesbians angered as TV tones down tale of Vita's love affairs," The Times, June 15, 1992, 12. Prairie Public Television in North Dakota chose not to broadcast the series at all, claiming it '[violated] community standards beyond saving'. See "PBS Mini-Series Rejected in N. Dakota," New York Times, July 20, 1992, 14, http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/20/arts/pbs-mini-series-rejected-in-n-dakota.html (accessed 14 April 2011).

[41] Charlotte Innes, 'Bloomsburied," The Nation, September 28, 1992, 338.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Sally Brompton, "Vita, Violet and me," Radio Times, September 15-21, 1990, 4—my emphasis.

[44] Nicolson, Portrait, 100.

[45] Ibid., 101.

[46] Ibid., 188.

[47] Brompton, 4.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Nigel Nicolson, "Portrait of a love betrayed?" The Times, September 22, 1990, 16.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 16, 17.

[52] Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

[53] Nicolson, Long Life (London: Phoenix, 1998), 27.

[54] Nicolson, "Portrait of a love betrayed?" 17.

[55] Nicolson, Long Life, 27.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Claire Cozens, "Davies boasts of 'filthy' lesbian drama," The Guardian, September 19, 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/sep/19/bbc.broadcasting1 (accessed 18 April 2011).

[58] Will Cohu, "The BBC make it sound quite filthy," The Telegraph, October 8, 2002, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4728952/The-BBC-make-it-

sound-quite-filthy.html (accessed 18 April 2011); E. Jane Dickson, “Velvet underground,” Radio Times, October 5-11, 2002, 24.

[59] De Groot, 187.

[60] Ibid., 193.

[61] Sarah Waters, Tipping The Velvet (London: Virago, 2006), 38.

[62] De Groot, 193.

[63] Cohu.

[64] Sarah Donaldson, “It’s not just two birds snogging,” The Telegraph, October 8, 2002, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3583845/Its-not-just-two-birds-snogging.html (accessed 18 April 2011).

[65] Tony Bonnici, “Where was the blue Velvet?” Daily Mail, October 11, 2002, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-142244/Where-blue-Velvet.html (accessed 18 April 2011).

[66] De Groot, 193.

[67] Thomas Sutcliffe in The Independent, cited in “Tipping the Velvet,” The Guardian, October 10, 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/oct/10/firstnight.broadcasting (accessed 18 April 2011).

[68] James Walton in The Telegraph, cited in “Tipping the Velvet,” The Guardian, October 10, 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/oct/10/firstnight.broadcasting (accessed 18 April 2011).

[69] De Groot, 193.

[70] Wilton, 4.

[71] Castle, 4.

[72] In 2005 the BBC broadcast an adaptation of Sarah Waters' Fingersmith (dir. Aisling Walsh). This series was not as explicit as Tipping, nor was its lesbianism as central to the plot. In 2010 the BBC broadcast The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister (dir. James Kent). This series marked a return to the legitimating framework and heterosexualised lesbianism of Portrait, employing an intensified rhetoric of cultural legitimacy to insist on Lister's universal relevance: 'It's not about being gay or lesbian—the story is about anybody who wants to be who they want to be'. Michael Osborn, "Drama gives 'first' lesbian fresh life," BBC News Website, May 31, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8710965.stm (accessed 21 April 2011).

[73] Castle, 7.