

Susana Onega

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- 1 The publication of her first three novels, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), established Sarah Water as a neo-Victorian writer with the revisionist agenda of dismantling the received notion of compulsory heterosexuality fostered by patriarchal ideology and of tracing lesbian practices back to the Victorian period. As Waters herself has pointed out in various interviews, before becoming a writer she was a university teacher and a researcher and she read numerous non-canonical lesbian and gay historical fictions for the writing of her PhD thesis. Of these, she singles out as most influential the works of Ellen Galford, Isabel Miller, and Christ Hunt, especially the latter's novel, *Street Lavender*, which she acknowledges as a direct intertext of *Tipping the Velvet* (Armitt 2007, 121). Waters has also expressed an admiration for lesbian historical writers like 'Sylvia Townsend Warner, or Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney at the turn of the last century, or Mary Renault or Marguerite Yourcenar' (121), and she admits that this fact has conditioned 'the shape that [her] writing career has taken, which is that it all grew from *Tipping the Velvet*, which itself grew from [her] PhD thesis.' (120) In consonance with this, Waters sees her first three novels as being intimately related to each other, with 'each book grow[ing] out of the interests that remain from the book before' (120).
- 2 This assertion begs for a reading of *Fingersmith* as the culmination of Waters' sustained attempt, in her first three novels, to provide contemporary readers with an alternative representation of Victorian society in which the invisible and marginalised homosexual women are made to occupy the focal centre. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the key for the construction of this alternative recreation of our recent past lies in the crossing of the class, gender and moral boundaries determining the roles of men and women in a power structure of domination and subservience whose cultural expression is Victorian pornography.
- 3 At the beginning of the novel, the most important barrier separating Sue Trinket and Maud Lilly, the two autodiegetic narrator-characters of *Fingersmith*, is the fact that they belong in diametrically opposed social classes. Sue is the adoptive daughter of Mrs Sucksby, the owner of a 'farm' for orphans and illegitimate children and a member of a gang of thieves, con artists and fences living in Lant Street, Southwark. Raised by Mrs Sucksby as her own, Sue leads the life of a thief apprentice until the age of seventeen, when she is lured by her adoptive mother, in connivance with a fellow swindler called Richard Rivers, also known as 'Gentleman', to participate in a plan to win the love of a wealthy heiress, declare her mad after the wedding, and rob her of her fortune. This heiress is Maud, an orphan like Sue, living in Briar House, Buckinghamshire, with her uncle, Christopher Lilly, a nefarious rural squire obsessed with the indexing of a huge collection of pornographic texts and prints, entitled the *Universal Bibliography of Priapus and Venus* (Waters 2003, 201). Mr Lilly has led Maud to believe that her mother, Marianne Lilly, was a lunatic, and that she died in childbirth in the mental asylum where Maud herself spent the first eight years of her life.
- 4 One salient result of this difference in the circumstances of Sue's and Maud's births and upbringing is that Sue is completely illiterate until Maud teaches her to read when she becomes her lady's maid, while Maud has been trained, first by the matrons in the mental asylum and then by her uncle, to read and write with the perfection of someone destined to be Mr Lilly's secretary. This vital difference in education is rendered ironic when the two girls discover, in the narrative present, that they were exchanged in the cradle and that Sue was in fact Marianne Lilly's daughter, born at the Lant Street baby farm, not in the mental asylum, and that Mrs Sucksby was Maud's biological mother. Of their respective fathers we know virtually nothing, only that they had abandoned their partners. As Sue sardonically remarks,

Mrs Sucksby's "husband had been a sailor lost at sea.—Lost to her, I mean. He lived in the Bermudas" (44). Of Marianne Lilly's absent partner we can only gauge that he did not marry her, as the dying lady signed the testament stating the terms of the babies' exchange with her maiden name (531). This exchange, agreed by the two mothers, was to be kept in secret by Mrs Sucksby until the girls became eighteen years old, when each would recover their real identity and inherit half of Marianne Lilly's private fortune (531).

5 Commenting on the happy ending of the novel, with the two protagonists envisioning a life together instead of being punished, as happens with transgressive women in Dickens' fiction, Cora Kaplan has written that "[i]n a simple reversal, Maud Lily and Susan Pinder [sic], *Fingersmith's* two heroines, survive, saved by the self-sacrifice of their biological and social mother, Mrs Sucksby, the mistress of the thieves' den' (2008, 53). However, Mrs Sucksby's self-sacrifice was not motivated by altruism or motherly love, but greed. She never intended to respect the pact with Marianne Lilly and all her actions were aimed at securing the title and status and inheritance belonging to Sue for Maud. It was for the achievement of this end that Mrs Sucksby was ready to send Sue to the madhouse for the rest of her life and even to take the blame for the murder of Richards Rivers and pay for it with her life. Indeed, when Sue agrees to participate in Mrs Sucksby and Rivers' plan to cheat Maud, she does not know that their real intention is to switch back Sue's and Maud's identities and intern Sue, instead of Maud, under the name of Mrs Maud Rivers, in the infamous mental asylum.

6 Thematically, the exchange or confusion of children in their cradles is a well-worn literary *topos*, running from the estranged twins in Plautus' *Menaechmi*, through Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, to modern tales of mistaken identities and rags-to-riches such as Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), or Charles Palliser neo-Dickensian novel, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (1989). As various critics have pointed out, in the case of the second switch of identities aimed at burying Sue alive in the mental asylum, the closest intertext is Wilkie Collins' sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1859).¹ Similarly, the sad story of Marianne Lilly, which Richard Rivers wishes to repeat with Maud, responds to yet another well-worn literary *topos*, that of the 'seduced and abandoned maiden'. The fact that Marianne Lilly gave birth to her daughter Sue in Mrs Sucksby's atrocious baby farm suggests that the naïve heiress had been lured by a rake into defying family and social norms for the sake of true love, only to find herself ruined, persecuted by her relentless brother, and abandoned by her lover when he lost hope of getting hold of her wealth. His absconding sealed Marianne's destiny, as in the utterly patriarchal Victorian world, even a lady with her own private fortune could not fend for herself without the protection of male relatives and friends. Her disgrace is graphically presented as a crossing of the geographical and class boundaries separating Briar House, her ancient family mansion in Buckinghamshire, from the Lant Street baby farm in the poverty-stricken London area of Southwark.

7 Generically, Marianne Lilly's untimely death is prefigured by that of Clarissa Harlowe's lingering death after her seduction by Lovelace, in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, Or, The History of a Young Lady* (1748), while Marianne Lilly's loss of family protection and social status stands in opposition to the hypergamic rise from lady's maid to gentlewoman achieved by the eponymous protagonist of Richardson's *Pamela, Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), thanks to her 'epic resistance' to the advances of Mr B. Further, at the beginning of her narration, Sue provides an even closer generic model for Marianne Lilly when she explains that, when she was 'five or six years old' (7), she was taken by Flora, another member of the gang, to beg at a theatrical performance of *Oliver Twist*, at 'the Surrey, St George's Circus' (3), and that she made such a racket when she saw Bill Sykes beat Nancy to death, that she was never taken to the theatre again. Besides providing evidence for the tenderness of Sue's heart, this allusion to Dickens' work brings to mind the figure of Oliver's mother. As is well known, after the unexplained disappearance of her husband Agnes Leeford, *née* Fleming, undertook a dramatic journey which ended with the pregnant lady collapsing on the street in a seaside town and her internment in the workhouse where Oliver was born. Agnes died soon after without giving her name, while the locket and ring that held the clues for her identification and married status were stolen. The unravelling of this mystery would be decisive for the restoration of

Oliver's legitimacy and identity. Deprived of them, the supposed illegitimate orphan was left in a baby farm in the care of a dreadful woman called Mrs Mann until he became nine years old. The main difference with Waters' rewriting of Dickens' plot is that, while Oliver's loss of identity and social status is a question of ill fortune that will be eventually overcome with the help of a providential God, in the case of Sue and Maud it is the result of a hastily-hatched design, motivated, in Marianne Lilly's case, by the desire to save her illegitimate baby from the clutches of her vindictive and pervert brother and, in Grace Sucksby's case, by the prospect of having her daughter cross the impenetrable class and geographical boundaries separating the poor from the gentry.

8 In her analysis of the novel, Mariaconcetta Costantini, drawing on Michael Diamond (2003, 114–15), explains that, in the mid-nineteenth century, 'The East End was the great market for children who are imported into West-end houses, or taken abroad wholesale when trade is brisk' (30). This is the ominous trade that provided Mrs Sucksby with her meagre income and the awful future she intended her daughter to avoid. The irony lies in that the well-meaning plan did not turn out as expected as, by agreeing to the exchange of babies, Mrs Sucksby was putting her biological daughter in the hands of Mr Lilly, the most pervert of all wealthy consumers of pornography at the other end of the social spectrum, thus condemning Maud to an even more degrading future than that received by Sue in the thieves' lair.

9 In the 'Notes' printed at the end of *Fingersmith*, Sarah Waters acknowledges that the inspiration for Mr Lilly's Index 'is based on the three annotated bibliographies published by Henry Spencer Ashbee under the pseudonym Pixanus Fraxi' (2003, 549). As Kathleen Frederickson notes, Ashbee is 'a wealthy Victorian gentleman, who became the first bibliographer of pornographic literature' (2011, 304). The author's acknowledgement situates the novel, then, within the context of the debate on the modern concept of pornography as a distinct category, which according to Frederickson, was initiated in 'the mid-19th century' (304). Central to this debate was the *Obscene Publication Act*, passed in 1857, which was meant to establish the differences between such overlapping areas as obscenity and blasphemy; science and pornography; pornography and blasphemy; and pornography and Catholicism (309). The ill-repute of Catholicism in nineteenth-century Britain is alluded to by Sue's surprised reaction when she realises that the document she found in Mrs Sucksby's clothes after her hanging was a 'testament', not a 'will' (Waters 2003, 531), and so, that her mother, Marianne Lilly, was Catholic. But it is Mr Lilly himself who overtly acknowledged the close connection between Catholicism and pornography in the course of a conversation with Richard Rivers, reported by Maud. As she explains, Rivers made a passing reference to Agnes, her former Irish maid, as 'Miss Fee, the papist' (261), thus provoking the following excited comment by Mr Lilly:

'I defy you—positively defy you, sir!—to name to me any institution so nurturing of the atrocious acts of lechery as the Catholic Church of Rome [...]' Then he had me read for an hour from an antique text, *The Nuns' Complaint Against the Fryars* (262).

10 Mr Lilly's Catholic background and his association with Henry Spencer Ashbee help characterise the depraved librarian as the first Victorian collector of pornography created for the exclusive consumption of gentlemen and catering for their misogynistic, pederastic, and sadomasochistic tastes. At the same time, however, the fact that he is called 'Lilly' complicates this picture, pointing to a parentage with Angela Carter's feminist recreation of Bluebeard in 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979). This is suggested by Carter's constant association of Bluebeard with white lilies,² and by the remarkable similarity between Mr Lilly's self-designed emblem—'a lily, drawn strangely, to resemble a phallus; and wound about with a stem of briar at the root' (218)—and the cover illustration by James Marsh of the Penguin edition of *The Bloody Chamber and other Stories*.³

11 Jacques Perrault's 'Barbe Bleue' (1697) was inspired by the atrocities committed with hundreds of children by the Baron of Rais (1405-1440), an aristocrat who had served in the Hundred Years' War with Jeanne d'Arc. In Carter's twentieth-century recreation of this tale, Bluebeard is presented as the descendant of a long line of aristocrats exerting unlimited power

over their land and serfs, including the right of life and death. As the blind piano tuner tells Carter's protagonist: 'There was a Marquis once who used to hunt young girls on the mainland; he hunted them with dogs, as if they were foxes' (1988, 32–33). The difference in the treatment of women between this remote ancestor and the present Marquis was that while the former used to hunt for the daughters of his own servants in this domain, the protagonist's husband 'must travel as far as Paris to do his hunting in the salons' (33). Needless to say, the fact that, in Carter's tale, Bluebeard is simply called 'the Marquis' points to the crucial role of the Marquis de Sade in the configuration of this character.

12 The presence of this less overt, though crucial, intertextual referent in *Fingersmith* adds an element of murderous violence against children and women exerted by dominant males under a façade of respectability that brings to the fore the sadomasochistic structure of domination and submission underlying class and gender relations in Victorian society, of which Mr Lilly's pornographic texts is the symptomatic expression. Consequently, this allusion to Carter's short story dissipates any charges of escapism or nostalgia of Waters's neo-Victorian novel, situating it in the context of what Frederickson has described as the 'renewed interest in pornographic politics, formal conventions and trade practices' which formed a substantial part of the 'sex wars' in the 1970s and 1980s (2011, 304).

13 Summarily stated, these debates on pornography gave way to two main antagonistic positions. Anti-porn feminists claimed that pornography represents or describes sexual behaviour that is degrading or abusive for at least one partner, and that it can lead to violence. This position was synthesised in Robin Morgan's slogan: 'pornography is the theory, rape is the practice' (1978, 169). Backed by the conclusions of the Meese Report on Pornography appointed by Ronald Reagan in 1986, this anti-porn position was a response to the anti-censorship position officially endorsed by Richard Nixon's Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1970, and defended by feminist thinkers and writers like Nadine Strossen—the author of *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women's Rights* (1995)—, Gillian Rodgers, Elizabeth Wilson, Lynne Segal, Mary McIntosh, or Angela Carter. Anti-censorship feminists argue that far from being an unalterable given, sexuality is conditioned by history and changes in time. Therefore, they denounce the anti-porn position as essentialist in that it presupposes the existence of a single, 'healthy' sexuality based on romantic assumptions and the fear of unrestrained desire. And they reject censorship on the grounds that pornography is a consequence, rather than the cause, of dysfunctional sexual relations in patriarchal societies. The central tenet of anti-censorship feminism is that sexual practices can, and should, be demystified and liberated from the constraints imposed by the dominant ideology.⁴ This process of demystification and liberation of all forms of sexuality is the task allotted by Carter to the 'moral pornographer':

The moral pornographer is an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work[...] . His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relation of man and his kind. (1992, 19)

14 This definition of the moral pornographer, which Carter applied to herself, would perfectly fit Sarah Waters, as in *Fingersmith* she projects a sadomasochistic world of total corruption and greed, reflecting the pervert sexual habits of Victorian gentlemen practiced under the cover of the double standard of morality, and forces readers to see the way such a world might work.

15 Central to the projection of this universalised sadomasochistic model is the process of corruption to which Maud is submitted by Mr Lilly. After taking hold of her custody, the nefarious librarian left the little girl he believed to be his niece in the care of the matrons of the madhouse for transgressive gentlewomen where he had tried to seclude his disobedient sister Marianne, and where Sue was also to be interned on the charge of lunacy. Thus, Maud spent the first eight years of her life sleeping by turns with one of her twenty 'foster mothers' and imitating their sadistic treatment of the wretched gentlewomen interned in it by some male relative, either because he wanted to get hold of the lady's fortune or as a punishment for some form of assertiveness or misbehaviour. After providing little Maud with this cautionary

instruction in the dangers of female transgression, Mr Lilly took the child to Briar House with the intention of training her as his secretary and reader of pornographic texts. Describing the perverse tastes of Mr Lilly and his male guests, Mariaconcetta Constantini advances the hypothesis that 'little Maud is psychologically and, most probably, also physically abused by the pornographers' (2006, 30). However, although he employed all sorts of physical and psychological punishments to 'educate' Maud according to his wishes, the dreadful librarian did not take so much pain just to transform her into a sexual object for himself and his guests. Firstly, because he could buy very cheaply as many children as he wished for this purpose in orphan farms like that of Mrs Sucksby. And secondly, and most importantly, because the destiny he had envisioned for his niece was much more demanding and rare: that of continuator of his life task as 'a curator of poisons' (Waters 2003, 198). As Mr Lilly himself explains, the reason why he forced Maud to read and watch the illustrations of his pornographic texts every day was that he intended her to become 'immune to them' so that she would be, like him, exclusively motivated by 'the lust of the bookman' (199). Maud achieves this immunity to pornography at the age of thirteen, when she realises that Mr Lilly's loathsome texts contain male fantasies, not truths:

But soon I do not care [...] I understand my uncle's books to be filled with falsehoods, and I despise myself for having supposed them truths. My hot cheek cools, my colour dies, the heat quite fades from my limbs. The restlessness turns all into scorn. I become what I was bred to be. I become a librarian. (201)

- 16 With Carter's conception of sexuality and pornography in mind, it seems evident that, at this point, Maud has moved from accepting the received notion that the sexual practices described in Mr Lilly's books reflect universal and unalterable human behaviour, to the shocked realisation that they are only crude metaphoric representations of patriarchal fantasies of domination and subservience. In other words, she has reached the understanding that, as Angela Carter puts it in the 'Polemical Preface' to *The Sadeian Woman*,

The notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick.
Pornography, like marriage and the fictions of romantic love, assists the process of false universalising. Its excesses belong to that timeless, locationless area outside history, outside geography, where fascist art is born. (1992, 12)

- 17 Still, this new insight is not enough to take Maud beyond the patriarchal paradigm she has been taught to abide by. It simply teaches her to beguile. Although at first the love-starved child strongly resisted Mr Lilly's training, she was eventually bent into obedience by a strict disciplinary regime of physical and psychological punishments that taught her to comply with his wishes and hide her hatred and rage under a façade of meekness and imperturbability. When Sue arrives at Briar House as her new maid, she is far from understanding that her lady's oddly childish and meek figure hides the iron will of a schemer as unscrupulous and immoral as herself, and that the only emotion she can feel is the sadistic pleasure she actively seeks pinching, beating and shocking her servants, including Mrs Stiles, the only person who had made her know 'what a mother's love is' (Waters 2003, 67). Susan is not aware either that, in order for her to get her job at Briar House, Maud had allowed Rivers to realise a wicked plan to get rid of her former lady's maid, Agnes Fee, which involved ruining her (238). The plan worked, for the morning after Rivers entered her bedroom, a discomfited Agnes complained of having caught scarlet fever and asked to be sent back home immediately. Although Maud heard Rivers enter Agnes' room and although she thought that he was going to rape her, she did nothing to stop the assault. In fact, it was only later, when she remembered 'Agnes showing me her red and swollen mouth' (294), that Maud realised that Rivers had opted for a less irreversible, though equally traumatic form of 'shaming' the terrified teenager away. By then, Maud had also agreed with Richard Rivers that, after their elopement and private wedding, Sue will be interned in the mental asylum instead of her. Maud's absolute lack of moral scruples and empathy, and the secret pleasure she derived from her sadistic treatment of those under her, together with her outward masochistic compliance to Mr Lilly's wildest whims and often painful demands—such as sleeping with a tight corset on, wearing a stiff and narrow-waisted

crinoline under her short doll-like skirts during the day, or wearing kid gloves day and night—shows that she has learnt to adapt her behaviour according to her relative position in the social scale: dominant with her servants and compliant with her uncle and his male friends.

18 From this perspective, the fact that her meekness is a façade hiding the reckless and morally unbounded zest for domination of a sadist may be interpreted as proof of the success of Mr Lilly's training, not, however, as a librarian immune to lust, but as a 'Sadeian woman', that utterly free, and therefore monstrous, type of woman Angela Carter saw in the great women imagined by the Marquis de Sade as counterparts to his sexually voracious and murderous statesmen, princes and popes:

Juliette Clairwill, the Princess Borghese, Catherine the Great of Russia, Charlotte of Naples, are even more cruel still [than the great men] since, once they have tasted power, once they know how to use their sexuality as an instrument of aggression, they use it to extract vengeance for the humiliations they were forced to endure as the passive objects of the sexual energy of others.

A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder. (Carter 1992, 27)

19 This is the rare stage in her individuation progress that Maud has reached when Sue arrives at Briar House. For all this, however, the novel ends with the reunion and reconciliation of the two protagonists and the prospect of a happy life together in Briar House after the death of Mr Lilly, with Maud earning a living as a writer of pornography.

20 Reflecting on this ending, Mark Llewellyn has written that '[t]he fact that Sue's narration ends with her and Maud's assumption of the role of pornographer proves a possibly less than satisfactory resolution' (2007, 205), for, as he argues, '[i]t is debatable whether this reclaiming of a pornographic heritage is a liberation for the female characters, or readers' (204). Similarly, Cora Kaplan expresses the bafflement this ending has provoked in many readers, including a good number of 1960s and early 1970s feminists like her, on the argument that:

the joyful reunion of two star-crossed, cross-class women lovers switched at birth would have been more than acceptable, but the other half of the novel's happy ending, in which the slum girl brought up as a rich lady begins a promising new career as a pornographer would surely have been a joke too far. (2008, 51)

21 According to Kaplan, this ending only makes sense if we read it ironically as 'a cautionary tale' (52), providing evidence for the continuation of 'a market' for pornography, for 'Maud's limited control over the discourses that have shaped her', and for the fact that her 'wicked uncle' has succeeded in making Maud 'his heir, and more' (51).

22 In the light of the debate on pornography discussed above, which is explicitly invoked by Kaplan, it seems evident that the reluctance of these critics to accept the happy ending of the novel stems from the assumption, programmatically endorsed by anti-porn feminists, that Maud is writing the same type of male-oriented pornography Mr Lilly hoarded because all pornography responds to a universal pattern of sexual behaviour unmediated by social, cultural and economic facts. This assumption is so engraved in patriarchal societies that Sue herself is disconcerted and repulsed when she discovers that Maud is earning a living as a pornographer:

'To find you here, all on your own, writing *books like that*—!'

Again she looked almost proud. 'Why shouldn't I?' She said.

I didn't know. 'It just don't seem right,' I said. 'A girl like you—!'

'Like me? There are no girls like me' (Waters 2006, 546–7, emphasis in the original)

23 Just before this exchange, Maud had told Sue that when she offered her own pornographic material to a friend of her uncle's, he sent her to 'a home for distressed gentlewomen'. Then she added: 'They say that ladies don't write such things. But I am not a lady' (546). By rejecting the qualifications of 'girl', 'lady' and 'distressed gentlewoman', Maud is situating herself beyond the social and cultural bounds limiting her actions and sexual behaviour according to her gender, thus opening up the possibility of imagining new form of social and sexual relations. Only by considering this possibility can we account for Maud's apparently contradictory decision to deface or sell Mr Lilly's books and prints (456) while simultaneously earning a living as a writer of pornography.

24 After her arrival at Briar House, Sue discovered a finger painted on the floor of Mr Lilly's library pointing to the demarcation line servants and uninvited guests must not cross. Mark Lewellyn, in a section of the above-mentioned article entitled '*Fingersmith: Crossing the Finger*' (201–206), provides an accurate interpretation of its symbolism when he suggests that '[t]he finger points to the inclusive/exclusive divide between those who have access to material print culture and those who are merely its subjects' (201). With this warning finger in mind, it is easy to see that the main shortcoming of Sue's upbringing was her illiteracy, and the main mistake Mr Lilly made was to allow Maud to cross this demarcation line by providing her with an education exclusively reserved for gentlemen while he treated her as a subservient woman. As we have seen, it is the crossing of this cultural boundary that allowed Maud, at the age of thirteen, to comprehend the constructed nature of pornography, and so, to move from the role of passive object of male domination and lust to the position of Sadeian woman. The second stage in Maud's individuation process begins at the age of seventeen, when Sue arrives at Briar House and makes her discover a new type of sexual relation based on mutual pleasure and love, rather than on domination and submission. Her eventual realisation that sex between consenting women has nothing to do with the stereotypical representations of lesbianism in Mr Lilly's pornographic texts constitutes the real fulcrum in Maud's individuation process, allowing her to cross the definitive cultural boundary from Sadeian woman to moral pornographer, that is, from morally unbounded and monstrous consumer and enforcer of sadomasochistic pleasure and pain to active agent in the demystification and liberation of all forms of sexuality from patriarchal constraints. The fruition of true lesbian love provides Maud with the necessary agency to take control of her life and produce a new type of erotica 'filled', as she tells Sue, 'with all the words for how I want you' (547). Maud's emphasis on the verbal nature of her texts echo Angela Carter's description of the task of the moral pornographer:

The sexual act in pornography exists as a metaphor for what people do to one another, often in the cruellest sense; but the present business of the pornographer is to suppress the metaphor as much as he can and leave us with a handful of empty words. (1992, 17).

25 This is the crucial aspect in which Maud's pornographic texts differ from those of her uncle: the fact that her writings are made of words of desire expressing her own homosexual experience, rather than metaphors representing patriarchal stereotypes of male domination and female submission. The existence of these texts puts an end to the assumption that sexual roles respond to an unchangeable and universal pattern. Thus, while patriarchal pornography is based on the objectification of women and the justification of male violence, Maud's lesbian texts open up the possibility of imagining women as the active agents of their own *jouissance*, living in a more empathetic, egalitarian and free society. In this sense, Maud's assumed role as a lesbian pornographer, far from providing evidence for the continuation of Mr Lilly's teachings, or being the expression of Sarah Waters' ironic admission of defeat, as Kaplan argues, has in fact a moral as well as an educational value, as it provides both the Victorian and the contemporary readers with a liberating alternative to the binary oppositions between man/woman, self/other, master/slave, subject/object of desire that have been ruling sexual and social relations in Western culture since the pre-Socratic philosophers.

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Notes

1 Laura Fairlie's astonishing resemblance to Anne Catherick, the mentally disabled woman in white, is employed by Laura's husband, Sir Percival Glyde, to switch their identities and confine her in a mental asylum so he can get hold of her marriage settlement. On the intertextual indebtedness of *Fingersmith* to *The Woman in White*, see Onyett (2008: 21–23).

2 Thus, for example, when the Marquis disrobes his newly wed wife, she is torn between sexual arousal and a repugnance she cannot stifle 'for his white, heavy flesh, that had too much in common with the armfuls of arum lilies that filled my bedroom in great glass jars, those undertakers' lilies with the heavy pollen that powders your fingers as if you had dipped them in turmeric. The lilies I always associate with him; that are white. And stain you' (Carter 1988, 15).

3 Sarah Waters has acknowledged the influence of Carter's works and ideas in general and *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* in particular (Dennis 2008, 43–45).

4 For a more nuanced exposition of the anti-porn and the anti-censorship positions, see Seidman (1991).

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Abstracts

La pornographie et la traversée des frontières morales, de classe et de genre dans *Fingersmith* de Sarah Waters

Dans le sillage de *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) et de *Affinity* (1999), le troisième roman néo-victorien de Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (2002), est le point culminant de son projet consistant à fournir au lecteur contemporain une représentation différente de la société victorienne, dans laquelle les homosexuelles invisibles et marginalisées deviennent le point focal du récit. Cet article propose une lecture du roman dont le but est de démontrer que le moyen privilégié de construire cette vision différente de notre passé récent réside dans la traversée des frontières morales, de genre et de classe qui déterminent les rôles masculins et féminins au sein d'une structure de pouvoir dont la pornographie victorienne est l'expression culturelle.

Fingersmith (2002), Sarah Waters' third neo-Victorian novel, represents the culmination of her sustained attempt, in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999), to provide contemporary readers with an alternative representation of Victorian society in which the invisible and marginalised homosexual women are made to occupy the focal centre. The article offers a reading of the novel aimed at demonstrating that the key for the construction of this alternative recreation of our recent past lies in the crossing of the class, gender and moral boundaries determining the roles of men and women in a power structure of domination and subservience whose cultural expression is Victorian pornography.

Index terms

Mots-clés : Carter (Angela), Dickens (Charles), censure, classe, féminisme, Femme Sadienne, genre, guerre des sexes, lesbianisme, pornographe moral, sadomasochisme

Keywords : Carter (Angela), Dickens (Charles), censorship, class, feminism, gender, lesbianism, moral pornographer, sadomasochism, Sadeian Woman, sex wars

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