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'Queer and Verdant': The Textual Politics of Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian Novels

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<1> Sarah Waters is without a doubt one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary British writers, as well as one of the most commercially successful: her reputation as a gifted and prolific storyteller is firmly grounded in her neo-Victorian beginnings with *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), and has been recently confirmed by the publication of her fourth novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), set in the war-ravaged London of the 1940s. Before this foray into the twentieth century, Waters's atmospheric chronicles of forbidden, and forgotten, passions against the backdrop of the Victorian capital had become the trademark of her fiction –- and *The Night Watch* continues this legacy in its preoccupation with notions of marginality and illegitimacy and in the exploration of the narrative and critical possibilities offered by the vibrant metropolitan setting. This analysis, however, centres on Waters's recuperation and reinterpretation of Victorian narrative strategies and physical locations: it is therefore limited to Waters's "quasi-trilogy" and its engagement with the literary devices of domestic melodrama, gothic fiction and the sensation novel, as well as with the literal and metaphorical geography of late nineteenth century London.[1]

<2> The scope of this article is the natural development of my earlier study of the city space in *Tipping the Velvet*, a narrative which foregrounds the fluid and performative nature of identity through a sustained portrayal of London as a stage; it is the exploration of Waters's deliberate use of the Victorian metropolis as a carnivalesque space, where it is possible to be an actor and a spectator at the same time, that first sparked my interest in the relationship between the literary genres revisited by Waters and her characterization of the city. Unfolding ostensibly as a *Bildungsroman*, *Tipping the Velvet* in fact charts Nancy Astley's picaresque vagaries through London in an episodic, non-teleological narrative framework: the only form of character development we encounter, if any, is the result of a theatrical apprenticeship, rather than a genuine sentimental education.[2] I would argue that, like *Tipping the Velvet*, both *Affinity and Fingersmith* recoil from the sense of closure and the facile moral lessons of the novel of formation, and parade instead an eccentric disposition rooted in their penchant for Victorian popular formulas and in their confrontation with the reality of urban life.

<3> For this reason, this is an essay of two interlocking halves: the discussion of Victorian literary subgenres will trigger the analysis of how Waters negotiates the gender and sexual biases and stereotypes that underpin conventional narrative forms; similarly, the focus on the Victorian city will provide another rewarding perspective for the assessment of whether/how the characterization of her protagonists, which is informed by their interaction with London, challenges the supposed naturalness of gender and sexual roles, by foregrounding the notion of identity as performance. In other words, this essay will show how Waters challenges the distinction between masculine and feminine plot drives typical of gothic fiction, how she blurs the boundary between proper and improper models of femininity of the sensation novel, and how she questions the feminine acquiescence with the sphere of domesticity in the novel of sentimental education. In this way, Waters performs a subtle critique of patriarchal rules and values, while casting a candid look on the lesbian characters in her fiction: together, the adoption of popular narrative formulas and the portrayal of protagonists who, more often than not, must face problematic decisions in the definition of their chosen gender and sexual roles, are the key to Waters's success in disenfranchising queer narrative and queer identity from twenty-first century literary and cultural margins. As we will see, this project is underscored by an ever-present awareness of the literary and cultural constructedness of both the narratives and the characters' positions –- and in both cases it is the confrontation with aspects of the Victorian world (Victorian popular fiction and the Victorian city) that brings the artificiality of literary and cultural 'givens' to the readers' attention.

"Twisting Passages": Rewriting Victorian Popular Fiction

<4> *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* revisit the Victorian era with a seamless combination of originality and tradition: while innovative in their focus on lesbian relationships and immensely readable for their gutsy narrative developments, Waters's early novels have managed to retain a feeling of nineteenth century authenticity, through a Dickensian array of unforgettable heroes, villains and minor characters and an uncompromising exploration of the darkest pleasures and evils of metropolitan life. The Dickensian depth and breadth of Waters's narrative meanderings through the gas-lit streets of nineteenth century London is accompanied by a gusto for melodramatic twists in the plot reminiscent of other popular Victorian writers, such as Wilkie Collins, whose *The Woman in White* is one of Waters's favourite examples of suspenseful storytelling and the underlying intertextual reference for *Fingersmith*.[3] Ironically, the sense of nineteenth century 'authenticity' and the 'Dickensian feel' of Waters's fiction bank rather heavily on our very own twenty-first century perceptions of Victorian culture; Waters herself has described her research on period details as partly a matter of smoke and mirrors: the historical realism of her novels rests on enough genuine references so as to give the illusion of complete faithfulness to the period but, to a certain extent, it also panders to contemporary popular perceptions of Victorian culture.[4] Waters's attitude to period faithfulness, in her nodding to contemporary constructions of the Victorian age, is not so much the result of a deliberate choice to take liberties with historical accuracy as the by-product of a postmodern fascination with the hyperreal, the inevitable acknowledgement that the copy is as good and 'authentic' as the non-existent original. Yet, at a first glance, this appears to be Waters's only concession to a postmodern sensitivity: all in all, in her writing practice, the days of blatant self-reflective pastiche, and overt experimentalism appear to be long gone, to be replaced by an earnest revival of popular Victorian literary forms and an unashamed delight in page-turning novels which, for all their twists in the plot, do offer a seemingly unproblematic, unselfconscious reading experience, allowing their audience to lose themselves in the fast-paced narrative flow. In the best tradition of the weighty three-volume novel (incidentally, both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* are divided in three parts) or the equally substantial publication in instalments, Waters knows how to spin a long, riveting story, satisfying the readers' desire for action as well as psychological and cultural analysis: like their Victorian predecessors, Waters's novels are full of dramatic incidents and memorable characterizations, moral dilemmas and acute social observations. They clearly represent a return to the mainstream pleasure of plot-driven, engrossing narratives: it is not surprising that both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* should have made it with relative ease and rapidity, and great success, onto the small screen on the BBC.[5] Besides exploiting to full effect the action-driven nature of these novels, the translation onto the television medium perhaps gives us the exact measure of their popularity with an audience beyond academia and literary circles.

<5> In fact, for all their emphasis on the transparency of the narrative medium, and the primacy accorded to the unfolding of the plot over formal and linguistic experimentalism, Waters's novels are examples of a subtle kind of narcissistic and literary writing. "[R]esolutely silent on its own fictionality, presenting itself as paradoxically more real than the thing it imitates", Waters's fiction nonetheless gives voice to "the historically silenced and forgotten *who have no history*" (Kohlke, 156, *passim*, italics in the text). The novels' ostensible unselfconsciousness is both calculated and polemical, for it "mimicks [*sic*] history's obscuration of its own narrativity, not merely critiquing it but re-enacting it" (Kohlke, 165). At the same time as she satisfies her readers' narrative greed, Waters exposes the blind spots in official history through her choice of marginalized,

silenced heroines, effectively producing what Linda Hutcheon would call historiographic metafiction and what Kohlke calls, with a revealing neologism, "new(meta)realism", where the 'meta' reads like a last minute, parenthetical hint at the narratives' ultimate artistry and self-awareness. While I see the validity of Kohlke's take on the realist element in Waters's novels (a point developed with particular reference to *Affinity*), I would argue that Waters's use of historical fiction is much more than an appeal to new(meta)realist conventions, but rather the intentional recuperation of popular and, more crucially, highly formulaic, subgenres of the Victorian novel. Interestingly, even if *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* all lend themselves to be read as 'coming out' stories, Waters's narrative form of choice is not the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of formation. Instead of charting the development of the characters' sense of self and exploring the integration of the individual within society (the subject of 'serious', 'high-brow' realist novels), Waters adopts the conventions of popular Victorian fiction: the gothic novel, the melodrama or feuilleton, the sensation novel. The formulaic conventions of these genres are tempered with a certain plausibility in the portrayal of the protagonists of the narratives: Waters eschews the popular trappings of black and white characterization in order to give life to complex, even flawed, heroines. This combination of formulaic plots and psychological realism is the reason perhaps for Waters's great crossover popularity: if the protagonists' struggle to come to terms with, and to express, their sexual identity is relevant enough to the experience of a queer audience, the roundness of Waters's characters succeeds in enlisting the sympathy of any reader, while the quick pace and the inventiveness of the plot make these novels compelling reads and instant best-sellers, excellent examples of popular fiction in the most positive sense of the word.

<6> As anticipated, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* have very clear literary affiliations with the gothic novel and the sensation novel respectively; *Tipping the Velvet* instead is harder to categorize within the frame of Victorian fiction: its most direct, recognized literary predecessor is, by public consensus, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), to whose shenanigans *Tipping the Velvet* provides an equally mischievous queer counterpart.[6] The two narratives share an interest for the demimonde of prostitution and petty criminality, as well as a rumbustious story-line and a subversive picaresque spirit: as in the case of *Moll Flanders*, the picaresque format of *Tipping the Velvet* underlies the protagonist's apparent moral and emotional progress in her 'sentimental education', seriously impairing the credibility of her final redemption. Thus, the Victorian *Bildungsroman* loses its edifying punch and becomes a provocative fictional crossbreed, much like the gothic and the sensation novel.

<7> Besides offering the possibility of attention-grabbing plots, the three particular narrative conventions adopted by Waters all lead to an understated critique of patriarchal ideology and to the testing and trying out of alternative rules, for they contain a fantastic and/or improbable streak (the markers either of wishful thinking drives or nightmarish anxieties) in a sound realistic grounding. In other words, the picaresque, the gothic and the sensation novel are all hybrid genres, combining formulaic plots, stock characters and larger-than-life scenarios with a minute realism; the latter two forms in particular often rely on the representation, and implicit questioning, of female domestic life (Modleski, 20). The picaresque endless sequence of adventures, the gothic suspense and the sensationalist melodrama, when focused on female experience (which the gothic and particularly the sensation novel do almost by definition) give voice to women's dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and to their ambivalent feelings towards the rules of patriarchy.

<8> Waters's true strength as a writer, both in the aesthetic and political value of her novels, is that she exploits the subversive potential of her chosen subgenres in surprising, unorthodox ways, with full consciousness of the paradoxical double bind of complicity and critique that these narratives necessarily carry within themselves: providing an outlet for the expression of women's rage against patriarchy is also the easiest way to contain and control these rebellious urges. Waters's Sapphic revisitation of these popular narrative conventions contains some truly unexpected twists in the tale, especially if we want to argue that her ultimate goal is to provide positive models of homosexual behaviour. In fact, Waters's critique of patriarchy -– and of the double restrictions that it imposes on homosexual women –- is complemented by an unprejudiced representation of her heroines as less than perfect, and occasionally downright unpleasant, human beings: Waters's writing is in no way a 'drawing by numbers' exercise, or a facile matter of roles and values reversals, even if that means that sometimes her characters' defiance remains only skin-deep, while the conservative rules of society get slowly reinstated in the conclusion of her stories.

<9> *Affinity*, for example, spells out the gothic *topos* of the identity, as far as women are concerned, between the space of the home and that of the prison: the novel charts two parallel stories of domestic and criminal horror, with Margaret Prior's doomed spinsterhood and captivity in her family home and Selina Dawes's detention at Millbank, charged with fraud and assault committed in the exercise of her questionable profession as a spiritualist medium. Diane Long Hoeveler has acknowledged a whole critical tradition that distinguishes between "female" and "male" gothic plots: "female" narratives essentially aim to expose the social and economic evils plaguing women (their confinement to the sphere of domesticity, or their lack of independent identity and legal status, as in the institution of manumission), while "male" gothic tales usually revolve around the recognition of the evil other as one's self, and therefore rely on the creation of a psychological horror.

<10> Until the very last section of the novel (the last thirty pages of the book), *Affinity* seems to unfold according to the expected pattern of a traditional female gothic tale, since it describes Margaret's awakening to the harshness and the injustice of her condition as a woman bound to her phallic mother's house, and follows her planned escape from her mother's rule. Such an escape would appear to depend on Selina's breakout from Millbank, and the final consummation of Margaret's and Selina's spiritual and sexual affinity: Margaret's infringement of the domestic order spills onto a criminal transgression against society (after all, female homosexuality has never been a criminal offence, because of its invisible –- or rather spectral (Castle) -– existence).[7] Yet, the conclusion of the novel contains a truly dreadful revelation, and a consequent, catastrophic reversal of fortune for Margaret, who comes to realize that she has been an unwitting pawn in the hands of Selina and, even more shockingly perhaps, of her own maid, Ruth Vigers, Selina's real, long-term lover. Thus Waters originally and successfully combines female and male gothic plots: Margaret is deprived both of her money and her identity by her other self, Selina. What we are left with is an ironic take on the 'affinity' of the title: in a deft, last-minute sleight-of-hand Waters denies her readers their feel-good story, and turns a buoyant tale of sisterhood into a truly frightening, honest appraisal of the precariousness of Margaret's ability to claim her own individual identity, both as a woman and as a lesbian (Margaret's lack of control on her own identity is also clearly exemplified by the slipperiness of her name: she is Margaret to her mother, but Peggy to her father, Miss Prior to her servants, and Aurora – an overt homage to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation heroine in *Aurora Floyd* -– to her beloved sister-in-law and, later on, to Selina).[8]

<11> A complementary reading to this take on Margaret's demise would perhaps suggest that the real villain of the piece (possibly in response to her own subordinate and downtrodden position) is Ruth, Margaret's -- and in fact Selina's -– maid: doubly invisible, not only as the impersonator of Peter Quick, Selina's spirit guide, but also because of her low social status. Kohlke argues that at the end of the novel the reader is left pondering the possibility that Selina herself might be a victim, manipulated against her will by Ruth: "[Waters] calls into question the extent to which real lesbian relationships actually resolve gendered power imbalances, for Selina proves both victimizer and victim, dominated and exploited by her lesbian lover Ruth, who adopts a stereotypical butch and masterful attitude towards her 'girl'" (Kohlke, 161-62). Interestingly, *Affinity* unfolds with the alternating first person narratives of Margaret's visits to the prison and Selina's pre-Millbank diary, but ends with Ruth's possessive words to her lover ("Remember ... whose girl you are", Waters, 1999, 352). The ambiguous, disturbing conclusion of the novel confirms once more Waters's desire to integrate the deconstruction of gender / sexual stereotypes with an insightful social critique. After all, the double standards in what is even perceived as unacceptable behaviour in women of different class status pervade the whole novel: in the underworld of Millbank, where the phenomenon of female 'pals' is unofficially acknowledged, Margaret's economic and social superiority still guarantees her a semblance of respectability, even if she is taunted for her special friendship with Selina; in her own household instead, Margaret is frowned upon for what is seen as a morbid interest and an improper association with her Millbank protégés, whose social provenance and moral disposition are at least dubious (the stigma, that is, is of a purely social nature: the fact that Margaret might have emotional and/or sexual ties with the women prisoners is so unthinkable that it is never even mentioned –- see also Havelock Ellis's belief that lesbian inclinations could be found particularly in women from the 'lower races', i.e. "the working class and the criminally deviant" [Llewellyn, 209]).[9]

<12> *Fingersmith* makes the juxtaposition between proper and improper models of femininity, as well as the chasm between the privileged and the lowly, even more extreme in the characterization of Maud Lilly and Sue Trinder, the two central figures in the story. At the beginning of the novel, Maud is described as a dutiful, innocent young lady, bound to a tyrannical uncle, while Sue appears to be a streetwise petty thief, acting

after the questionable moral example of her adoptive mother, Mrs Sucksby. This initial stark opposition is an obvious legacy of *Fingersmith*'s affiliation with the sensation novel, which often combines proper and improper feminine traits in its central character: Waters enhances the visibility of this motif by telling the story of not one, but two sensation heroines, with their dark past and uncertain future. This device inevitably multiplies by two the readers' shock when they find out that things are not quite what they seem. Maud's ladylike innocence is merely a façade, tainted as it is by Mr Lilly's passion for erotic fiction, so that even in her confinement in the library at Briar, her uncle's secluded country home, she is a lot less sexually naïve than Sue, who has been brought up in the lawless environment of Lant Street. In spite of her lifelong connection with the Borough and its absence of legality, Sue turns out to have a (however misguided) moral code of her own, as well as much stronger emotional ties than Miss Lilly: Sue's daughterly affection for Mrs Sucksby, so resilient that it even survives the most terrible betrayal, is poignantly contrasted by Maud's hatred for her own mother.

<13> There is in *Fingersmith* a sustained deconstruction of the binary opposition between proper and improper models of femininity, carried out in the doubling up of the morally and socially ambiguous figure of the sensation heroine. "To put a woman at the active centre of a sensation plot [i]s to make her functionally transgressive, because such an active and assertive role conflict[s] with accepted views of the proper feminine." (Pykett 1992, 82). Yet, even as, true to the scandalous nature of the Victorian popular formula, patriarchal rules and accepted definitions of respectability are blurred, Waters's story undercuts the heroines' role in shaping their own destiny. The subversive charge of the sensation novel is curtailed by an implicit reminder of women's vulnerability and powerlessness. The entire plot of the novel hinges on the two protagonists' initial determination to defraud each other of their identity (even, possibly, of their sanity): for both young women –- who ignore the fact that they have been living each other's existence all along, in a plan carefully orchestrated by Mrs Sucksby –- the affirmation of one's successful independence cannot but come at another woman's expense. As in *Affinity*, where not even Margaret is completely innocent of predatory behaviour (arguably, her role as lady visitor at Millbank allows her to disguise her voyeuristic gaze as a philanthropic practice), the two protagonists of *Fingersmith* are far from guileless, nor are they capable of immediately acting upon the early signs of their mutual passion: once again, the escape from bleak material conditions becomes a priority over any romantic considerations. Maud's and Sue's respective acquiescence with a scheme that requires the perpetuation of a logic of female oppression is mirrored by the two characters' ultimate passivity in the final denouement of the plot: the felicitous conclusion of *Fingersmith*, with Maud and Sue's reunion as mistresses of Briar, is hardly the direct result of the couple's emotional maturation. The resolution has come from above, from Mr Lilly's convenient passing away and, most significantly, from a corrupt female *deus ex machina*: it is Mrs Sucksby's sudden reformation (admittedly triggered by the desire to save her own child from the gallows), which constitutes the real turning point in the plot, allowing for a happy ending of sorts. With the (contrived?) change of heart of the one character who has been virtually scripting the whole narrative from the very beginning, Waters points out the double textual nature of Maud's and Sue's identity, who are inscribed in Mrs Sucksby's plot even before they make their appearance on the pages of *Fingersmith*. Maud's case, in fact, is further complicated by her belonging to Mr Lilly's narrative too, since he has carefully brought her up to become a formidable, unique figure, a lady connoisseur of erotic fiction: this extra layer in Maud's textuality is foregrounded by the literary associations of her name, as well as by the fact that her own account of the events is framed by Sue's, whose narrative opens and closes the novel.

<14> Both *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* deliberately set up traditional, popular nineteenth century literary expectations in order to disappoint them: Margaret's gothic nightmare has no resolution and the sensation heroines Maud and Sue play a minor role in their low-key happy ending. The two novels thus seriously undermine the notion that events might be effectively shaped by the heroines' agency, while emphasizing the textual, constructed nature of the main characters' identity: if anyone has any control on the story at all, it is a villainous figure (Ruth Vigers, Mrs Sucksby), whose exertion of power is simultaneously made possible and limited by their marginal, unprivileged social status and their calculated, at times necessary, disregard for cultural and moral norms.

<15> A partial exception to the lack of agency in Waters's protagonists is Nancy Astley, the narrator of *Tipping the Velvet*, the only novel which, as already anticipated, harks back to a linear, episodic picaresque narrative structure, rather than to the more twisted plot developments of gothic and sensationalistic fiction. Waters's first novel also has, apparently at least, the sharpest, most solid happy ending, with Nancy's sensible choice of the right companion, a sure sign of emotional and intellectual maturation. Nancy comes to choose politically committed Florence, the most serious and dependable of her lovers, having rejected Kitty, her first partner (in life and on the stage), and having escaped from the mortifying, exploitative relationship with debauched aristocrat Diana Lethaby.

<16> Yet I would maintain that throughout the novel Nancy really undergoes a *theatrical* apprenticeship, rather than a sentimental education: her decision to settle down with Florence does not imply a heartfelt subscription to her lover's values and code of conduct, but is motivated, in part at least, by the desire to step off the traditional stage (be it that of Kitty's show-business world, Diana's upper-class, clandestine lesbian circles, or even Florence's political podium) and genuinely blur the boundaries between actors and spectators. Nancy concludes her roguish series of adventures, renouncing her histrionic past in order to join a carnivalesque pageant, where everybody is a participant and an observer at the same time. If Nancy's initial subversive drive can be ascribed to her "third-person status" (Bakhtin) as a picaresque hero, her truly revolutionary achievement is the annihilation of the dichotomy between subjects and objects of the gaze. It is worth pointing out how this is merely a less sinister variation on the theme of the outsider: to Nancy's fundamentally comic figure, theatrical metamorphoses and picaresque romp, correspond the darker machinations and more dramatic transformations effected by Ruth Vigers and Mrs Sucksby, whose third-person status, as servant and social outcast respectively, grants them a limited degree of agency.

<17> Another theme that *Tipping the Velvet* makes in a much more obvious and light-hearted manner than the two later novels is the idea of gender and sexuality as performance.[10] The new(*meta*)realism of *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* (intrinsically metafictional because, to a certain extent, formulaic) is a subtle, yet constant, reminder of the textuality of its main characters, of their ultimate 'inauthenticity' in their subjection to a series of cultural and literary rules: of course, the most immediate frame of reference for hybrid genres, pledging an affiliation to narrative conventions as well as a care for realistic details, is as much the literary tradition they draw inspiration from as reality itself (Frye, 59). *Tipping the Velvet* instead relies on Nancy's conspicuous artistry as a "masher" and her artfulness as a picara, a creature living a restless life of expedients, in order to unmask the hypocrisy of Victorian conventions and the artificial nature of gender and sexual roles; the detached, demystifying outlook of the picara on society is beautifully underscored by the setting of the novel: the focus on the music hall world leads to the perhaps inevitable choice to tell the story against the backdrop of the Naughty Nineties, during "the turn-of-the-century gender crisis" (Pykett 1995, 14). Still, Nancy's cross-dressing is only Waters's most apparent, but by no means most sophisticated, way to expose the cultural and theatrical nature of sexual identity: Nancy's true histrionic potential is revealed as she establishes her social, as well as her sexual role, walking through the streets of the capital. In fact, the city of London plays a similarly crucial function in all of Waters's narratives, as the second part of this essay will argue.[11]

'London,' I said. 'Oh, London!': Identity and the City Space

<18> Waters's most ingenious tool in the affirmation of gender as performance is her characters' interaction with the Victorian metropolis and its potential as a stage.[12] Waters herself has explained the consistent choice of an urban setting for her novels as a wilful attempt to disenfranchise her writing from the wish-fulfilment mode, and mould, of a certain kind of 'closeted' lesbian fiction. The vital, crowded and boisterous capital of the British Empire takes Waters as far as possible from two equally unpalatable scenarios: the covert pastoral idyll, with country girls tumbling in haystacks, and more explicit stories where, nonetheless, 'friendship' between women seems to occur only within enclosed / aberrant / ephemeral contexts, often accompanied by physical or mental alienation (lesbianism as insanity, or the result of a more or less permanent and complete segregation, such as the belonging and/or confinement to an all-female institution –- a college, or a prison, or a community where the men are temporarily absent because of a transitional emergency).[13]

<19> With her choice to have her characters live, struggle and succeed or fail in Victorian London, the largest metropolis and the capital of the most powerful empire in the world in the nineteenth century, Waters steers clear of the comparison of lesbianism with a temporary, idyllic, harmless fantasy or with a psychological nightmare / mental disease, for a full immersion into history, and into a very significant period of

women's history at that. In Britain, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the Eighties and Nineties,

> new identities, new conceptions of human nature, declared itself. Men became women. Women became men. Gender and country were put in doubt: the single life was found to harbour two sexes and two nations. Femaleness and the female writer broke free; the New Woman, and the Old, adventured into fiction, and might be found to hold hands there, as sisters. ... [It was] an age in which there seemed to be three sexes, an age tormented by genders and pronouns and pen-names, by the identity of authors, by the 'he' and the 'she' and the 'who' of it all. (Miller, 209)

What Karl Miller describes so vividly, with special reference to the literary field, is the sign of a momentous revolution in the way the concept of "Woman" and the role of women in the family and society are thought of; in the second half of the nineteenth century irresolvable contradictions are finally subjected to close and critical scrutiny: it becomes more and more difficult to ignore the contrast between women's role as the emotional foundation and moral beacons in the home and their lack of power in the social and political sphere, as well as their claim (or perhaps men's claim on their behalf) to a higher moral standing and capacity for empathy, while they continue to be economically oppressed. It is in this period that the "woman question" finally becomes an open political issue, and that the double standards in men's and women's sexual mores start being questioned: in fact, Pykett argues that these new ideas are at the root of the development of the sensation novel. The vibrancy, and the pertinence to her concerns, of the spirit of this historical period would be a good and obvious enough reason to prompt Waters's interest in Victorian London; an equally crucial part is played by the less self-explanatory potential to envisage the metropolis as a theatre, that is a place where characters are allowed to choose, rehearse and finally act their own individual identity. As Judith R. Walkowitz points out, the perception of London as a stage had become widespread and fully acknowledged by the 1880s and of course it is exploited to its full potential in the glitzy, West End setting of *Tipping the Velvet* in the Naughty Nineties.

<20> The ability to create, nurture and then claim a strong public, as well as private, persona against the backdrop of London's multifarious reality underlies, as anticipated, the whole of Waters's fiction; in texts concerned with the search for a secure sense of identity, it is no surprise that there should be a crucial opposition between being and appearance. This polarity is played out in the Victorian locations of legitimized subversion (the West End theatre), surveillance and repression (Millbank prison) and the alternative order of the underworld (the Borough): in other words, within places and spaces where observing and being observed are everyday activities, and where the desire for self-exposure and the elusion of close watch paradoxically coexist. As in *Tipping the Velvet*, where West End theatres and East End slums finally coalesce as places of performance, so in *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* the prison and the home, and the London underworld and Mr Tilly's country mansion are ultimately exposed as places of close watch and (hidden) perversion: the heroines' success is measured against their ability to evade from these controlled, and controlling, spaces and inhabit the non-hierarchical pageant of the city streets. Yet only Nancy Astley manages to do so: with her desecrating and free spirit, she is truly in control of her act and truly at home in the metropolis - perhaps because she acknowledges from the start that her identity is an act and the streets of London her privileged and liberating stage. When Kitty's agent asks the two girls to explore London in order to "scrutinise the men" in preparation for a new act, Nancy quickly finds herself relishing the challenge and truly enjoying the experience:

> ... we seemed to learn the ways and manners of the whole unruly city; and I grew easy, at last, with London, as with Kitty herself -– as easy and as endlessly fascinated and charmed. We visited the parks -– those great, handsome parks and gardens, that are so queer and verdant in the midst of so much dust, yet have a little of the pavements' quickness in them, too. We strolled the West End; we sat and gazed at all the marvellous sights -– not just the grand, celebrated sights of London, the palaces and monuments and picture galleries, but also the smaller, swifter dramas: the overturning of a carriage; the escape of an eel from an eel-man's barrow; the picking of a pocket; the snatching of a purse. (Waters, 1998, 86).

It is clear that Nancy's ease with her own sexuality progresses alongside her orientation within the exciting metropolitan scene ("...and I grew easy, at last with London, as with Kitty herself"), while the "smaller, swifter dramas" which Nancy is a witness to convey, each in its own way, a sense of subversion of order and liberation from constraints. The carnivalesque overturning or erasure of hierarchies is echoed in the conclusion of the novel, when Nancy openly declares her love to Florence, as they both join a socialist demonstration in Victoria Park: the public square is the emancipating, non-judgemental, inclusive stage, where the rallying crowd can simultaneous be participants and observers, actors and spectators of a popular drama.

<21> This non-hierarchical position is made impossible by the setting of *Affinity*, in which Millbank is clearly modelled after Bentham's panopticon; Margaret herself is made to think about the 'all-seeing' structure of the prison from the very beginning of the novel, when Mr Shillitoe, its director, takes her to the central hexagonal tower commanding a view of the six sections of the gaol: "'You will see the logic of the design of this,' said Mr Shillitoe as we climbed, growing red and breathless; and of course, I saw it at once, for the tower is set at the centre of the pentagon yards, so that the view from it is all of the walls and barred windows that make up the interior face of the women's building." (Waters, 1999, 10). This is one of the earliest examples of how Margaret (and the reader with her) is lulled into a false sense of security by the belief that she can observe Selina without being seen; the twist in the plot lies precisely around Selina's ability to turn the prison from a privileged locus of surveillance into a place of performance, carefully directed by the only truly invisible character in the novel, Ruth Vigers. Until the last section of the book, *Affinity* follows the rules of a female gothic novel, in which Margaret manages to elude the patriarchal rule and escape her mother's surveillance through her "professionalisation of femininity" (Long Hoeveler), i.e. an enactment of the weakness, submissiveness, even sheer incompetence that patriarchy traditionally ascribes to women. What fails her in the long run though is her inability to realize that she herself has been targeted as the gullible audience of another deceitful performance: Selina's act and illusionistic tricks, planned and carried out with Ruth's dexterous complicity. Ruth, by contrast, has the greatest advantage of all over Margaret, since she can read her diary and therefore pierce through her masquerade as a detached, charitable lady. Ruth's cunning acknowledgement of the significance of Margaret's private story is a clever reversal of Margaret's own collusion with a masculine notion of history, which deems the lives of great men as its only worthy subjects and demands a serious, public narrative treatment.[14]

<22> Similarly, the initial drama in *Fingersmith* revolves around a series of bluffs and counter-bluffs, and the characters' deliverance from their fate depends on their ability to decipher and unravel the plot that keeps them imprisoned. Maud's ordeal is perhaps the best case in point, because she is embedded in three 'narratives' (Mr Lilly's, Mrs Sucksby's and Waters's of course): she is represented as a particularly literary character, and as such not fit to come out of the pages of a book and survive in the city. Precisely when she has made her escape from the Borough in a brave act of self-determination and defiance of Mrs Sucksby, Maud is made to acknowledge that she is not equipped to negotiate the streets of London, since the London she knows is just a setting in her uncle's books, a fictional, crystallized creation rather than the dynamic, challenging but also empowering place that it really is. Maud runs away from Lant Street with the hope of making an appeal to the chivalric spirit of one of her uncle's literary acquaintances, a Mr Hawtrey, dealer of erotic fiction in the notorious Holywell Street; unsurprisingly, Maud's journey across London is marked by a series of disillusionments and the unwanted attention of less than gentlemanly characters, while Mr Hawtrey refuses to offer any practical help other than some painful home truths: "This is not Briar. The world is not like Briar. ... You cannot live, in London, on nothing." (Waters, 2002, 383). In its opposition to Briar, London is the place of harsh reality and brute economics, and this is what Mrs Sucksby, and her partner in crime Gentleman, rely on to break Maud's resistance and get her to collaborate with their fraudulent scheme: "Look about you Maud. Step to the window, look into the street. There is life, not fiction. It is hard, it is wretched ... We have more than three months, to persuade you into our plot. I think three days -– of Borough living, I mean -– will do that." (Waters, 2003, 341-42).[15] At the same time, the key to survival in London is a chameleon-like ability to adapt to all kinds of situations, a skin-deep layer of propriety perhaps to cover up one's less orthodox machinations: in this sense, the Borough -– a stage for all sorts of scams, the place where Mrs Sucksby first hatched her plan, a home to fake gentlemen -– is a microcosms of the whole of London and the petty, superficial respectability of people like Mr Hawtrey, and the moral and economic contradictions of society at large. What Maud, and Sue, need to learn in their physical journeys from Briar to London, and vice versa, is to discern between substances and appearances, and finally decide whether to put on their own act, or retreat backstage: before they do that, Maud must descend into Sue's world of social injustice in the Borough and Sue must descend into Maud's world of psychological horror in the

madhouse[16] -– and yet, as we have seen, the deep mutual sympathy that derives from these experiences is not what brings the characters together in the end: their final reunion reads both as a fortuitous coda to the story and a retreat from active life, from the London limelight.

<23> Maud and Sue eventually meet up again at Briar, where Maud has voluntarily exiled herself and makes a living writing erotic fiction: the knowledge that Maud is finally writing her own story, and has succeeded in turning her uncle's oppressive obsession into an enjoyable and lucrative activity, is somehow dampened by the nagging impression that this scenario reads too much like the country idyll that Waters is so keen to supersede. But perhaps we ask too much of the lesbian writer: Waters's critique of gender and sexual roles, powerful as it is, gains in earnestness and crossover appeal through her problematic characterizations and her refusal of neat, satisfactory conclusions. In fact, the lack of outright positive role models of lesbian identity in her fiction can be read as Waters's premeditated disappointment of the expectations placed on lesbian writers. In an article jointly written with Laura Doan, Waters addresses the question of the lesbian author's responsibility in response to a critique moved to Winterson's historical fiction for "provid[ing] little in terms of a new narrative model for lesbian life in the late twentieth century" (Patricia Julian Smith, quoted in Doan and Waters, 24). Waters's reply possibly explains the bold choices in her own fiction: "Such criticisms reveal the burdens of responsibility that are placed, by lesbian reading communities, upon lesbian writers; they gesture to a kind of expectation which Winterson's increasingly complex writing must fail to fulfil." (Doan and Waters, 24). This is a clear reminder of the kind of 'no win' predicament which is often the lot of the lesbian writer, and of the inevitable pigeonholing that such a category involves.

<24> Nonetheless, the label 'lesbian fiction' provides an interesting framework within which to recapitulate our argument and draw a critical conclusion; inevitably, the comparison between Waters and Winterson provides an immediate, convenient analytical focus. No two other authors have managed to take lesbian fiction into the mainstream, with comparable success to Waters's and Winterson's;[17] nonetheless, beyond their shared concern about voicing and giving visibility to lesbian experiences, the two writers' works are very different: Jeanette Winterson's *oeuvre* is overall marked by a rejection of the conventions of formal realism and the lengthy, 'three-volume' narrative scope that Waters instead embraces in her neo-Victorian novels. In spite of their individual distinctive features, *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* can all be adequately described as realistic historical novels; Jeanette Winterson's fiction, by contrast, is much more obviously experimental and unconventional in style, so much so that even The *Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), her early historical novels, are characterized by a sustained recourse to the devices of magic realism and fantasy, as well as by a more or less overt parodic intent. Winterson's political agenda is undeniable, particularly in her early fiction, which often banks on a deliberately polemical and unsubtle reversal of binary oppositions (see, for example, the sequel to the fairy tale 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' in *Sexing the Cherry*, in which the 'happily ever after' for the twelve brides consists of getting rid of their legitimate husbands and taking on women lovers). If Winterson writes militant novels of ideas, Waters makes her political commitment covert, a natural by-product of her talent to weave engrossing stories, which can reach out and draw into their world straight, as well as queer, readers.

<25> In fact, both writers explore similar issues: Winterson carries out the analysis of the disintegrated postmodern self and the exposure of gender roles as cultural stereotypes through her recourse to fantastic and parodic literary modes, her adoption of grotesque rather than formal realism, and her highly provocative and subversive narrative style. Waters instead accomplishes her questioning of a unified notion of self and above all of the supposed naturalness of the notions of gender and sexuality through her own revisitation of *popular* Victorian literary subgenres, which were first knowingly recognized by nineteenth century critics and women writers as powerful tools to challenge patriarchal ideology and its oppression of women. As we have seen, Waters makes the most of the late nineteenth century questioning of the stability of gender and sexual roles in her use of the Victorian metropolis, whose potential as a stage is perhaps the most effective way to expose the performative nature of the notion of identity. In a way London becomes the real main character of Waters's narratives, a setting for the 'coming out' of her heroines, whose eventual triumph or downfall seems to depend on their success as skilful performers and discerning spectators in the multifaceted, histrionic reality of the Victorian capital. Through her balanced references and subtle innovations of Victorian narrative conventions, as well as her use of a metropolitan setting, Waters has created a host of remarkable, unique heroines and villainesses, writing the Victorian novels that no nineteenth century author could ever have written. It seems to me that Waters's nuanced characterizations and the wide-sweeping narrative, and critical, scope of her novels can be hailed as a new phase in lesbian fiction, a "queer and verdant" (as opposed to Winterson's 'queer and militant') writing: Waters's political awareness and commitment to her role as a lesbian author are 'coated' -– for lack of a better word -– within the exuberance and the lavishness of her narrative offerings, rather than being spelt out in overtly polemical tones. Waters's plot-driven, sensationalistic stories have successfully captured and sustained the interest of a crossover readership, creating a space on the contemporary literary scene for lesbian fiction which is truly mainstream because it seems to shift its emphasis from vociferous partisanship to the celebration of equality in one's diversity and the universal pleasure of storytelling.[18]

Endnotes

[1] Waters would agree with "Victorian quasi-trilogy" as a definition for *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*: " ...there's something about three -– they're not a trilogy, but there's still a sense of completion to having written three and then moving on.", Sarah Waters in an interview with Ron Hogan, http://www.booksense.com/people/archive/waterssarah.jsp "Faux-Victorian (or neo-Victorian) quasi-trilogy" also seems like an apt description, if one is happy with the proliferation of qualifiers. [^]

[2] As mentioned before, for a more detailed discussion of these points, see my previous article in the *Literary London Journal*, 3:1, March 2005. [^]

[3] Cf. "Sarah Waters's Favourite Victorian Novels", on http://books.guardian.co.uk/top10s/top10/0,,670937, 00.html See also John Mullan's discussion of *Fingersmith* and intertextuality in his column 'Guardian book club' in *The Guardian*, June 3, 2006. [^]

[4] Cf. Waters's response to the question about the interplay between scholarly research and creativity in her writing: "Part of the thing of it is making it seem like it's authentic. I have researched the slang, especially for *Fingersmith*, more than any of [my other Victorian novels], really. But at the same time I kind of use the words that capture my imagination. I leave research behind for a while and just sort of do that. When it comes to sort of specific lesbian and gay stuff, like *Tipping the Velvet*, I did have to take a few liberties with history really. I had the whole thing about the word "tom"... people did use that word, going back to the 18th century, to talk about lesbians, but I don't think they used it to quite the extent -- not like as a street word -- in the way that I suggested it was used. Part of the project of that book was not to be authentic, but just to imagine a history -— to imagine the sort of history that we can't really recover.", 'A Chat with *Tipping the Velvet* Author Sarah Waters', http://www.moviepie.com/filmfests/sarah_waters.html [^]

[5] In the meantime *Affinity* is rumoured to be destined to become a feature film, possibly on a screenplay by Andrew Davies, who is already responsible for the adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* for the small screen (cf. "Interview with Sarah Waters", 11 February 2003, on http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/books/features/sarah-waters-interview.shtml [^]

[6] "Lesbian romp" is the most catchy label adopted to describe *Tipping the Velvet*, which remains the most sexually explicit of Waters's books. Its publication, unsurprisingly, has seen Waters hailed as the new champion of lesbian literature: from the tentative "This could be the most significant debut of its kind since that of Jeanette Winterson" (*Daily Telegraph*) to the outright celebratory "Imagine Jeanette Winterson on a good day collaborating with Judith Butler to pen a Sapphic *Moll Flanders*" (*Independent on Sunday*), the latter a review which now significantly appears on the back cover of the paperback Virago edition of *Tipping the Velvet*. [^]

[7] The Labouchère Amendment of 1885 made illegal gross acts of indecency, and therefore did not particularly target homosexual identity, whether male or female, as such. On the other hand, though, male homosexuality was brought to the attention of the late Victorian public by the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895. [^]

[8] On the significance of the name of Braddon's heroine, P. D. Edwards writes: "The original 'Aurora', the Roman goddess of the dawn, conjures up appropriate connotations of youth, freshness, and elusive beauty, perhaps extending to the idea of a new type of heroine, prefiguring a 'new day' for womankind. Some such idea as this must surely have been in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's mind when she adopted the name for the heroine of her epic-verse novel of contemporary life, *Aurora Leigh* (1857)" ('Introduction' to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, xx). The name also brings to mind Aurore Dupin, better known as George Sand, the French feminist writer who defied early 19th century conventions with her call for gender equality and the adoption of her male pseudonym and, more shockingly, male attire. [^]

[9] It ought to be said that despite this conviction, which would appear to suggest the contrary, Havelock Ellis maintained that "sexual inversion" was not a disease, nor a crime, but merely a variation in personality (see *Studies in the Psychology of Sex. Volume II*, first published in 1896). Before him, Edward Carpenter had made a similar point in his *Homogenic Love* (1894) and in his later *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (1908), where he had argued both against the rarity and the deviancy of "Uranian" people, i.e. "those whose deepest feelings of love and friendship go out only to persons of their own sex." (1908, 23). The action in *Affinity*, of course, predates both Ellis's and Carpenter's books. [^]

[10] In this respect, Waters is the true heiress of the sensation novel tradition which opened up the space for analyzing the performative nature of gender (and class!), in displaying "villainy as the mimicking inversion of respectability, feminine anomaly as the masquerading of the codes of femininity." (Bourne Taylor, 9). [^]

[11] Significantly, *The Night Watch* is set once again in London in the 1940s, another period of redefinition of gender roles. [^]

[12] The idea of the city as a stage is supported by Waters's skill in drawing readers' attention to the importance of clothing in the characters' stories: we are reminded of the theatricality of life by Nancy's costumes, Ruth Vigers's / Peter Quick's masquerades, Maud's gloves, as well as by the contrast between Margaret's attire as a philanthropic gentlewoman and Selina's prison uniform, or Sue's coarse, corset-less garb and Maud's elegant dresses and crinolines. (The focus on these details is aptly reflected in the cover of the paperback Virago edition of the three novels). [^]

[13] Sarah Waters talked about the choice of a London, urban setting for her novels, in deliberate contrast with rural and self-enclosed scenarios, in response to a question I asked during a talk at the GLBT Society of the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK in November 2004. The complex reality of metropolitan life offers a livelier historical context and provides a useful counterpart to those sections of her novels which are set in confined all-female spaces (the prison in *Affinity*, the asylum in *Fingersmith*, even the golden cage of Diana's mansion in *Tipping the Velvet*). *The Night Watch* instead capitalises on the state of emergency of WWII, exploiting the temporary gender revolution brought about by the conflict: much of the dramatic tension of the novel's earliest section, set in 1947, derives from the characters' disappointment in the reduction of available opportunities for women in the aftermath of the war. [^]

[14] Cf. Margaret's appeal to her deceased father's historiographical skills: "I wish that Pa was with me now. I would ask him how he would start to write the story I have embarked upon to-day. I would ask him how he would neatly tell the story of a prison –- of Millbank Prison –- which has so many separate lives in it, and is so curious a shape, and must be approached, so darkly, through so many gates and twisting passages." (Waters, 2000, 7). See also Kohlke, 157 and 161. [^]

[15] By contrast, Borough-girl Sue finds the countryside "unnatural" ("The air smelled too pure. Some time in the night I woke, and the barn was full of cows: they stood in a circle and looked us over, and one of them coughed like a man. Don't tell me that's natural. ", *Fingersmith*, 466) and yearns for the familiar darkness and excess of London ("The chimneys grew taller, the roads and rivers wider, the threads of smoke more thick, the farther off the country spread; until at last, at the farthest point of all, they made a smudge, a stain, a darkness […] 'London,' I said. 'Oh, London!', *Fingersmith*, 467). In reality, Sue knows her way around Mrs. Sucksby's Borough no more than Maud does, which accounts for the necessity of their final return to Briar. [^]

[16] This is yet another example of the combination of "male" and "female" gothic plot drives. [^]

[17] Like Waters's debut, Winterson's first novel (*Oranges are not the Only Fruit*) has also been notoriously televised by the BBC in 1990 [^]

[18] In making this suggestion, I am thinking in particular of the contrast between the fundamental humanity and realism of Waters's characters and the self-righteousness and larger-than-life nature of some of Winterson's creations. It goes without saying that the pioneering polemical strength of Winterson's work has paved the way for Waters's understated political message. [^]

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Neo-Victorianism is an aesthetic movement which amalgamates Victorian and Edwardian aesthetic sensibilities with modern principles and technologies. Many magazines and websites are devoted to Neo-Victorian ideas in dress, family life, interior decoration, morals, and other topics. Many neo-Victorian novels have reinterpreted, reproduced and rewritten Victorian culture. Significant texts include The French Lieutenantâ€™s Woman (John Fowles, 1969), Possession (A. S. Byatt, 1990), Arthur and George (Julian Victorian novels tend to be idealized portraits of difficult lives in which hard work, perseverance, love and luck win out in the end. They were usually inclined towards being of improving nature with a central moral lesson at heart. While this formula was the basis for much of earlier Victorian fiction, the situation became more complex as the century progressed.Â The husband and wife poetry team of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning conducted their love affair through verse and produced many tender and passionate poems. The reclaiming of the past was a major part of Victorian literature and was to be found in both classical literature and also the medieval literature of England. Elsewhere, texts similarly integrated into neo-Victorian novels may be taken from more mundane but verifiable historic sources, such as nineteenth-century newspaper reports and other archived documents . Here is Julian Barnes, some years later: "Apart from Jean's letter to Arthur," he writes in Arthur and George (2006), "all letters quoted, whether signed or anonymous, are authentic; as are quotations from newspapers, government reports, proceedings in Parliament, and the writing of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle" (505). Barnes's explanation is somewhat disingenuous, give â€˜â€œQueer and Verdantâ€: The Textual Politics of Sarah Watersâ€™s Neo-Victorian Novelsâ€™, Literary London Journal, 5:2, 2007, www.literarylondon.org. 'To Hell and Back: The Katabasis and the Impossibility of Epic in Derek Walcott's Omeros', Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 35:2, 2000, 87-103. Book chapters. â€˜The Things They Carried in the Short-Story Cycle Traditionâ€™, Critical Insights: Tim Oâ€™Brien, Robert C. Evans (Ed.), Amenia (NY): Salem Press, 2015, 82-102. â€˜Rules Are Meant to Be Broken: 20th and 21st Century Crime Writingâ€™, Introduction to Popular Fiction, Christine Berberich