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

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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]

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 picaresean vagaries through London in an episodic, non-teleological narrative 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_ recall 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.

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 perspective on 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 'gives' to the readers’ attention.

"Twisting Passages": Rewriting Victorian Popular Fiction

_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 modern fantasy of 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 sensibility: 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, unconscious 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, engaging 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.

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" (Kohike, 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-enticing it" (Kohike, 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,
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 unthinkably until her lesbian lover Ruth, who adopts a stereotypical butch and masterful attitude towards her 'girl'" (Kohlke, 161-62). 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, 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 eliciting 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.

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 (Modlesi, 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.

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 Sappphic 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’ defiances remain only skin-deep, while the conservative rules of society get slowly reinstated in the conclusion of her stories.

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 spiritual 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 the conclusion of determination), while “male” gothic tales usually revolve around the recognition of the Other as one’s self, and therefore rely on the creation of a psychological horror.

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 manifestly not recognized – status). The mourning 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 buoant 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 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 respect from both her sanctioned 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 protégé, 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, 2009]).

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...
harmless fantasy or with a psychological nightmare/mental disease, for a full immersion into history, and into a very significant period of
temporary absence because of a transitional emergency.

British Empire takes Waters as far as possible from two equally unpalatable scenarios: the covert pastoral idyll, with country girls tumbling in
potential as a stage.

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

order to unmask the hypocrisy of Victorian conventions and the artificial nature of gender and sexual roles; the detached, demystifying outlook of
conventions as well as a care for realistic details, is as much the literary tradition they draw inspiration from as reality itself (Frye, 59).

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sinister variation on the theme of the outsider: to Nancy’s fundamentally comic figure, theatrical metamorphoses and picaresque romp, correspond
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
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Sucksby), whose exertion of power is simultaneously made possible and limited by their marginal, unprivileged social status and their calculated,
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.

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 sensationalist 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.

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 rogueish 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

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.

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

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...
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 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.

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 strode 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 barrel; 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-judgmental, inclusive stage, where the rivaling crowd can simultaneously be participants and observers, actors and spectators of a popular drama.

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 deciper 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 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

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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 Shillito, 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 Shillito 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 buildings.” (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 privileged locus of surveillance into a place of subversion and ultimate control. In the case of Maud, she is made to acknowledge that she is not equipped to negotiate the streets of London, since
trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895. 

<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" (Patrick Julian, Tipping the Velvet 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 fulfill." (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 recapture 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 engaging 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 gender not by focusing on the disintegration of the self, but by rendering gender and sexuality through her own revision 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 spit 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 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]

[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]


[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 of 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 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 [5] As mentioned before, for a more detailed discussion of these points, see my previous article in the Literary London Journal, 3:1, March 2005. [6]

[6] 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 [7] "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. [8]

[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]
In this respect, Waters is the true heirress 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).

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

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’ / 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). [10]

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. [11]

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 polemic 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 Lieutenant’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. 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 "Queer and Verdant: The Textual Politics of Sarah Waters’s Neo-Victorian Novels", 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. The Things They Carried in the Short-Story Cycle Tradition, Critical Insights: Tim O'Brien, Robert C. Evans (Ed.), Amenia (NY): Salem Press, 2015, 82-102. Rules Are Meant to Be Broken: 20th and 21st Century Crime Writing, Introduction to Popular Fiction, Christine Berberich