Queer Inventions: Rupturing Narrative Hegemony in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*

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<1>Sarah Waters' Victorian era historical novels have enjoyed both popular and critical success, and with good reason. In addition to the praise lavished upon her works by reviewers,[1] her first three books have attracted keen scholarly interest for their protagonists, who defy canonical cultural narratives of the period. As one critic puts it, Waters "uses her inventiveness to unearth the silenced histories of the marginalised, to arrange together the ransacked historical records of their existence, and to fill in the many gaps by imagining missing details, events and emotions" (Costantini 20). Critical attention focuses on her construction of lesbian narratives in particular, characterizing Waters' genealogies of lesbian desire as a project that "silently inserts her depiction of nineteenth-century female homosexuality into our cultural memory of Victorian fiction" (Kate Mitchell 118), making visible typically invisible lesbian stories. But, as Waters herself notes, the historical suppression of gay voices is most often "rectified" through modern literary invention, creating fictional archives of homosexuality where legitimated sources of cultural knowledge—such as Victorian literature—remain silent (Doan and Waters 15).

<2>I show that Waters focuses on the act of queer narrative invention in her novel *Fingersmith* (2002), modeling how not only gay lives but also more broadly, queer identities—those which resist the often-prescriptive labels of normative identity politics—can be effectively written back into the historical record through the medium of neo-Victorian fiction. I argue that *Fingersmith* understands nineteenth-century queerness as expressible only *outside* the orthodox narrative frameworks of Victorian literature. Waters achieves this by first showcasing the intersections between conventional portrayals of acceptably feminine gender performance and sexuality within discernably Victorian storylines. Depicting the totalizing power of heteropatriarchal narrative construction in the Victorian texts she pastiches, Waters suggests that Victorian literary plots are themselves heteropatriarchal, authoring the lives of their female characters in recognizable patterns that reinforce rigid behavioral and sexual roles for women. She disrupts these narratives by creating queer leads and telling their stories through narrative techniques that challenge not only the content but also the form of Victorian storytelling, which is characterized by "the seeming security of coherency of narrative structures and textual order as represented by the nineteenth century" (Llewellyn 29-30). That textual order works to uphold heteronormativity by presenting socially-sanctioned female characters as the only options for women in a disciplined, "cohesive" Victorian reality. As a neo-Victorian author, then, for Waters, reproducing exactly the temperament and structure of the Victorian novel while also queering it successfully is impossible, because the principles of

Victorian literature are fundamentally incompatible with the articulation of non-normative fictional subjects.

<3>Her questions regarding the politics of narrative recovery are ones also raised in scholarship on neo-Victorian literature; for example, Mark Llewellyn has argued that the trending popularity of neo-Victorian texts requires careful consideration about the ethics of appropriating Victorian culture for contemporary fiction. For Llewellyn, neo-Victorian authors are faced with "aesthetic decisions about the construction of that historical narrative—the tale, what it is about, how it is to be told, who will tell it—[which] are inextricably connected with ethical decisions—what is the meaning of that tale, who decides that meaning, what should we 'read' into it, what do we take from it, what do we want it to do" (30). Therefore, neo-Victorian fiction does not just expose the fabricated nature of history, it exposes too the necessarily selective nature of interpreting nineteenth-century culture from a modern perspective. Waters incorporates an awareness of this complicated authorial dynamic into *Fingersmith*, suggesting that queer Victorian identities cannot simply be imagined in the twenty-first century and then inserted smoothly back into an unchanged Victorian literature and history. The point is worth making, especially since in both popular and scholarly accounts, Waters is labeled a lesbian writer; similarly, her first three novels are often grouped together as a trilogy of works about lesbians.[2] As Kaye Mitchell suggests, these tags are not exactly undeserved, especially as Waters herself has used them—but they tend to oversimplify what writing queerness entails, too frequently implying that nineteenth-century queer culture can be recuperated merely by fashioning lesbian protagonists.[3] In *Fingersmith,* Waters does not so much uncover an untold lesbian history as she does reveal the power implicit in the pressures that govern narrative formation, including those that have historically glossed and continue to shape queer narratives. This critique extends even to contemporary expectations about what queer stories are or ought to be; for instance, despite challenging a monolithic portrait of Victorian culture, Waters' works are often compressed into the equally monolithic category of "lesbo-Victorian romps," a term Waters once used to discuss *Tipping the Velvet* (1998)[4] and which dominated subsequent reviews of her novels, much to her chagrin: "why, oh why, did I ever allow the phrase 'lesbo Victorian romp' to cross my lips?" ("Desire, Betrayal and 'lesbo Victorian romps'")[5] Waters' question conveys dismay at the modern propensity to applaud the recovery of gay history while simultaneously reducing it to easily-digestible soundbytes; furthermore, it seems to protest the reduction of queerness to easily-digestible sexualities. Attending to these issues, *Fingersmith* explores how the neo-Victorian novel can best foster the expression of queer—rather than "lesbo"—identity while acknowledging the genre's complex role of interrogating—rather than rewriting—the past it uses as its foundation.

<4>Because *Fingersmith* is concerned with narrative authority and expression, its plot revolves around epistemology, and scrutinizes how facts and knowledge are created. The text is filled with surprising plot twists, defying most claims to truth. *Fingersmith* follows Sue Trinder, a London girl raised by criminals who becomes embroiled in a scheme to help a conman called Gentleman seduce, marry, and then commit to an asylum a wealthy country heiress, Maud Lilly. As Sue and Maud take turns narrating their stories, the reader discovers that Maud has conspired with Gentleman to commit Sue in her stead, gaining her independence from her

uncle, Christopher Lilly; she and Gentleman will split the money that will be hers upon marriage. The plot encounters another shakeup when it is revealed that Maud and Sue were switched at birth by Sue's "mother," Mrs. Sucksby, to gain the full Lilly fortune; Maud is actually Mrs. Sucksby's daughter, while Sue is the legitimate daughter of Marianne Lilly, Christopher Lilly's sister. Other surprises are sprung upon the reader along the way, including the revelation that the innocent Victorian "angel" Maud works for her uncle as his secretary, helping him compile his bibliography of pornography. As these constant disclosures unsettle what the reader thought she knew about plot and characters, the girls remain connected by what is a mutual attraction to and eventually, love for one another—a truth that holds firm when all else is suspect.

<5>It is tempting, then, to read *Fingersmith* as rejecting the knowability of truths except for that of queer love, which seems to remain steady despite the trickery of narrative. Sarah Gamble has argued that "*Fingersmith* is constructed around multiple disclosures which periodically force the novel's audience to radically reformulate their interpretation of characters and events, and this has a particularly destabilizing effect upon the first-time reader" ("'I know everything'" 44). For Gamble, *Fingersmith* undercuts the reader's faith in any single account of how and why things occurred; the doubled narration of Sue and Maud necessitates the act of re-reading the text to secure a conclusive perspective on events. Although Gamble emphasizes the volatility of *Fingersmith*'s narrative, she ultimately claims that the novel reaches a narrative resolution, arguing that "despite all its warnings to the audience about the untrustworthiness of words, [*Fingersmith*] remains implicated in both their production and transmission" (54). I am unconvinced by this reading's conclusion, which maintains that, "particularly when situated within a distinctively queer context, it may be possible for words to act as vehicles for authentic knowledge" (54), citing as evidence the fact that Maud writes her own pornography, filled with her feelings for Sue. Gamble takes queerness to be situational, but does not acknowledge its complicated relationship to narrative in her understanding of queer expression. To interpret the women's fates so certainly means overlooking both the novel's point about the restrictions placed on women by familiar nineteenth-century narratives and its deliberate attempts to thwart them. It seems to me that Gamble's projection of a clear denouement reveals more about readers' desires—for recognizable narrative fulfillment—than it does about the protagonists'. As a text that highlights its own fluidity, *Fingersmith* also refuses to give us a sure finale; instead, the novel represents "authentic" queerness through narrative tactics that avoid too definitively voicing queer subjects. Waters allows that queer love may be a truth, but it is as unknowable within the narrative confines of the Victorian novel as it is within the categorical stereotype of lesbian historical fiction. The work of the neo-Victorian novel, then, is to reveal and then subvert the narrative hegemony that moderates women and their desires in Victorian literature.

Narrative Entrapment and (Neo-)Victorian Women

<6>*Fingersmith* is a text that both solicits and denies narrative familiarity. The text draws plot elements and characters from many Victorian sources: "In addition to Dickens and Collins, Waters incorporates explicit references to Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred

Tennyson, Mrs. Henry (Ellen) Wood, Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and other writers, including the less-known (often anonymous) authors of Victorian pornographic literature" (Costantini 18). And while the casual reader of Victorian literature may not always recognize the rich intertextuality of the novel, for a scholar of the period, the references are impossible to ignore. For example, *Fingersmith*'s affinities with Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859) are obvious, especially in their plots, both of which hinge upon the exchange of women's identities. Likewise, Sue Trinder's upbringing recalls Oliver's time with Fagin's gang in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-39). Waters' close approximation of these Victorian novels distinguishes her from other neo-Victorian writers that write historiographic metafiction,[6] which provides ironic metacommentary on the process of writing historical fiction. The absence of such interjections in Waters' work has prompted debate about how she uses her Victorian backdrop; as Kaye Mitchell observes, "critical discussion about Waters' fiction has centred on what *kind* of historical novelist she is: the extent to which she is concerned with historical accuracy or authenticity, or is actively revising the histories that she relates" (6). *Fingersmith* might not draw overt attention to its artificiality like other postmodern historical narratives such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002),[7] but a reader would be remiss to think it is uncritically replicating a Victorian literary aesthetic. Its generous use of several recognizable—indeed, glaringly apparent—Victorian sources reminds us that the neo-Victorian novel borrows from and reformulates bits of other stories to create a genre that is both linked to and divorced from the literature of the period. Thus, Waters' textual references spotlight the self-consciously constructed nature of her neo-Victorian novel. She does this to emphasize that *all* narratives—Victorian sources and neo-Victorian reconsiderations—are the products of assembly, making her novel's focus the mechanisms of narrative design. She further indicates that narrative creation constitutes social, cultural and political power by showing that women were regulated in every way by the literary narratives that were legitimated by patriarchal Victorian society, raising poignant questions about the how the conscientious neo-Victorian novel should grant its female characters narrative freedom.

<7>*Fingersmith* teems with allusions to storytelling and narrative manufacture, and Sue's narrative is saturated with the stories on which she is raised. She is conditioned to understand herself and her place in the world through existing tales with clear plots, roles, and outcomes. When Gentleman explains his scam to Sue, he quips that he is just like "Robin Hood" (32), while Sue compares the furniture in Maud's home of Briar to the setting of "*Ali Baba*" (92). She thinks of Maud herself as a literary character: "She said that—sounding, I thought, just like a girl in a story. Aren't there stories, with girls with magic uncles—wizards, beasts, and whatnots?" (73) Besides a catalog of folk figures and fairytales, Sue is also at the mercy of the common narratives found in Victorian literature. When Sue describes her mother, she explains that "her story was a tragic one. She had come to Lant Street on a certain night in 1844. She had come, 'very large, dear girl, with you,' Mrs. Sucksby said" (11). Mrs. Sucksby's interruption of Sue's memory reveals her as the source of Sue's information, and it quickly becomes clear that her evocation of a typically "tragic" scene where a young woman is about to birth a Victorian orphan is an exhibition of her skill as a consummate storyteller:

So Mrs. Sucksby told it; and every time, though her voice would start off steady it would end up trembling, and her eyes would fill with tears. For she had waited for my mother, and my mother had not come. What came, instead, was awful news. The job that was meant to make her fortune, had gone badly. A man had been killed trying to save his plate. It was my mother's knife that killed him. Her own pal peached on her. The police caught up with her at last. She was a month in prison. Then they hanged her. They hanged her, as they did murderesses then, on the roof of the Horsemonger Lane Gaol. Mrs. Sucksby stood and watched the drop, from the window of the room I was born in. (12)

Mrs. Sucksby spins a tale we know: the pregnant outcast with nowhere to turn; the end of a murderess; the terrible lessons learned from a thief's life. She uses the outline of the Newgate novel to groom Sue to obedience. In claiming she keeps Sue from the terrible fate that awaits characters like her, Mrs. Sucksby becomes Sue's savior, winning her gratitude and loyalty. But Sue, narrating *Fingersmith* when she is wise to Mrs. Sucksby's deceptions, stresses the artifice of her recitation, noting the cues that prompt her tears and listing mechanically the story's generic conventions. Mrs. Sucksby's personal touch on the plot, the lie that she witnessed the hanging from Sue's own room, haunts the ending of *Fingersmith* when Mrs. Sucksby is set to swing for Gentleman's murder. *Fingersmith*'s conclusion alludes to the novel's first fabricated example of a murderess' death, accenting its derivative nature through the use of narrative déjà vu. The novel metafictionally inventories the fictional narratives that are circulated and recycled throughout Victorian literature.

<8>Throughout *Fingersmith*, Waters specifically emphasizes the gendered, regulatory function of these narratives as they operate on women; they dictate what roles women can perform. In addition to Mrs. Sucksby's lifelong manipulation of Sue, Gentleman's plan includes many of the tropes found in sensation fiction, the genre Waters is specifically pastiching: a mysterious manor; an innocent heiress; a madhouse; a fallen woman (24-29). Sue, believing Maud is the genre's sweet leading lady, soon to be wrongfully institutionalized, falls victim to a gendered literary template she cannot escape. She insists on reading Maud as the naïve country "pigeon" (184), which of course, Maud is not—but Sue is unable to conceptualize a part for either Maud or herself that does not conform to standardized literary plots. Waters comments on the ineluctable grip of narrative power in a scene where Sue is ridiculed by the asylum doctors, who dismiss her story of mistaken identity as absurdly literary: "If you might only hear yourself! Terrible plots? Laughing villains? Stolen fortunes and girls made out to be mad? The stuff of lurid fiction! We have a name for your disease. We call it a hyper-aesthetic one. You have been encouraged to over-indulge yourself in literature; and have inflamed your organs of fancy" (447). Here, the reader is asked to acknowledge that the fictional character Sue is firmly trapped in the genre the doctors have defined and then relegated to fiction. The reader's consumption of the sensation fiction pastiche can lead only to its heroine's literal incarceration, a dramatization of her figurative bondage to the genre. Within the boundaries of sensation fiction, Sue has very little chance of agency.

<9>Just as Sue cannot think outside the structures of the narratives to which she is assigned, Waters' critique of disciplinary narrative also applies to Maud. Scholars have analyzed the links between writing and patriarchal governance in relation to Maud in particular, who is enslaved to her uncle as his scribe. Kathleen A. Miller has argued that Maud's pornographic writing subverts Christopher Lilly's legacy of literary patriarchal dominance by authoring pornography based on women's desires (2-3). Nadine Muller focuses on the influence of fictive matrilineal legacies on women, positing that the girls' origin stories, while false, impede their ability to formulate their identities outside of narratives that serve patriarchal ends (120). Like Muller's point about narrative, my discussion of Mrs. Sucksby's manipulation of Sue shows that patriarchal narrative power is not localized to male characters' authorship of women's lives; rather, narrative itself is an institution that can write women into subjection. When Sue is given fairytales and, more metafictionally, Victorian literature as hermeneutic frameworks to shape her identity, her possibilities of self-realization are limited, defined by existing female figures. The Newgate novel, the sensation novel, the works of Dickens and Collins—these texts contain the women Sue can mimic; significantly, there are no canonical textual models for Sue, a woman who falls in love with another.

<10>The exception to this rule is found in the realm of the "other Victorians,"[8] Victorian pornography, where two women are regularly intimate with one another, as Maud knows well: "May a lady taste the fingers of her maid? She may, in my uncle's books" (270). But this rendering of women is rooted in male fantasy, given nineteenth-century pornography's conservative efforts to mandate the portrayal of women's sexualities. Waters styles Christopher Lilly after the real-life bibliographer of erotic literature, Henry Spencer Ashbee. As Miller argues, Ashbee's legacy is that "as the inheritance of a Victorian pornographic book culture has been passed down, a culture that objectifies women's bodies has simultaneously been transmitted along with it" (4). Lisa Z. Sigel has argued that mid-nineteenth-century pornography was increasingly male-centric, and strove to propagate "a vision of sexuality that could be both transgressive and masculine" (55), which rested on reinforcing heteropatriarchal control over women through their representation in erotic fiction. As Miller puts it: "Pornography became a tool of maintaining political and sexual hierarchies. For women, these men's ability to assert power over the written text proved dangerous, as it encouraged political and sexual hierarchies that advocated the exploitation, oppression, and submission of women" (5). Given the broader function of Victorian pornography in the management of women's sexualities, *Fingersmith* suggests that pornography dictates the terms in which the girls can vocalize their erotic desires.

<11>The description of Sue and Maud's sexual encounter, initially delivered by Sue, reads like a pornographic text in which one young woman, green in matters of sex, is guided in them by an experienced partner. Like *The Curtain Drawn Up; or the Education of Laura* (1818), with which Maud becomes acquainted at an early age (and in which Laura learns about sex from several women, including her governess), the girls' interaction is one of sexual education: "'I wish you would tell me,' [Maud] said, 'what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night!'" (146) Sue then attempts to explain the particulars of sexual intercourse for the benefit of a seemingly oblivious Maud:

"But truly, miss, you mean, you don't know?"

"How *should* I?" she cried, rising up from her pillow. "Don't you see, don't you see? I am too ignorant even to know what it is I am ignorant of!" She shook. Then I felt her make herself steady. "I think," she said, in a flat, unnatural voice, "I think he will kiss me. Will he do that?" (147)

Although Sue narrates this scene, it is orchestrated by Maud, who directs them by the scripts she knows. As revealed later in her own narrative, Maud is *feigning* ignorance, since she has much more knowledge of sexual matters than we initially believe, a fact Waters cheekily alludes to when an unsuspecting Sue tries to soothe Maud's insecurities: "Wise? Aren't you wise? A girl like you, that has read all those books of your uncle's?" (146) Maud adopts the guise of first, chaste Victorian lady, and then, childlike pornographic subject, roles already available to her within a repertoire of female characters; Maud herself notes how especially comfortable she is with playing parts: "And at first, it is easy. After all, this is how it is done, in my uncle's books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing…" (297)

<12>Even Maud's more candid account of their affair mimics the language of nineteenth-century erotica, which conveyed sexual yearning as much as it detailed sexual acts. Consider, for example, this excerpt from "Sub-Umbra, or Sport Among the She-Noodles," printed in the notorious pornographic periodical, *The Pearl* (1879-80): "She turned her face to mine, suffused as it was by a deeper blush than ever, as her dark blue eyes met mine, in a fearless search of my meaning, but instead of speaking in response to this mute appeal, I kissed her rapturously, sucking in the fragrance of her sweet breath till she fairly trembled with emotion" (3). Maud uses similar language to describe her kiss with Sue: "She feels me jolt, and draws away—but slowly, slowly and unwillingly, so that our damp mouths seem to cling together and, as they part, to tear. She holds herself above me. I feel the rapid beating of a heart, and suppose it my own. But it is hers. Her breath comes, fast. She has begun, very lightly, to tremble" (298). The girls' moment of genuine connection is filtered through a genre that systematically stereotypes its female characters, one specifically implicated in the production of lesbian sex for male pleasure.

<13>Lilly's bibliography embodies and further enhances the patriarchal bent of Victorian pornography; his directory organizes pornographic women, sorting and effectually stripping them of even the sexuality they are permitted in this one genre. His obsession with categorization sanitizes what is potentially deviant content by normalizing porn as an academic object of study, reassuring Maud that: "You will soon forget the substance, in the scrutiny of the form" (209). He likens his books to artifacts in a museum, part of a collection he is determined to perfect: "I am a curator of poisons. These books—look, mark them! Mark them well!—they are the poisons I mean. And this…this is their Index. This will guide others in their collection and proper study. There is no work on the subject so perfect as this will be, when it is complete. I have devoted many years to its construction and revision" (208). Lilly dominates his books, relishing in the absolute authority he has to copy, stamp and file them according to the system he creates. The result, which he envisions as whole and complete, will be a testament to

his efforts and a gift to the intellectual world. His impression of the bibliography contrasts sharply with Maud's, for whom it is only corrective:

> My work itself is of the most tedious kind, and consists chiefly of copying pages of text, from antique volumes, into a leather-bound book. The book is a slim one, and when it is filled my job is to render it blank again with a piece of india-rubber. I remember this task, more than I remember the pieces of matter I am made to copy: for the pages, from endless friction, grow smudged and fragile and liable to tear; and the sight of a smudge on a leaf of text, or the sound of tearing paper, is more than my uncle, in his delicacy, can bear. They say children, as a rule, fear the ghosts of the dead; what I fear most as a child are the spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased. (204)

For Maud, the bibliography is a punitive project, taming her as much as it checks the sensual women it wraps safely in scholarly purpose. The work disciplines Maud through her fear of imperfection, shaping her into the compliant young lady Lilly needs her to be. Her poor behavior and willful temper gradually subside, curbed by the strength of the bibliography's oppressive enterprise. From this perspective, it is no surprise that Maud comes to loathe books, whose supervised existence she compares to her own life: "Sometimes…I suppose such a plate must be pasted upon my own flesh—that I have been ticketed, noted and shelved—so nearly do I resemble one of my uncle's books" (229).

<14>Maud is subdued by Lilly's bibliography, but like Sue, she is also hampered by the chains of the extant Victorian narratives that control women. Lilly further guarantees Maud's passivity through her mother's supposed history as a madwoman. Raised on her uncle's stories of her madhouse origins, Maud is held captive to his unstated threat; she knows the madwoman account well, and knows her fate if she should defy Lilly. The madwoman's narrative is so common, in fact, that once evoked, it commandeers Maud's conception of her birth:

> I imagine a table, slick with blood. The blood is my mother's. There is too much of it. I think it runs, like ink. I think, to save the boards beneath, the women have set down china bowls; and so the silences between my mother's cries are filled—*drip drop! Drip drop!*—with what might be the staggered beating of clocks. Beyond the beat come other, fainter cries: the shrieks of lunatics, the shouts and scolds of nurses. For this is a madhouse. My mother is mad. (188)

Since Maud is actually Mrs. Sucksby's daughter, we know this scene is sheer fabrication. Maud the narrator, having already experienced the events of *Fingersmith*, knows it too, acknowledging the fact by punctuating her account with "I imagine" and "I think;" her mother's life, her blood, is galvanized by "ink." The madwoman story is so pervasive that Maud fills in its outline herself, allowing it to inform her sense of self-identity. She is the hostage not only of Lilly, but also of the narrative powers he—and Victorian society—has at his disposal. These fictions have very real effects on the choices women have, an unpleasant lesson Maud learns when Lilly's friend, mortified at the scandal when Maud seeks his help in London after fleeing

from both Lilly and Gentleman, arrests her attempts to escape with the meaningful question, "Are you *mad*?" (406)

<15>*Fingersmith*'s ending affirms the comprehensiveness of narrative control as it appears to write the women back into the normalizing stories that shadow them throughout the novel. Once Mrs. Sucksby dies, Sue discovers the truth of her parentage from a letter authored by Susan's real mother, Marianne. Realizing that Maud spared Sue this knowledge to avoid hurting her, she resolves to find Maud, whatever the cost. Her quest for a happy ending takes her back to Briar, now a solitary and mostly abandoned mansion whose very name recalls the thorns and brambles that blanket Sleeping Beauty's castle in Charles Perrault's fairytale. And, like the enchanted sleep that stills the castle's inhabitants, leaving it silent and seemingly deserted, Briar too seems magically frozen: "I stepped to the table. It was still set, with candlesticks, a knife and a fork, a plate of apples; but it was covered all over with dust and cobwebs, and the apples had rotted. The air was thick. Upon the floor was a broken glass—a crystal glass, with gold at the rim" (524). Maud resides at Briar alone save for two servants—an allusion to Rochester's seclusion at Ferndean in *Jane Eyre* (1847), another novel clearly indebted to the fairytale, a Victorian favorite penned by the likes of John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde. Nodding to both the pat finish of "Sleeping Beauty" and the narrative closure that ruled nineteenth-century realist texts, Sue and Maud each profess their love, resolving to be together. The novel's last words seem to wrest narrative power away from the forces that suppressed Maud and Sue, as they read the pornography Maud has written for them: "She put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one" (582).

<16>But—we must ask—is *Fingersmith* a fairytale? Critics are divided over this ending, debating whether Maud's disruption of a typically male-oriented (and produced) profession is a satisfactorily feminist one; her pornographic career is interpreted as either a reinsertion into heteropatriarchy or a glimpse at sexual liberation.[9] Claire O'Callaghan observes that the ubiquity of this binary is surprising in its failure to understand pornography in queer terms. Rejecting the polarized discourse of the sex wars, O'Callaghan views Waters' work through the lens of what Angela Carter called "moral pornography," which "utilize[s] and simultaneously critique[s] sexually explicit writing in order to illustrate its misogyny, stereotypes, and influence" (566), offering an interpretive option that falls outside the rigid parameters of the pornography debate. O'Callaghan's instructive attempt to resist black-and-white labels is insightful about the complexities of Waters' text. But where O'Callaghan argues that "Waters forces readers to reconsider the history of women's involvement in pornography and to reimagine the implications of an alternative genealogy of pornographic materials" (573), I have shown that Waters' critique of pornography is only one component of a much broader critique of Victorian narratives. Her return to fairytale motifs at the novel's conclusion is a red flag, a reminder of the restraints they represent for both women. Waters cautions us against mistaking for her principal goal the integrity of the familiar narratives she recalls; we must not emulate Lilly, who values only the appearance of wholeness. Maud learns this lesson well, as she witnesses firsthand how books are made; her work as a copyist, and her observation of Lilly's treatment of his pornographic books, instill in her not only a hatred of the books and the servitude they embody, but also a deeply ingrained distrust of their finished forms, which hide

their authoritarian nature. Where a young Maud "suppose[s] all printed words to be true ones" (194), the older, wiser Maud dreams of a new life in London completely devoid of books and the containment they signify: "I will find my liberty, cast off my self, live to another pattern—live without patterns, without hides and bindings—without books! I will ban paper from my house!" (252) But the relief that Maud craves is a fantasy, impossible for women, upon whom narratives are imposed from every direction. Sue's instinctual fear at seeing Lilly's library is telling; she asks herself: "How many stories does one man need?" (79) What Waters offers in response to this query is discouraging, since it seems that where Victorian literature is concerned, the answer is: all of them.

Rethinking Narrative

<17>*Fingersmith* demonstrates that strict fidelity to the anatomy of the Victorian novel would foreclose the possibility of its heroines' escape from nineteenth-century patriarchy, even if conventional narratives were appropriated to relate an alternative story. This does not mean, however, that Waters abandons the women to their narrative destinies. Capitalizing on the neo-Victorian novel's relationship to postmodernism,[10] Waters provides us instead with a method of challenging the totality of narrative domination with an alternative *to* the hegemony of the realist narrative form. Frederic Jameson has shown that "complete" stories are projections of cultural wishful thinking, which formalize the projection of a comprehensive reality into a similarly comprehensive narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Realism's operating tenets—unity, progression, cohesion—uphold the bourgeois social order, helping cement a "fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality" (34). The seduction of narrative linearity is so universal that it extends even to critical interpretive traditions, becoming a crucial gauge of a story's quality. Unseating the assumption about what constitutes a "good" narrative requires examining readers too, and "the 'local' ways in which they construct their objects of study and the 'strategies of containment' whereby they are able to project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient" (10). For Jameson, "master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them" (34).

<18>Llewellyn's discussion of *The Crimson Petal and the White* exemplifies this point, focusing particularly on reader expectations about the endings of realist texts. Explaining the widespread disgruntlement caused by Faber's abrupt and ambiguous conclusion, Llewellyn reasons that Victorian novels have trained its readers—including the audience of neo-Victorian fiction—to want definitive narrative closure:

> The point raises important questions about how contemporary neo-Victorian readers think the Victorian realist mode worked. Faber's text disappoints them because it does not live up to their expectations of a (neo-)Victorian novel; they feel intellectually and financially conned because they have bought into a version of the Victorian that the author seems to play along with only to renegotiate (or renege on) the terms of the contract in the final pages. (31-32)

It is worth noting that although Llewellyn is referring to the general reader, his remarks about the delimiting effects of genre on interpretation are equally true of the scholarly reader, as evident in the diverging critical opinions about *Fingersmith*'s ending, which are oppositional in interpretation but united in assuming narrative closure. Eschewing the interpretive binary that reads Maud and Sue as either fettered or freed, I argue instead that Waters purposely avoids clarifying the nebulousness of her protagonists' futures. When asked to identify her own interpretation of the novel's ending, Waters' response, while generally optimistic, is also carefully noncommittal: "[*Fingersmith*] ultimately tries to at least gesture toward the possibility that women could write their own porn themselves, even if I don't sort of show it" (Dennis 43). Her words hedge, signaling contingencies rather than convictions—"tries to;" "at least; "gesture;" "possibility;" "sort of." I see this evasion as its own interpretive mode. Against the wholeness of realist narrative, Waters offers us uncertainty and possibility. Her statement dramatizes the unuttered, fragmented, often incoherent experience of queer lives, which exist in the Victorian novel only as omitted elements of narratives that consider themselves intact without them.

<19>Thus, in order to voice queerness, Waters employs narrative techniques that upset rather than support narrative continuity. Like sensation fiction, *Fingersmith* is animated by the mysteries and surprises that characterize the detective fiction that is clearly indebted to authors like Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. But in lieu of the facts that would permit the reader to stitch clues together, Waters repeatedly drives home the unreliability of knowledge as she consistently overturns the realities the girls—and the readers—think they know. As Mrs. Sucksby tells a horrified Maud as she learns of her childhood, there is nothing that cannot be passed off for, and accepted as, the truth:

> "You think I don't remember my own home?"

> "I should say you remember the place you lived in when you was little. Why, so do we all. Don't mean we was born there."

> "I was, I know it," I say.

> "You was told it, I expect."

> "Every one of my uncle's servants knows it!"

> "They was told it too, perhaps. Does that make it true? Maybe. Maybe not." (343)

If, as Mrs. Sucksby suggests, everything we know is something we are told, then all truths, including our own memories, are suspect; like realist narratives, facts can be weapons of hegemony, fitting you into a story and consequently, a place in society the moment they materialize into the world. As Victorian women, Maud and Sue's identities are defined by the facts that are given to them by others. Sue the narrator therefore repels the attempts to

narratively pin her down by introducing herself with a highly ambivalent description, resistant to facts:

> My name, in those days, was Susan Trinder. People called me Sue. I know the year I was born in, but for many years I did not know the date, and took my birthday at Christmas. I believe I am an orphan. My mother I know is dead. But I never saw her, she was nothing to me. I was Mrs. Sucksby's child, if I was anyone's; and for father I had Mr. Ibbs, who kept the locksmith's shop, at Lant Street, in the Borough, near to the Thames. (3)

This passage produces more questions about her identity than it answers: if her name "was" Susan, does she have another now? When was she born, if not at Christmas? If Sue "believe[s]" she is an orphan, is there a chance that her father lives? If she "never saw" her mother, why is Sue certain she is dead? Does or doesn't she consider herself Mrs. Sucksby's child? Before *Fingersmith* even begins, Waters obscures its narrator's identity, denying us the clarity and conviction that characterizes, for example, the sense of self wielded by the eponymous narrator of *David Copperfield*: "To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o' clock at night" (13). Waters' murky introduction not only raises questions about its narrator that it refuses to answer, it simultaneously casts doubt on the validity of literary beginnings; being unable to witness his own birth, David takes as factual that which he has been told.

<20>In this sense, *Fingersmith* takes narrative facticity to task, including the way narrative orders the passage of time and events. Sue's introduction oscillates between past and present tense, the Sue she was and the Sue she is, the character and the narrator. Switching between these registers, there is no clear progression from one to the next, no set hierarchy of past, present and future. The Susans she sketches are at once distinct from, and also the same as, each other. Similarly, Sue describes her story as one that has both already begun and also has yet to be told. Fourteen pages in, she interrupts her own narration to address the reader directly: "You are waiting for me to start my story. Perhaps I was waiting, then. But my story had already started—I was only like you, and didn't know it" (14). *Fingersmith* does not have a beginning, it has many possible beginnings, undermining the concept of an unambiguous narrative start. She teases us with multiple outsets: "This is when I thought it really began" (15). Her statement, slippery in its concurrent suggestion and repudiation of a solid fact, also asks how narrative beginnings are determined. Sue's story might start with her false mother's appearance as a murderess; with her true mother's death at Lant Street; with her birth; with the introduction of Gentleman's plan; or with her introduction to Maud. But what then of Maud's story, which timewise seems to parallel Sue's, but is not introduced for two hundred pages, and is further filled with false starts: "The start, I think I know too well. It is the first of my mistakes" (188). All are beginnings—but also, none of them adequately capture *a* beginning to the convoluted story of their lives together.

<21>This jumbled, unruly temporality defies a typically linear narrative, where the forward movement of a character's life aligns with the narrative's progression from start through to finish. In seeking a legitimated beginning to the women's story, the reader will fail to perceive

the nonlinear, unconventional nature of their lives, which culminate in an unspoken, unspecified future rather than marriage. Foucault's observation that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex" (qtd. in Halberstam 1) explains why Maud and Sue's love cannot be fully captured through the means of realist narrative. Their story is incompatible with the Victorian novel's obsession with family and inheritance; both girls have mothers who are not their mothers, families that are not their relations, and significantly, neither have any intention of reproducing and bearing heirs that can carry their legacies, monetary and otherwise. *Fingersmith*'s conscious use of the term "queer," which appears in the novel dozens of times, describes not a sexual orientation, but everything about the women, from odd sensations to the smell of the air to one of Maud's dresses. Queerness is found in the trivial details of the everyday lives of queer people, not just in their bedrooms, a truth that gives new meaning to Maud's declaration that "there are no girls like me" (581). Within the norms of the Victorian novel, she makes no sense.

<22>*Fingersmith*'s treatment of time therefore perfectly exemplifies Judith Halberstam's concept of queer time, which Halberstam defines as the process by which "willfully eccentric modes of being" forge alternative relationships to time and space (1). Since hegemonic time is most frequently marked by "the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction" (1), gay, lesbian and transgender people experience time quite differently; for example, within communities where the AIDS epidemic is a palpable threat, the future is never a certainty in relation to the present. In literature, queer temporality rejects "the seemingly inexorable march of narrative time toward marriage (death)" by imagining how unusual narrative forms can represent "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (3, 2). Exchanging the order of orthodox narrative for the open-ended fragments of queer time, *Fingersmith*'s distrust of truth, paired with its enigmatic, meandering temporality, constitute a narrative mode that embodies queerness, which remains unintelligible within linear narratives. As Halberstam reminds us, "Within the life cycle of the Western human subject, long periods of stability are considered to be desirable, and people who live in rapid bursts (drug addicts, for example), are characterized as immature and even dangerous" (4-5). Steadiness and continuity are privileged as natural and healthy; queer narrative, then, is defiantly imprecise and fractured, refusing narrative customs that would regularize queer experience. The "queer" stories we might discount for their seemingly erratic forms are, in fact, a testament to queerness.

<23>As a queer novel, then, *Fingersmith* denies that we can "know" queerness in a typical sense. And as a neo-Victorian novel, it criticizes any attempt to write queer voices back into the literary and historical records that repressed them through storytelling methods that may inadvertently reproduce the narrative practices that regulated queerness in the nineteenth century; we must look beyond the "fairytale" ending. For readers, to champion *Fingersmith* as a queer Victorian tale requires thinking about queer identities beyond the inclusion of gay characters in a Victorian setting. The impulse to recreate queer voices in historical fiction might be, as critics have argued, a way of grappling with current issues facing feminists or the LGBTQ community, a method of bridging the solutions of the past with the troubles of the present[11]— but *Fingersmith* warns us against writing queer voices into a past that remains unaltered by

their presence, using a narrative mode that remains complicit in their continued subjection to heteronormative culture.

<24>Scholarship is also not immune to this critique; it too writes queer subjects into narratives that suit its ideas of what a more inclusive Victorian history should be. It seems no coincidence that Christopher Lilly considers himself a scholar, one violently fixated on completing his bibliography. The complication with trying to complete a historical record by supplying what is missed is that doing so should radically transform our understanding of the past and our own relation to it—but all too often, it does not. Sharon Marcus has argued that relationships between women in the nineteenth century were not only existent, they were quite normal; if we have failed to recognize this, it is because "a narrow focus on women's status as relative creatures, defined by their difference from and subordination to men, has limited our understanding of gender, kinship, and sexuality" (1). Her inspiring book takes scholarship about Victorian sexuality as its subject as much as it does the lives of the women she documents. Covering both emotional and sexual connections between women, Marcus contends that "our preconceptions have led us to doubt the importance of relationships such as marriage between women, which was not only a Victorian dream but also a Victorian reality" (1). She stresses the fact that "the massive increase in scholarship about the history of same-sex relations…has done little to challenge [the] view of the family, for much of that research has similarly assumed a basic opposition between lesbians and gay men on one side and marriage and the family on another" (9). Accordingly, Marcus shares her own revelation that questions sent her way regarding Victorian lesbians, such as "Weren't Victorians too invested in female sexual purity to admit that lesbians existed?" were troubling ones, "not because I think that secretly all Victorian women were really lesbians, but because I came to see the basic premises of these questions as anachronistic and misguided" (12-13). Marcus contrasts the scholarly practice of reading homosexuality symptomatically, extrapolating on what is excluded from a text, with her own method of "just reading," which attends instead to what *is* being stated (3). Doing so will, she hopes, not only provide a nuanced reading of Victorian culture, it will also help reorient the fields of gender and sexuality studies around a new theoretical approach to homosexuality (13).

<25>Marcus calls out scholarship as yet another institution through which narratives about queer lives are problematically invented. Her attention to academia suggests that scholars need to examine their own assumptions about and expectations of homosexuality as judiciously as they analyze queer culture in the artifacts they study. Neo-Victorian fiction is especially primed for a productive reconsideration of non-normative lives, as scholars increasingly ponder why we continue to return to the Victorians. If, as many critics suggest, the social, cultural and political affinities between the nineteenth and twentieth/twenty-first centuries make the Victorians especially valuable as sounding boards for fielding contemporary problems,[12] then neo-Victorian fiction may well help us make better sense of queer history and its relation to present issues of framing queer identity. But as critics continue to search for the nomenclature that describes accurately what Victorian historical fiction "is" in relation to Victorian literature—faux-Victorian (Waters), post-Victorian (Sadoff and Kucich), retro-Victorian (Gutleben), new(meta)realism (Kohlke), taxonomography (Eve)—we must keep in mind that for authors like Waters, the genre is inherently cautious of the appropriation it undertakes, critical of the labels

that would codify too rigidly its interpretation by its readers. As *Fingersmith* demonstrates, sometimes the only method of establishing queer identity is to avoid establishing it at all. Far from proposing yet again that history is made from competing narratives, *Fingersmith* insists that narrative rupture has its own historical story to tell.[13]

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Endnotes

[1] For an overview of the reception to Waters' novels, see Kaye Mitchell (1-5).

[2] Abigail Dennis, for instance, observes that "the ostensible similarity of [the novels'] subject matter led to Waters being somewhat reductively tagged as 'the lesbian neo-Victorian author'" (42).

[3] See, for example, Sarah Gamble, Mandy Koolen, Kate Mitchell, and Paulina Palmer.

[4] See her use of the phrase in "Hot Waters."

[5] Despite Waters' clear reluctance to adopt the term, *The Guardian* uses it to headline its article; an indicator, perhaps, of how the periodical interprets its audience's interests in neo-Victorian fiction.

[6] Linda Hutcheon's influential work remains the dominant definition of this genre. Often-cited examples of historiographic metafiction include John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990).

[7] Mark Llewellyn's article, mentioned elsewhere in this essay, examines Faber's novel as an example of neo-Victorian fiction that calls specific attention to the process of writing Victorian historical fiction.

[8] I borrow this term from the seminal work of Steven Marcus.

[9] See, in addition to Kathleen A. Miller and Nadine Muller, Cora Kaplan, Marie-Luise Kohlke, and Paulina Palmer.

[10] As Jonathan Clark explains, "postmodernism has set itself against what it takes to be 'modernist' ideas of truth and objectivity, replacing what it sees as a set of grand narratives claiming objective authority with a diverse pattern of localized narratives and fluid identities" (3).

[11] See, for example, Mandy Koolen and Nadine Muller.

[12] See, for example, Mariaconcetta Costantini, Sarah Gamble, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, and Eckart Voigts-Virchow.

[13] Shawn Smith has argued that it is no longer novel to claim, as Christopher Norris once did, that "history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies, a plural discourse which can always produce any number of alternative accounts" (qtd. in Smith 2). This may be true, but we must more critically examine "alternative accounts" that critique narrative strategies in relation to queer identity and expression.