

**LADIES, LUNATICS AND FALLEN WOMEN IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM:
THE FEMINIST POLITICS OF NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION, 2000-2010**

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
List of Illustrations	iii
List of Abbreviations	iii

Introduction

Through the looking glass: the feminist politics of neo-Victorian fiction	1
Neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism: beginnings and contexts	4
Prefixing history: terminologies and definitions.....	8
Defining the present through the past: the politics of writing history	15
Beyond (dis)identification: historiographic potentials.....	22
Consuming women: neo-Victorianism, third-wave feminism and the sexualisation of culture ..	28
The feminist politics of neo-Victorian fiction: chapters and themes	35

Chapter 1

(Re)Writing genealogies: feminism, matrilinealism and neo-Victorian fiction	38
Feminist genealogies: histories and contexts	39
‘And what of history?’: The feminist genealogies of <i>A Short History of Women</i>	51
Not my mother’s daughter: <i>Fingersmith</i> ’s matrilineal fictions.....	63
Conclusion	77

Chapter 2

Hystoriographic metafiction: gender, madness, therapy and power	79
Feminism and mental health: histories and theories	80
Rewriting and overwriting the Victorian madwoman: <i>Human Traces</i>	91
<i>An Inconvenient Wife</i> : hypnosis, power and the ambiguities of liberation	99
Conclusion	114

Chapter 3

Sexual f(r)ictions: women, sex and pornography.....	117
Pornography in Britain: definitions, contexts, debates	118
<i>The Journal of Dora Damage</i> : pornography's feminist failures.....	135
<i>Fingersmith</i> : pornography's feminist potentials	147
Conclusion	159

Chapter 4

Pimping the neo-Victorian prostitute: the feminist politics of sex work.....	161
Constructing the prostitute: discourses and politics.....	162
Re-colonising feminism: prostitution and Western superiority in <i>The Linnet Bird</i>	177
Selling Sugar: the sexual and textual economies of <i>The Crimson Petal and the White</i>	190
Conclusion	204

Chapter 5

Writing women's lives: neo-Victorian fiction as feminist biography	206
Feminism and biography: writing the female subject.....	206
<i>Girl in a Blue Dress</i> : the feminist lives of Catherine Dickens.....	221
Gendering art, space and identity: <i>Keeping the World Away</i>	236
Conclusion	247

Conclusions.....	249
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Bibliography.....	258
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1.1 Untitled illustration by Adam Simpson © New York Times 2009

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BD* Gaynor Arnold, *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008)
- CP* Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002)
- DD* Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007)
- FS* Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (2002)
- HT* Sebastian Faulks, *Human Traces* (2006)
- IW* Megan Chance, *Inconvenient Wife* (2004)
- KtWA* Margaret Forster, *Keeping the World Away* (2006)
- LB* Linda Holeman, *A Linnet Bird* (2004)
- SHoW* Kate Walbert, *A Short History of Women* (2009)
- UW* Hebe Elsna, *Unwanted Wife* (1963)

GENERAL NOTES

Emphases in quotations appear in the original unless otherwise stated in the relevant footnote reference. A text's original year of publication is provided in square brackets after the author name(s) in footnotes and bibliography entries where relevant.

INTRODUCTION

Through the looking glass: the feminist politics of neo-Victorian fiction



Figure 1.1 Illustration by Adam Simpson © *New York Times* 2009

There are few means by which the purpose of this thesis could be captured more effectively than Adam Simpson's visual evocation of a meeting between two women who represent different stages in feminist history – one a suffragette, visibly marked by her 'Votes for Women' sash, the other her mid-century successor, perhaps a feminist too, yet not overtly identifiable as such. Simpson's illustration, which accompanied a *New York Times* review of Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women* (2009),¹ implies both a clear historical separation and connection between past and present: each woman perceives the other as (and reaches out to) her mirror image in the looking glass, the past seeing forward into the present (or her future) and the present recognising herself in the past. At the same time, we, the contemporary beholders of this picture, too, gaze

¹ Leah Hager Cohen, Review: *A Short History of Women* by Kate Walbert, *New York Times* (12 June 2009), Accessed: 1 October 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/books/review/Cohen-t.html>.

backward in history, hoping, perhaps, to achieve a better view of the features of our own time through its reflection in the historical mirror. This thesis proposes that in the new millennium neo-Victorian fiction has come to function as a literary manifestation of precisely such a reflection. Considering specifically the genre's representations of women, gender and sex/uality, I argue that these returns to the nineteenth-century past mirror and interrogate those feminist issues which not only featured prominently in the Victorian period but which also continue to preoccupy the literary, cultural and political landscapes of the twenty-first century.

In *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (2005), Jeannette King claims that 'revisiting Victorian women's lives provides an opportunity to challenge the answers which nineteenth-century society produced in response to the "the Women Question"'.² Yet, novelists' interest in such a project, she suggests, is also rooted in a curiosity about 'what the Victorian period can add to the modern reader's understanding of gender', a question which 'is as politically charged an issue now as it was at the end of the nineteenth century, and continues to be debated in both the popular and academic press'.³ Equally, Diana Wallace notes in *The Woman's Historical Novel, 1900-2000* (2005) that 'the questions which some of the best [... historical] novelists [...] ask about the relationships between gender, power, nationality, sexuality, religion and violence are still, sadly, all too relevant'.⁴ However, despite these observations, critics have largely neglected contemporary feminist theory as a framework for their readings of neo-Victorian fiction. King clearly indicates the importance of such an approach when she refers to the "post-feminist" mood that prevails at the beginning of the twenty-first century',⁵ but what exactly this mood is, how the author defines the term

² Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel, 1900-2000: Women Writers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.228.

⁵ King, *The Victorian Woman Question*, p.6.

which she carefully encloses in inverted commas, or how it might influence neo-Victorianism remains unexplored.

In order to fill this critical gap and investigate recent neo-Victorian fiction's engagement with contemporary feminist concerns, this thesis introduces, first, the current debates surrounding and the conceptual affiliations between twenty-first century neo-Victorian fiction and the theories generated by the so-called third wave of feminism, highlighting in particular the shared historiographic interests and practices of these two turn-of-the-millennium phenomena and the problematic sexual politics arising from those interests. The subsequent themed chapters then trace the histories of and analyse through a third-wave lens the literary representations of five feminist issues which have acquired particular significance within the neo-Victorian canon: matrilinealism, mental health, pornography, prostitution and women's life writing. Instead of considering neo-Victorian fiction exclusively within the parameters of the historical (con)texts it revisits, each of the chapters demonstrates that neo-Victorian fiction and its rewriting of the nineteenth century functions as a textual mirror which reflects as much, if not more, about the time in which it is conceived as about the period to which it returns, as well as about the similarities and differences between the two. Yet, at the same time, the novels discussed in this thesis also illustrate and often question the very relationship between the object, the looking glass and the mirror image; that is, they act as exemplifications of and, at times, critical comments upon the problematic textual and sexual politics pertaining to the feminist issues they revisit and which are evident in their own acts of representation and historical revision. By reading twenty-first century neo-Victorian fiction through a contemporary, third-wave feminist framework, the thesis explores the genre's engagement with current theories and debates surrounding women, gender and sexuality while also highlighting the problematics and potentials of its feminist politics.

Neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism: beginnings and contexts

Since the publication of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) – texts which are often cited as the first contemporary examples of the genre – contributions to and scholarly interest in neo-Victorian fiction have drastically increased in quantity.⁶ Following A.S. Byatt's Man Booker Prize-winning *Possession* (1990), neo-Victorian fiction has become a rapidly growing literary phenomenon as well as 'a catch-all term for many different kinds of work: the romance version of the historical novel, post-modern fun and games with period settings, lesbian romance for heterosexuals, lightweight commercial thrillers with Jack-the-Ripper fog, gaslight and carriages'.⁷ Patricia Duncker's evocation of this literary landscape as a 'cluttered maze' of plots,⁸ narrative modes and settings illustrates the sheer range of fictional works which have been labelled as neo-Victorian, rendering it problematic to assign to them any characteristics more specific (or serious) than Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's mocking assortment of 'Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels', listed on her blog *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic*.⁹

As in the case of neo-Victorianism, the theories, strategies and forms collated under the label third-wave feminism are by no means straightforwardly demarcated or coherent. This is at least in part because, not dissimilar to neo-Victorian fiction, the third wave crosses cultural and generic boundaries and has been identified and practiced

⁶ As Marie-Luise Kohlke points out, neo-Victorian fiction, if primarily defined as being written after the Victorian period but concerned with Victorian ideologies, is not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon but can encompass texts published from 1901 onwards. See: Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (Autumn 2008), pp.1-18 (p.4).

⁷ Patricia Duncker, Abstract: 'Neo-Victorian Fictions', University of Essex (2009), Accessed: 21 February 2011, http://www.essex.ac.uk/sociology/about/news/seminar_docs/2008-2009/speaker_info.aspx.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, 'Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels', *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic* (15 March 2006), Accessed: 1 October 2011, http://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2006/03/rules_for_writi.html. Burstein observes, for example, that 'any novel based on an actual Victorian literary work must include considerable quantities of sex', that 'the novelist must make the prose more antique by eliminating all contractions and using period slang (whether or not it is actually appropriate)', and that 'the novel's publicist should use the adjective "Dickensian" at least once'.

in various, sometimes intersecting realms, ranging from popular culture to activism and academia. Since Rebecca Walker first proclaimed ‘I am the third wave’ in a 1992 *Ms.* magazine article,¹⁰ the term has been adopted by more feminists of colour, as is perhaps best exemplified in the first-person narratives collected in Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman’s *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism* (2002). At the same time, however, a variety of other women have equally appropriated the label, not only in print publishing but also in popular culture, including girl-power advocates, the punk movement’s Riot Grrrls, and ‘the Hello Kitty-accessorised and lipglossed Girlies exemplified by the writers of zines such as *Bitch* and *BUST*’.¹¹

Due to the often anecdotal and confessional nature of third-wave writing and its frequent blurring of scholarly and popular forms and approaches,

some academic and second-wave feminists argue that these narratives are not ‘academic’ or ‘theoretical’ enough or are solely grounded in the personal [...] They do not view the personal as academic enough, despite the feminist mantra, ‘the personal is political’.¹²

In academic circles third-wave feminism has only reluctantly been accepted as a valid, productive approach to feminist issues.¹³ While publications by self-identified third wavers began to appear in the late 1990s,¹⁴ the first scholarly attempts to theorise third-wave politics, praxes and writing did not appear until a decade later with publications such as Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford’s edited collection *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (2004), a product of the first academic conference on the topic, and Leslie Heywood’s two-volume *The Women’s Movement*

¹⁰ Rebecca Walker, ‘Becoming the Third Wave’, *Ms.* (January/February 1992), pp.39-41 (p.41). For other early occurrences of the term, see: Ednie Kaeh Garrison, ‘Are We on a Wavelength Yet? On Feminist Oceanography, Radios, and Third Wave Feminism’, *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women’s Movement*, ed. by Jo Reger (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp.237-356.

¹¹ Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford, ‘Genealogies and Generations: The Politics and Praxis of Third Wave Feminism’, *Women’s History Review*, 13:2 (2008), pp.165-182 (p.169).

¹² ‘academic feminism’, *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.8-10 (p.9).

¹³ Gillis and Munford, ‘Genealogies and Generations’, p.170.

¹⁴ See: Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (eds.), *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

Today: An Encyclopedia of Third Wave Feminism (2006), which comprises a selection of primary texts and a glossary of terms. For the past decade, third-wave feminism has gained further momentum within the academy through various scholarly investigations of and contributions toward its theories and practices in disciplines such as sociology, women's and gender studies, philosophy and mental health.¹⁵

Both within this thesis and in existing scholarship, literary manifestations of the neo-Victorian span equally various kinds and combinations of re-visitations: Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002), for example, adapts the plots of canonical Victorian works,¹⁶ while Megan Chance's *An Inconvenient Wife* (2004), Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* (2006), Linda Holeman's *A Linnet Bird* (2004) and Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) revisit specific cultural phenomena such as hysteria, prostitution and pornography. Others utilise both historical and contemporary settings, like Margaret Forster's *Keeping the World Away* (2006) or Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women* (2009), and some, such as Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), reinvent the lives of (in)famous or more obscure Victorians.¹⁷ Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich ascertained in 2000 – in their introduction to one of the first essay collections dedicated to the revival of the nineteenth century in contemporary literature and culture – that the Victorians' 'prominence for postmodernism has [despite their evident popularity] yet to become the subject of rigorous scholarly analysis' and 'is a cultural phenomenon that

¹⁵ See: Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); and Ellyn Kaschak (ed.), *The Next Generation: Third Wave Feminist Psychotherapy* (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2001).

¹⁶ The recent 'zombifications' of certain canonical titles also contributes to this first category. See: Sherri Browning Erwin's *Jane Slayre* (2010), A.E. Moorat's *Queen Victoria: Demon Hunter* (2009) or Adam Roberts' *I Am Scrooge: A Zombie Story for Christmas* (2009).

¹⁷ There are, of course, several other neo-Victorian modes of returning to the nineteenth century, including the transport of twenty-first century characters into the nineteenth century (see Selden Edwards' *The Little Book* [London: Abacus, 2008]), or the insertion of historical figures into fictional narratives (see Gyles Brandreth's bestselling Oscar Wilde series [London: John Murray, 2007-2011]).

itself needs to be historicized – needs, indeed, simply to be acknowledged’.¹⁸ Redressing this ‘critical gap’ Kucich and Sadoff identified over a decade ago, the subsequent years of the twenty-first century saw the founding of the academic journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* as well as the publication of numerous articles, special journal issues, essay collections and monographs on neo-Victorianism as a literary phenomenon and as a significant aspect of (popular and material) culture, politics, education, economy, the media and the arts.¹⁹

It is undoubtedly because of neo-Victorian fiction’s and third-wave feminist writing’s formal and generic diversities that, with very few recent exceptions, no universal definitions have been attached to either phenomenon. Neo-Victorian fiction has only been loosely described in terms of the formal features and modes its authors employ, notwithstanding the growing body of critical work which the genre has inspired; equally, third-wave feminism frequently remains accused of a lack of coherence and unity, despite some scholars’ recent attempts to furnish it with a more defined theoretical identity.²⁰ While this thesis does not endeavour to fill such gaps, the following sections of this introduction outline two defining and shared characteristics of neo-Victorianism and third-wave feminism which render the latter a suitable analytical framework for the former.²¹ Establishing, first, the central role of history in the

¹⁸ Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich, ‘Introduction: Histories of the Present’, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp.ix-xxx (p.x).

¹⁹ It is worth noting that in 2010 alone two new edited collections and three new monographs on neo-Victorianism were published. See: Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (eds.), *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010); and Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁰ Notable exceptions to this lack of definition for the terms ‘neo-Victorianism’ and ‘third-wave feminism’ respectively are: Bobel, *New Blood*; Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.xxi-xxxiv; and Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*.

²¹ These commonalities become apparent predominantly in recent academic work on third-wave feminism, but they are also evident in a number of more popular publications aimed at audiences beyond

terminologies and definitions which currently shape scholarly debates surrounding the two fields, I argue that neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism are characterised by a keen interest in the relationship between past and present. Secondly, through an exploration of their conceptions and constructions of this relationship, I illustrate that neo-Victorian fiction's and third-wave feminism's historical and historiographic concerns shape their ambiguous and arguably paradoxical sexual politics in relation to sexualised Western consumer cultures.

Prefixing history: terminologies and definitions

In 'What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay' (2008), R. Claire Snyder identifies what she views as some of the key features of third-wave feminism. Besides displaying an emphasis on 'personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism', 'multivocality' and 'an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political', third-wave texts, she asserts, are often characterised by 'an ignorance of history'.²² Whether Snyder derives this claim from a perceived unwillingness of third wavers to engage with history or their alleged misrepresentation of it remains unclear in her discussion, but neither flaw is universally apparent in writing by or about the third wave. Indeed, third-wave feminism is characterised by a preoccupation with the achievements, failures and potentials of previous feminist generations, with the manners in which third wavers, other women and the media construct and represent the feminisms of previous decades and centuries, and with contemporary feminists' relationships to them. Rather than being ignorant of history, the third wave is both deeply influenced by and inevitably connected to it.

the academy. While the majority of this thesis draws on academic publications by and on the third wave, it also occasionally draws on other sources where appropriate.

²² R. Claire Snyder, 'What Is Third-Wave Feminism: A New Directions Essay', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34:1 (2008), pp.175-196 (pp.175-176 and p.183).

Indeed, it is its relationship to the past that sets third-wave feminism apart from the contemporary competitor with which it remains most frequently conflated and against which it is often defined: postfeminism. Terminologically as much contested as the third wave, postfeminism has generally come to designate either a backlash against the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s, the so-called second wave of feminism, or a new way of feminist thinking which is incompatible with the established feminist theories and politics of those previous generations. Proponents of the former definition insist that postfeminism's temporal prefix signifies the arrival of an era in which feminism belongs to the past, indicating either 'an anti-feminist critique of the misguidedness of feminism' and hence the need to leave its ideologies behind, or 'a pro-feminist nod to feminism's victories' which, supposedly, render the movement irrelevant to women today.²³ In contrast to these perceptions stands the academically popular argument that postfeminism is not an indication of feminism's demise, but that it instead signifies a combination of feminist and post-structuralist theories, thus embodying, as Ann Brooks puts it, feminism's 'maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference and reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements similarly demanding change'.²⁴ These understandings illustrate two overlaps between postfeminism and the third wave which perhaps explain the frequent confusion of the two terms. As Stéphanie Genz highlights, third-wave feminism, too, draws significantly on the 'theoretical maturity of academic poststructuralism' and on the ensuing notions of 'pluralism and difference' which Brooks (and others, including Genz) ascribe to postfeminism.²⁵

However, while this theoretical common ground creates a genuine link between the third wave and its contender, their supposedly shared rejection of previous

²³ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.19.

²⁴ Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.1.

²⁵ Stéphanie Genz, 'Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism', *Feminist Theory*, 7:3 (2006), pp.333-353 (p.339).

feminisms – often regarded as inherent in their prefixes – is a misconception. Indeed, it is here that we can identify the essential difference between these two branches of contemporary feminism, a difference which, in turn, also supports the connection between third-wave feminism and neo-Victorian fiction that I propose in this thesis: an interest in both history and historiography. Third-wave feminism’s numerical departure from its predecessor may superficially indicate a rejection of the second wave, but its continuation of the wave metaphor signifies a far more complex relationship with feminist history, one which, as the first chapter of this thesis demonstrates, closely resembles neo-Victorian fiction’s connection to the nineteenth century. Postfeminism, according to Heywood and Drake, ‘characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave’.²⁶ Because postfeminists, unlike the third wave, do not conceive of themselves as being connected to previous feminisms, the difference between the two

is to be found at the level of foundations, where these notions originate and their loyalties lie. In this way, third wave feminism establishes itself as a political movement that depends on a close dialogue with second wave feminism and its organized opposition to women’s exclusion and oppression.²⁷

Third-wave feminism, then, opposes the phenomenon which Genz sees as essential to postfeminism: a backlash against the past and its politics.

It is this demarcation which has frequently caused literary (and) feminist critics to suggest that neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism each exclusively seek to critique and, therefore, position themselves as superior to the predecessors against whom they define themselves. This is perhaps most palpable in third-wave literature if we consider that the term “third-wave” has frequently been employed as a kind of shorthand for a generational difference among feminists, one based on chronological

²⁶ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.1-24 (p.1).

²⁷ Genz, ‘Third Way/ve’, pp.340-341.

age'.²⁸ Such surprisingly rigid distinctions are all too evident in recent third-wave writing, as Chris Bobel notes.²⁹ In *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997), Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake assert that the third wave comprises feminists who have come of age in the 1970s and 80s,³⁰ while Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the New Future* (2003), are only marginally more generous by including those 'women who were reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement of the seventies'.³¹ Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, although 'avoiding a demarcation based on age',³² nevertheless apply generational characteristics to the women of the third wave when they assume that their identity development occurred in 'a world shaped by technology, global capitalism, multiple models of sexuality, changing national demographics, [and] declining economic vitality'.³³

However, that there is a desire to maintain a close and productive link to the feminisms of previous generations is indicated in the very term 'third wave'. As Genz suggests, by 'mimicking the nomenclature of its predecessors, third wave feminism acknowledges that it stands on the shoulders of other, earlier, feminist movements. Yet, at the same time, its agenda does not mirror the preceding waves' theories straightforwardly and unquestioningly'.³⁴ The third wave's very name, then, indicates its affiliation with feminist history, while its numerical break from its predecessors suggests a desire to be different and to develop past and existing feminist politics and theories for its own purposes; as Dicker and Piepmeier observe about the third wave's relationship to the second wave in particular: 'at its best, the third wave [... makes] use

²⁸ Genz, 'Third Way/ve', p.340.

²⁹ Bobel, *New Blood*, pp.16-17.

³⁰ Heywood and Drake, 'Introduction', p.2.

³¹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), p.15.

³² Bobel, *New Blood*, p.16.

³³ Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (eds.), 'Introduction', *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), pp.3-28 (p.14).

³⁴ Genz, 'Third Way/ve', p.340.

of the best of second wave theory and strategy as well as critiques of second wave feminism'.³⁵

Similar to these debates and demarcations, neo-Victorian fiction's motivations for returning to the nineteenth-century past, the relationships it establishes between the Victorian and contemporary periods, and its own reflections on those relationships have become the chief criteria according to which critics analyse and classify individual texts. The utilisation of prefixes as descriptors of the connection between the Victorian and the contemporary has been an equally divisive, if less politically charged, topic for scholars of neo-Victorianism as it has been for the third wave. While 'neo-Victorian' has by now become the widely accepted term, early investigations into the phenomenon employed a number of viable alternatives, including 'post', 'retro' and 'faux-Victorian'.³⁶

The term 'faux-Victorian', which remains the least used of the four, implies through its prefix a depthlessness and lack of engagement, suggesting a superficial reproduction of the plots and forms of nineteenth-century fiction which is rooted in a purely aesthetic – not intellectual or critical – pleasure.³⁷ In the first monograph dedicated to the field, working chiefly within the conceptual confines of pastiche and parody, Christian Gutleben identifies neo-Victorian fiction as a form of 'nostalgic postmodernism' and, correspondingly, utilises the term 'retro-Victorian' to denote what he considers contemporary fiction's nostalgic longing for the past and its detachment from the present.³⁸ Through their return to Victorian aesthetics and narrative

³⁵ Dicker and Piepmeier, 'Introduction', p.10.

³⁶ See: Mariaconcetta Constantini, "'Faux-Victorian Melodrama" in the New Millennium: The Case of Sarah Waters', *Critical Survey*, 18:1 (2006), pp.17-39; Georges Letissier, 'Dickens and Post-Victorian Fiction', *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. by Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp.111-128; and Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. by Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), pp.253-268.

³⁷ 'faux, adj.', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (September 2011), Accessed: 15 September 2011, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/249153>.

³⁸ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p.10.

conventions, he argues, the texts in question are inherently conservative rather than progressive because their duplication of Victorian practices inevitably leads also to their replication – rather than revision – of Victorian ideologies, meaning neo-Victorian fiction’s return to the past results in ‘an aesthetic and ideological deadlock’.³⁹ Consequently, Gutleben considers the ‘repetition [and] recycling’ of the past as a ‘want of originality and creativity’ and as an indication that, in the form of neo-Victorian fiction, ‘postmodernism returns to a period *before* modernism as if it were not able to progress and had to turn around and step back’.⁴⁰ Here, as Daniel Bormann argues, the prefix ‘retro’ thus denotes a foregrounding of the past rather than of the present.⁴¹

In her detailed review of the terminology applied to what has become known as neo-Victorian fiction, Andrea Kirchknopf concludes that the term ‘post-Victorian’ is most suited to the literary phenomenon because it signals a connection to the postmodern.⁴² Reminiscent of debates surrounding the politics of postmodernism and postfeminism, ‘post-Victorian’ indicates both a distancing from as well as an inevitable connection to the past, yet, despite this apparent conceptual appeal, it fails to communicate one of the key processes involved in the writing of neo-Victorian fiction which the prefix ‘neo’ adequately captures, that is, the act of ‘making new’ or rewriting the past, the creation of something contemporary through the use of history. As Bormann suggests, ‘neo’ implies a focus on the contemporary, on the new,⁴³ and paired with ‘Victorian’ it signifies both an engagement with the present as well as – and indeed *through* – the past.

As these terminological clues reveal, neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism share a relationship to their pasts which demarcates them as contemporary,

³⁹ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.29 and p.10.

⁴¹ Daniel Candel Bormann, *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel: A Poetics (And Two Case-Studies)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), p.61.

⁴² Andrea Kirchknopf, ‘(Re)Workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (Autumn 2008), pp.53-80 (p.65).

⁴³ Bormann, *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel*, p.61.

new and different as much as it acknowledges their productive connection with that past. The term neo-Victorianism proclaims a return to the nineteenth century and a simultaneous desire to see the contemporary through a remaking of the Victorian, while third-wave feminism's terminological pattern connotes a continuation of as well as a break from previous feminisms. Neither the third wave nor neo-Victorianism reject the histories to which they link themselves; rather, they demonstrate a willingness to utilise them as a means of critically investigating their contemporary worlds, to assess and acknowledge historical similarities and differences, and develop from those assessments a productive and historically informed picture of the present. Both third-wave feminism and neo-Victorianism can therefore indicate a fruitful bringing together of past and present for the purpose of looking forward, rather than glancing back at history with feelings of nostalgia or derision.

But this is not to suggest that such relationships to the past are void of or circumvent conflict. Conceptually less sophisticated examples of third-wave and neo-Victorian writing often unintentionally illustrate the difficulties and strains of their connections to and treatments of the past, while more ambitious texts frequently acknowledge and critically interrogate their own historiographic practices, that is, they question how and why they narrativise their histories. As numerous critics have illustrated, neo-Victorian fiction often demonstrates contradictory affiliations between present and past, as does third-wave writing in its exploration of previous feminist generations. Neo-Victorianism, Matthew Sweet claims, treads a fine line between positing the Victorians as inherently different from our own age and representing them as uncannily similar to ourselves. Indeed, he argues, 'most of the pleasures we imagine to be our own, the Victorians enjoyed first [in a culture] as rich and difficult and complex and pleasurable as our own'.⁴⁴ Heywood and Drake issue similar words of

⁴⁴ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.xxiii.

caution in their introduction to *Third Wave Agenda* and propose that feminism can only continue to develop – and indeed be effective – if the third wave acknowledges and critically works through its similarities to and differences from its forebears: for third-wave feminists, they argue, ‘being humble enough to realize that our ideas are not so new is one fine way to fight paralysis’.⁴⁵ Like Sweet in his discussion of neo-Victorianism, Henry detects a conflict between alliance and difference in third wavers’ conceptualisations of past and present feminist waves. Discussing specifically the third wave’s relationship to and construction of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, she observes that ‘younger feminists may not be able to write the story of the second wave in such a way as to highlight our easy alliance with it, nor will we be able to effortlessly posit the superior nature of our feminism’.⁴⁶

What transpires in Sweet’s and Henry’s observations in particular is the notion that neo-Victorianism’s and third-wave feminism’s constructions of their respective (and partially intersecting) histories function as means of defining more clearly their own present, a concept which becomes especially apparent in relation to their politics of gender and sex/uality. It is the characteristics and problematics of these historiographic practices which I trace in the following section, and which serve as further illustrations of the conceptual connections not only between neo-Victorian fiction’s and third-wave feminism’s relationships to their respective pasts but also between their sexual politics.

Defining the present through the past: the politics of writing history

For Bobel, the ‘[recurring] tension between past and present [...] is just beginning to produce what makes the third wave distinctive’,⁴⁷ and this tension is based on similar conflicts between continuity and disruption, between identification and difference, as

⁴⁵ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (eds.), ‘We Learn America like a Script: Activism in the Third Wave; or Enough Phantoms of Nothing’, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.40-54 (p.54).

⁴⁶ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.15.

⁴⁷ Bobel, *New Blood*, p.17.

those we witness in neo-Victorian fiction's engagement with the nineteenth-century past. Adopting Karl Mannheim's theoretical work on generations,⁴⁸ Henry illustrates how recent feminist discussions of the relationships between feminist waves have employed both 'positivist' and 'romantic-historical' models, meaning these discourses indicate a celebratory sense of progress as well as a nostalgic feeling of decline towards feminist history.⁴⁹ If a positivist stance thus evokes a sense of superiority and development in relation to a supposedly inferior past, and if a romantic-historical view instils feelings of insufficiency, discontent and unfulfilled longing for a bygone period, then it is inevitable to draw parallels, here, between third-wave conceptions of feminist history and neo-Victorian fiction's reimagining of the Victorians, both of which focus heavily on the politics of gender and sexuality in their attempts to define themselves against their predecessors.

Ever since the first decade of the twentieth century, the Victorians have been (re)defined in terms of their sexual politics and conceptions of gender, a process which, as Simon Joyce puts it, has been frequently accompanied by later generations' 'recognition of a surprising (and perhaps frightening) proximity' to their predecessors, despite their usually positivist views of their relationship to them.⁵⁰ As early as the 1910s, Lytton Strachey famously criticised Victorian gender conventions which rendered sexuality taboo and, for the remainder of the first half of the twentieth century, the period remained characterised, both in the public imagination and in scholarship, by its repressive attitudes towards sex. For Strachey and the Bloomsbury group in particular the construction of the Victorians as prudish, conservative and hypocritical, and the 'explicit or tacit rejection of the cultural preference and social mores of the

⁴⁸ See: Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), pp.276-322.

⁴⁹ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.5.

⁵⁰ Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), p.16.

Victorian world’,⁵¹ served as a convenient if inherently problematic means of representing their own time and movement as progressive and modern.⁵²

The 1960s, however, saw, among a more general resurgence of academic interest in the nineteenth century, the uncovering of the Victorian sexual underground: Henry Spencer Ashbee’s guide to pornographic books – *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877) – was republished in numerous editions,⁵³ while texts such as Marcus Stevens’ *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Victorian England* (1964) and H. Montgomery Hyde’s *A History of Pornography* (1964) were followed soon after by Ronald Pearsall’s *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (1969). All of these publications contributed to what Miles Taylor has aptly described as the ‘[transformation] of what was known about the Victorians – from suburbs to slums, religion to riots, drink and drugs, and class and sex in all their varieties’.⁵⁴ Yet, Marcus’ aim to ‘restore [the Victorians] for the first time to their full historical dimensions’ was only partially achieved.⁵⁵ Rather than diversifying their image, the newly uncovered ‘contrast between the furtive gloom of the agonized and repressed, and the gay life so evidently there for all to see’ served,⁵⁶ according to Kaplan, as ‘proof positive of the Victorians’ collective duplicity and double standards’.⁵⁷ Thus, similar to the motifs of Strachey and his contemporaries, the Victorians ‘offered to the 1960s’ generation confirmation of its own modernity’, not

⁵¹ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p.6.

⁵² Julie Anne Taddeo, *Lytton Strachey and the Search for Modern Sexual Identity* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002), p.12 and p.14.

⁵³ These new editions of Ashbee’s index have often been made more accessible for English-speaking audiences through the omission of entries referring to Latin, Spanish or German texts, whilst, similarly, the original title has been translated into English alternatives such as *Bibliography of Prohibited Books* (New York: Jack Brussel, 1962), *A Complete Guide to Forbidden Books* (North Hollywood: Brandon House Books, 1966), *Index of Forbidden Books* (London: Sphere, 1969) and *Forbidden Books of the Victorians* (London: Odyssey Press, 1970).

⁵⁴ Miles Taylor, ‘Introduction’, *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*, ed. by Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp.1-13 (p.8).

⁵⁵ Steven Marcus, [1963] *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Victorian England* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p.xix and p.xxi.

⁵⁶ Ronald Pearsall, [1969] *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (Strout: Sutton Publishing, 2003), p.xvii.

⁵⁷ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.86.

least because changing and increasingly tolerant laws and attitudes towards sex/uality ‘made the Victorians seem very old, different and, above all, very unenlightened’.⁵⁸ Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* represents a fictional manifestation of this notion: the novel engages, as Duncker notes, ‘with many discourses of Victorian writing, fiction and non-fiction, if only to despise the Victorians and their sexual hypocrisy’,⁵⁹ and it does so without any apparent self-consciousness regarding those constructions.

Fowles’ as well as Rhys’ literary critiques of Victorian gender politics (and, in Rhys’ case, their intersection with racial identity) and studies such as Hyde’s, Marcus’ and Pearsall’s were indicators of both Victorianist scholarship’s and neo-Victorian fiction’s focus on issues surrounding gender and sexuality, encouraged all the more by the emergence of feminist and women’s studies in the 1960s and 1970s. From the 1980s and 1990s onward novelists in particular began to turn to the nineteenth-century past at a greater and, from then on, drastically increasing frequency. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Byatt’s *Possession*, Margaret Forster’s *Lady’s Maid* (1990), Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) and Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* (1992) are only a few examples of the rising tide of neo-Victorian fiction which was to flood the literary market in the 1990s and the early 2000s and whose representations of the nineteenth century have provoked the continuing interest of (feminist) literary critics in neo-Victorianism’s sexual and textual politics. As Jeannette King observes, contemporary neo-Victorian novels, more than any other kind of historical fiction, ‘tend to be characterised by their engagement with gender issues’,⁶⁰ an engagement which has resulted in diverse analyses and responses by scholars over the past decade in particular.

Critics’ investigations have identified romantic-historical as well as positivist

⁵⁸ Taylor, ‘Introduction’, p.8.

⁵⁹ Duncker, ‘Neo-Victorian Fictions’.

⁶⁰ King, *The Victorian Woman Question*, p.2.

motivations in the genre's obsession with issues surrounding sex and gender. Gutleben's proposition that the majority of neo-Victorian fiction published since the 1960s develops neither literary practice nor contemporary ethics suggests that these textual returns to the past perform almost exclusively a romantic-historical notion of the Victorians, that is, they express – through form and content – a yearning for a past which, supposedly, they favour over the present in which they are conceived. Marie-Luise Kohlke has been equally cautious regarding the progressive potentials of neo-Victorian fiction's acts of looking backward and suggests that many examples of the genre – and particularly those focusing on issues of gender and sexuality – put forward a positivist view of history. Neo-Victorianism, she argues, represents for our age what Orientalism was for the Victorians, only that 'a displacement occurs from the spatial to the temporal axis' in that the 'unexplored geographical "dark areas"' of Orientalism are replaced by the nineteenth-century past and its sexscape in what she terms the 'new Orientalism'.⁶¹ Therefore, Kohlke continues, this sexualisation of the Victorians functions for the twenty-first century as it did for Strachey and, later, for the 1960s: as a way to 'conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress', establishing a positivist image of 'insurmountable difference in sexual sophistication between the Victorians – "them" – and us'.⁶²

Positivist processes are also at work in third-wave and, indeed, second-wave conceptions of feminist history, particularly in their utilisation of generational metaphors, be they based on familial structures (as in the notion of feminist foremothers and sisters) or rooted in the marine imagery of tides (as in the concept of feminist waves).⁶³ These metaphors exemplify a number of issues with generational conceptions

⁶¹ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic', *Probing the Problematics: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008), pp.345-356 (p.352).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.345 and p.347.

⁶³ Third-wave feminism's continuation of the wave metaphor and of the genealogical conceptualisation of women's history has been subject of much scholarly debate and is discussed in detail

of history because of the positivist relationship between past and present they establish. Illustrating feminism in genealogical terms and mapping onto those genealogies the dynamics of mother-daughter relationships in particular has frequently come to be understood as a claim to the daughter's superiority to her mother. While such metaphors enable feminists to establish historical connections and to create a sense of continuity for the feminist project, matrilineal and wave imagery also relies 'on a positivist understanding of generations founded on the idea of progress in which each generation is understood to go beyond the generation which came before it'.⁶⁴ Thus, the very concept which enabled feminists of the 1960s and 70s to situate themselves within a feminist history also made it possible for them to mark their perceived progress and superiority toward their foremothers, indeed, to come into existence as the second wave, and the same applies to feminism's third wave. Within such a context, then, "mothers" are inevitably lacking so that "daughters" may succeed where they have failed',⁶⁵ and each new wave exceeds the achievements of the previous one, meaning the present always surpasses the past.

As with neo-Victorian fiction, these notions of superiority have predominantly (although not exclusively) focused on issues surrounding sex and sexuality. Here, a positivist understanding of feminist generations often necessitates the acceptance and utilisation of the traditional gender roles feminists seek to challenge. As radical second-wave voices such as Germaine Greer and Kate Millet were overshadowed by those who associated 'genital sexuality, promiscuity, emotional non-involvement, and invulnerability'⁶⁶ with men and equated women with 'love, sensuality, humour, tenderness [and] commitment',⁶⁷ feminists of the 1960s and 70s became almost

in Chapter One.

⁶⁴ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, pp.59-60.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.72.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁶⁷ Robin Morgan, 'Lesbianism and Feminism: Synonyms or Contradictions', *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook in Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed. by Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York:

universally identified as anti-sex. For third wavers, this representation functions as a means of emphasising their own open assertion of their sexualities and their espousal of an increasingly sexualised consumer culture as a site of potential empowerment despite (and also because of) its commodification of women's bodies. Rebecca Munford highlights the tendency of third-wave writers such as Rene Denfeld to '[perpetuate] an understanding of second-wave feminism where radical feminist anti-pornography campaigners such as [Andrea] Dworkin, [Catherine] MacKinnon and [Robin] Morgan stand in for all second-wave feminist activity', a generalisation which, she continues,

is complicit with a broader erasure of the multifarious feminist approaches to pornography, sex and sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s – ranging from the diverse writings of Angela Carter and Nancy Friday to the contributions of feminist sex workers such as Annie Sprinkle.⁶⁸

Consequently, such attempts to define the third wave as sexually tolerant in contrast to a supposedly prudish second wave leads, paradoxically, to the exclusion of feminist voices which cannot so easily be categorised as pro or anti-sex.

Henry highlights that these positivist historiographic tendencies are manifestations

Routledge, 1997), pp.424-434 (p.430).

⁶⁸ Rebecca Munford, 'BUST-ing the Third Wave: Barbies, Blowjobs and Girlie Feminism', *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.183-198 (p.187). While Munford and other critics discuss the work of prominent writers of the 1990s, such as Denfeld, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf, as representatives of the third wave (see: Bobel, *New Blood*, p.15; Dawn Keetley [ed.] 'Toward a Third Wave', *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism*, Vol. 3 [Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002], pp.430-439), self-identified third wavers Heywood and Drake, and Deborah L. Siegel consider these authors as part of what they see as an inherently conservative postfeminism (Heywood and Drake, 'Introduction', p.1; and Deborah L. Siegel, 'Reading between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a "Postfeminist" Movement', *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, ed. by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], pp.55-82). Astrid Henry argues that Denfeld's, Roiphe's and Wolf's negative attitudes toward second-wave feminism exemplify a distinct difference between American third-wave feminism and its British counterpart (Astrid Henry, 'Feminist Identities: Waves, Generations, and Consumer Pleasure', paper presented at *Intergenerational Perspectives: Mothers, Daughters, and the Feminine/Feminist*, University of Oxford [13th September 2010]). Yet, other American third wavers (including Heywood and Drake, and Piepmeier and Dicker) strongly advocate a productive relationship with the second wave, while British writer Natasha Walter heavily criticised the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s in *The New Feminism* (London: Virago, 1998). For the purposes of this thesis, I therefore propose a conceptual and chronological rather than geographical distinction between these particular writers and other third-wave works. As I will discuss shortly, earlier examples of third-wave writing tend to lack the historiographic awareness evident in later third-wave writing. This is not to suggest that third-wave texts of the late 1990s and early 2000s do not critique the second wave; rather, I argue that in the past decade the third wave has begun to be more reflective regarding the (positivist) politics of such critiques.

of Diane Fuss' notion of 'disidentification',⁶⁹ a concept which proves equally applicable to neo-Victorian fiction (be it motivated by notions of superiority or, as Gutleben suggests, nostalgia). Disidentification, Fuss proposes, describes 'an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it',⁷⁰ a process which highlights the identity politics implicit in third-wave and neo-Victorian constructions of the past. Both are characterised by a tension created through the simultaneous desires to be similar and yet different to their perceived predecessors. It is the desire to be different which, as Kohlke and Henry have noted, often spawns positivist accounts of progress and improvement, but all too often these narratives betray a fear of potentially sharing and replicating the flaws assigned to the supposedly inferior past, be it feminist, Victorian or both.

The desire to be 'better' than previous feminist movements or the Victorians is thus also a desire sparked by the fear of being the same, of having failed to progress, of repeating the perceived mistakes by other feminists, or of living, still, in a society in which gender inequality is maintained and reinforced via social, cultural and political structures and which is, potentially, uncomfortably similar to the nineteenth century. Yet, in the past decade third-wave writers and neo-Victorian authors have turned a reflective eye upon these historiographic practices and their blindspots, and these critical reappraisals – influenced in particular by postmodern and poststructuralist theorisations of history and identity – have become a defining feature of both phenomena in the new millennium and have led critics to further consider the feminist potentials of neo-Victorian fiction.

Beyond (dis)identification: historiographic potentials

For the third wave, as for neo-Victorian fiction, 'history, like sexual identity, is textual:

⁶⁹ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.14.

⁷⁰ Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.7.

constantly shifting, continually in production, and always open to question'.⁷¹ Consequently, feminist history, like neo-Victorian fiction in its depiction of the Victorian past, presents us with a 'mediated image' consisting of constructions shaped by the socio-cultural contexts and preoccupations of those who write it and.⁷² As Deborah L. Siegel notes, 'the question of whose story gets told is particularly loaded for women', and is, indeed, one of the prime motivators of feminist history and historiography, driven as they are by the need to uncover stories which 'have been excluded from the master narratives of history'.⁷³ As King highlights, historical fiction can form 'part of the wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded and marginalised'.⁷⁴

Since the 1990s, 'feminist discourses within and outside the academy have taken a self-reflexive turn',⁷⁵ leading feminists to interrogate more critically the selection and construction processes involved in their own work as much as they heed these processes in accounts that have traditionally silenced women.⁷⁶ Therefore, at the turn of the new millennium,

part of the ongoing project of feminism should be the attempt to map out and assess which different pieces in the jigsaw of feminism get picked up and why; it should also be asking, at any given time and place, who is selecting the fragments, and however unintendedly – whose particular interests their delivery serves.⁷⁷

It is this critical engagement with feminist historiographic practice which renders third-wave – rather than second-wave – feminist theory a fitting analytical framework for neo-Victorian fiction. While the feminist history project was born out of the feminist

⁷¹ 'history, postmodern', *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.177-178 (p.177).

⁷² Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, p.4.

⁷³ Siegel, 'Reading between the Waves', p.61.

⁷⁴ King, *The Victorian Woman Question*, pp.3-4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.59.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁷⁷ Lynne Segal, 'Only Contradictions on Offer: Anglophone Feminism at the Millennium', *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, ed. by Marianne DeKoven (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp.37-59 (p.57).

movement of the 1960s and 70s, the work generated in this period rarely engages with the means through which it created an alternative history of women's voices, and this is not least because the second wave ran parallel to the development of those postmodern theories which were later to become the very foundation of the third wave. Where the second wave was, and very much had to be, preoccupied with the then revolutionary task of writing women into history, third wavers of the 1990s were the first generation who 'experience[d] hard-fought feminist gains as fundamental rights',⁷⁸ while at the same time the postmodern historiographic and poststructuralist theories of the 1970s and 1980s had become embedded in their higher education.⁷⁹ Heywood and Drake, for example, describe themselves and their generation as 'young feminists who grew up with equity feminism, got gender feminism in college, along with poststructuralism',⁸⁰ while Deborah L. Siegel notes that 'postmodernist, poststructuralist, and multiculturalist critiques have shaped the form and the content of third wave expressions'.⁸¹ The result is not only a continuation of the feminist history project but also an engagement with the very processes employed in the task of creating these new histories as well as an understanding of 'feminist history as process, or [...] as perpetually in motion'.⁸²

It is this appropriation of postmodern historiography in particular which we also find in neo-Victorian fiction of the late 1990s and early 2000s rather than in the earlier examples of the genre published in the wake and at the height of the second wave, such as Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which do not share the preoccupation with historiographic concepts which characterises so much

⁷⁸ Dicker and Piepmeier, 'Introduction', p.10.

⁷⁹ Significant contributions to cultural history and postmodern historiography across disciplines during this time include: Michel Foucault, [1978] *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by R. Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998); Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris, *Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1988); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁸⁰ Heywood and Drake, 'Introduction', p.3.

⁸¹ Deborah L. Siegel, 'The Legacy of the Personal: Generating theory in Feminism's Third Wave', *Hypatia*, Special Issue: *Third Wave Feminisms*, 12:3 (Summer 1997), pp.46-75 (p.46).

⁸² Siegel, 'Reading between the Waves', p.60.

neo-Victorian fiction from the 1990s onward. As King notes:

what perhaps characterises more recent historical fiction [...] is its more direct engagement with the historical process itself, often blending historical documentation and events with its imagined narratives and characters. This characteristic relates the new historical fiction to postmodern trends in historiography itself.⁸³

This relationship between recent historical fiction and postmodern historiography, together with Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, form the very basis of Heilmann and Llewellyn's proposition for a more thorough definition of neo-Victorianism and, by extension, of neo-Victorian fiction. Historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, consciously and explicitly 'attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical [...] both thematically and formally' by challenging history's claim to truth 'in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems'.⁸⁴ Accordingly, Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest that neo-Victorianism equally involves 'a series of metatextual and metahistorical conjunctions',⁸⁵ meaning it is a text's awareness of itself as an artificial construct and its implicit or explicit comments on the processes through which it (re)writes, and thus contributes to, history that renders it neo-Victorian and '*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century'.⁸⁶

Neo-Victorianism, or Victoriana, as Cora Kaplan has termed it, can therefore be considered a 'discourse through which *both the conservative and progressive* elements of Anglophone cultures reshaped their ideas of the past, present and future'.⁸⁷ Rather than subscribing to Gutleben's thesis that neo-Victorian fiction is inescapably nostalgic and conservative, Heilmann and Llewellyn put forward that it is usually an engagement with metatextuality and metahistory which distinguishes the progressive and often more

⁸³ King, *The Victorian Woman Question*, p.3.

⁸⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.108 and p.93.

⁸⁵ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.4.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.4, my emphasis.

liberal examples of the genre from those which fall under Gutleben's category of nostalgic postmodernism. Neo-Victorianism, then, exclusively encompasses those texts which are 'in some respect [...] *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*',⁸⁸ while those which are 'inherently conservative [...] lack imaginative re-engagement with the period and instead recycle and deliver a stereotypical and unnuanced reading of the Victorians and their literature and culture',⁸⁹ a definition which, as I discuss later on in this introduction, is both more strict but also highly relevant to the definition this thesis employs.

Neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism, then, are capable of rewriting previous versions of history as well as of investigating their own accounts of the past and the very concepts and structures they utilise in those representations. Third-wave writers and critics have, in recent years, turned a particularly critical eye on the limitations and potentials of the notion of feminist generations, highlighting that it can be problematic, if not even self-defeating, as it excludes women who came of age between the 1920s and the 1960s and, equally, does not account for feminists of the late 1970s and 80s, 'who can be understood as neither "mothers" nor "daughters" within feminism's imagined family structure, [...] are frequently absent from recent discourse on feminism's (seemingly two) generations'.⁹⁰ Neo-Victorianists have been equally cautious about the artificial lineage their objects of study potentially create. As Joyce notes, the conventional concept of historical emergence and the 'temporality of historical rupture' are tempting ways of establishing and reading the relationship between the Victorians and later generations, but they simplify the complex 'multiple overlapping processes of [historical] transition'.⁹¹ What ambitious authors of neo-

⁸⁸ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.4.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.4.

⁹¹ Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, p.7.

Victorian fiction thus aim to do, is to question, and even subvert, ‘the conventional modernist historiography, which sees “the Victorian” as superseded by something else – variously termed “the modern,” “the Edwardian,” or “the Georgian”’.⁹²

It is because of this historiographic self-consciousness that, despite as well as due to their attention to the past and their constant self-interrogation of their relationship with history, both neo-Victorianism and third-wave feminism are undeniably and inherently concerned with the present both as a problematic continuation and rupture from the past. Several critics who have immersed themselves in the analysis of neo-Victorian fiction in the past two decades have commented on this binary perspective. Peter Widdowson, in his discussion of what he calls ‘contemporary re-visionary fiction’, notes that ‘novelists are using fiction as history to explore how the scars of the past persist into the present, how the past’s presence in the present determines the nature of that present’.⁹³ Heilmann and Llewellyn equally highlight that neo-Victorianism ‘[negotiates] the present [...] through a range of (re)interpretations of the nineteenth century’.⁹⁴ Third-wave feminism, while frequently accused of being too preoccupied with its history and feminism’s internal divisions, utilises the past to an equally productive effect by using it to look forward and to engage more vigorously with its own present by constructing a feminist past which is as problematic as it is emboldening.⁹⁵ Both neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism, then, have the potential, in Gillis, Howie and Munford’s words, to ‘indicate a crossroads where the past and present meet in order to mark our trajectories for future feminist praxis’.⁹⁶

⁹² One example, here, is Michel Faber’s sequel to *The Crimson Petal and the White*, a collection of short stories which approaches the notion of historical periods with caution and humour when one of its protagonists tells us he was ‘born on the day Queen Victoria died’ and insists, consequently, that he is not a Victorian, but an Edwardian and possesses none of the characteristics usually attributed to the Victorians. See Michel Faber, *The Apple: New Crimson Petal Stories* (London: Canongate, 2006), p.137.

⁹³ Peter Widdowson, ‘Writing Back: Contemporary Re-visionary Fiction’, *Textual Practice*, 20:3 (2006), pp.491-507 (p.492).

⁹⁴ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.3.

⁹⁵ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.87.

⁹⁶ Gillis, Howie and Munford, ‘Introduction’, p.xxxi.

Consuming women: neo-Victorianism, third-wave feminism and the sexualisation of culture

One issue in particular on which both neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism reflect through their representations of the sexual politics of past and present is their simultaneous contribution to and critique of an increasingly sexualised culture of consumerism. Third-wave politics in particular are often framed as both a response to and participation in what has variously become known as ‘striptease culture’,⁹⁷ ‘pornographication of the mainstream’,⁹⁸ or the ‘sexualization of culture’,⁹⁹ that is, the increasing presence and visibility of sex in the public sphere, and particularly within all areas of consumer culture, including for example the increasing use of nudity and sexually explicit or pornified imagery in advertisement, WHSmith’s promotion of a Playboy stationary range aimed at pre-teens, and fitness clubs that offer pole dancing classes as a form of exercise.¹⁰⁰ For third-wave feminists, the acceptance of postmodern identity politics – that is, of identity as a constantly shifting construct ‘always inflected by race, class, sexuality, religion, and educational status’¹⁰¹ – has, according to Danzy Senna, provided ‘an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited’.¹⁰² Like feminists of the second wave, third wavers actively critique capitalism and the gendered power structures it enforces in the form of consumer and beauty cultures. However, in contrast to their predecessors, they simultaneously acknowledge that they play active parts in these structures and take pleasure from participating in them. As Michele Miller puts it,

⁹⁷ Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁹⁹ Feona Attwood (ed.), ‘Introduction: The Sexualization of Culture’, *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.xiii-xxiv (p.xiii).

¹⁰⁰ See: Attwood, ‘Introduction’, p.xiv-xv; Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009); and Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010).

¹⁰¹ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.44.

¹⁰² Danzy Senna, ‘To Be Real’, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, ed. by Rebecca Walker (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp.5-20 (p.20).

within the third wave, feminists focus on a body politics that celebrates the strength of the female sexual body, while recognizing that there are structural forces, such as patriarchy and capitalism, applying power on them and constraining the way they are expected to behave in the world. Instead of rejecting beauty and sexuality, third wave feminists focus on asserting their sexual selves, not necessarily for the male gaze but for themselves, allowing them to be both subject and object in their own sexual lives.¹⁰³

Third-wave feminists, then, attempt to critique – from the inside, as it were – an aspect of contemporary culture from which, at the same time, they happily benefit and to whose maintenance they at the same time eagerly contribute.¹⁰⁴ Thus, ‘in the third-wave paradigm, you could be a feminist aerobics instructor, a feminist exhibitionist, or a feminist supermodel’,¹⁰⁵ as Deborah Siegel suggests.

While several critics have attacked this supposedly contradictory practice, third-wave feminists insist that although they are conscious that ‘shopping and buying recreates the sexism, classism, heterosexism, racism, and imperialism that [they struggle] against’, their participation in consumer culture also enables them to be agents rather than objects, and to utilise that participation, therefore, to ‘form individual and group identities and help to tell the world who we are, what we think, and what we believe in’.¹⁰⁶ The argument, then, is that women can only make themselves heard if they utilise and manipulate existing structures for their own ends. As Judith Lorber puts it, ‘third-wave feminism valorizes women’s agency and female sexuality as forms of power’.¹⁰⁷

This emphasis on agency is directly connected to two of third-wave feminism’s most central and frequently debated concepts: individualism and choice. Because of the third wave’s inclusiveness, its acceptance of multiplicity and contradiction, it must, by

¹⁰³ Michelle Miller, *Branding Miss G: Third Wave Feminists and the Media* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2008), p.67.

¹⁰⁴ See also: Bobel, *New Blood*, p.22; Genz, ‘Third Way/ve’, p.340.

¹⁰⁵ Deborah Siegel, *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.147.

¹⁰⁶ ‘consumerism’, *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.67-69 (p.67).

¹⁰⁷ Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.275.

extension, accept whatever political or sexual choices women make. As Snyder notes, ‘because politicized debate about sexuality once shattered the feminist movement [during the so-called sex wars of the 1970s and 80s], third-wave feminism completely embraces nonjudgmentalism and choice, sometimes to the point of blunting its critical edge’.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, women’s participation in pole dancing classes, their preference for masochistic sexual practices, or their entry into sex work via prostitution or pornography, are all, from a third-wave point of view, valid – and potentially even feminist – choices providing women gain pleasure and/or a form of perceived empowerment from them.¹⁰⁹ However, without a critical examination of how these choices are made, what desires propel them, and what their consequences are, the third wave runs risk of becoming ‘an ideology of individual empowerment to make choices, no matter what those choices are’.¹¹⁰

Perhaps surprisingly, neo-Victorian fiction’s return to the nineteenth century is subject to similar complexities and paradoxes when it comes to the politics of representation. Gutleben argues that neo-Victorian fiction’s seemingly progressive denunciation of ‘the injustice towards some of [the nineteenth century’s] ill-used or forgotten representatives such as women, the lower classes or homosexuals’ is not a means of genuine subversion but functions, instead, as a ‘[posture] of indignation’ produced in line with market demands for ‘an aesthetics of the politically correct’.¹¹¹ The critical and intellectual capabilities of such literary recoveries are, therefore, limited to ‘the enterprise of rectification, rather than giving rise to an analysis of the flawed situation’.¹¹² In line with his perception of neo-Victorian fiction as a form of nostalgic postmodernism, Gutleben’s verdict is that the genre’s return to the past is an

¹⁰⁸ Snyder, ‘What Is Third-Wave Feminism’, p.191.

¹⁰⁹ The concept of choice is further explored in relation to sex work in Chapter Four, which investigates neo-Victorian fiction’s representation of prostitution.

¹¹⁰ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.45.

¹¹¹ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p.10 and pp.11-12.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.169.

unproductive one, both in light of its engagement with the past (which is an inherently conservative one) and its treatment of the present, which apparently it fails to consider at all. ‘A majority of these contemporary novels’, he argues, ‘are totally bereft of any narrational or diegetic consideration about the present situation’ and ‘[feel] exempt from any other political responsibility’ than the superficial rectification of historical wrongs and absences.¹¹³ Consequently, ‘the ill-treatment of women, homosexuals or the lower classes is not at all shocking or seditious’ and, far from being a taboo, has become, instead, a neo-Victorian trope.¹¹⁴ Both implicitly and explicitly, Gutleben’s argument, then, is based on the assumption that there is no connection between the Victorian past and the present and, more importantly, that the issues to which neo-Victorian fiction returns so repetitively (and, according to Gutleben, for no purpose but marketability), are being returned to exclusively for an increase in sales figures.

To a certain extent, Gutleben raises an important issue in questioning the motivation behind and effect of neo-Victorianism’s rewriting of women’s histories and issues surrounding gender and sexuality. Its ethical motivations, due to neo-Victorianism’s success on page as well as on screen, are an inherent and unavoidable aspect of neo-Victorian fiction and have also been addressed by Heilmann and Llewellyn, who draw attention to ‘the marketing and marketability of the contemporary Victorian adaptation’ in television and film, particularly in relation to the heteronomatization of Sarah Waters’ lesbian-centred neo-Victorian novels in their adaptation to the small screen. But what is lacking in Gutleben’s analysis specifically (and what is, in contrast, very much evident in Heilmann and Llewellyn’s as well as, to a lesser extent, in Kohlke’s work) is an attention to neo-Victorian fiction’s potential for self-conscious interrogations of its own constructions of the Victorians, and, more specifically, of the manner in and means through which it rewrites that past, including

¹¹³ Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p.169.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.11.

the politics of its own profitability and status in sexualised consumer culture.

While Kohlke also acknowledges that the genre can '[comment] on our own cultural obsession with sex', she nevertheless criticises it for 'reveal[ing] less about our forebears and more the present-day sexual fantasies',¹¹⁵ as if uncovering and conveying knowledge of the Victorian past must be neo-Victorian fiction's primary aim, and the fictionalisation of and contribution to Victorianist scholarship its ultimate function. If 'even overtly political uses of the sex trope in neo-Victorian fiction thus remain questionable as avenues to genuine knowledge of the past', then the implicit assumption here is that authors create and readers expect an erotic lesson in the 'true' history of sexuality from neo-Victorian fiction.¹¹⁶

Setting aside the fact that neo-Victorian fiction lays no claim to deliver such 'genuine knowledge of the past', we also need to ask what does. Is not the increasing scholarly work on sex and the Victorians since the 1960s as motivated and influenced by the new sexualisation of culture as neo-Victorian fiction is, and does not scholarship, however unintentionally, also '[bear] risks of inadvertent recidivism and obfuscation'?¹¹⁷ As Mark Llewellyn asks, 'are not both groups of researchers [Victorianists and neo-Victorianists] actually engaged in a similar, if not identical, task? Is not the locus of their dual perspectives an approach to understanding the impact of the nineteenth century and its enduring legacy into the present?'¹¹⁸ Kohlke's insistence that 'we need to begin to ask not only what we know about sexuality, but *how* we know it, and what "knowledge" derives only from eroticised fantasies of the Other' hence needs to be explicitly extended beyond neo-Victorian fiction and to the 'sexsation' of scholarship.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation', p.348.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.350.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.353.

¹¹⁸ Mark Llewellyn, 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (Winter 2008), pp.164-185 (p.169).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.354.

That studies of nineteenth-century sexual culture, like neo-Victorian fiction, can function as historical peep-shows for researcher and reader alike is evident in the playful paratext of the 2001 Faber & Faber hardback edition of Ian Gibson's *The Erotomaniac*,¹²⁰ a biography of Henry Spencer Ashbee, the perhaps best-known and most important Victorian collector and bibliographer of pornography. The front of the dust jacket which fashions Gibson's text contains a cut-out in the shape of a keyhole, implying that opening this book and discovering its contents will allow us, the readers, to peep through the hole and see something which we are not supposed to see, something forbidden which would otherwise remain concealed behind closed doors. Visible through the keyhole is, of course, the front of the book's hardcover, but rather than being blank, it reveals an indistinct black and white shape. Removing the dust jacket, we discover a drawing of a woman whipping a man with a birch, and it becomes clear that the shape we spied is, in fact, the man's naked bottom together with a part of his coat, which his punisher lifts up in order to expose his behind. What we see through the keyhole is, then, merely a fragment with little or no meaning which gains significance only if we uncover the whole picture, if we put it into context, as Gibson does with Ashbee and Victorian pornography and society; but this physical play of images also draws attention to the sexsation of the scholarship we encounter between the covers.

In fiction, too, we find intertextual and metafictional allusions to neo-Victorian fiction's reputation for an abundance of sex. Brian Thompson's highly self-referential *The Widow's Secret* (2008), for example, features a London-based upper-class heroine, Bella Wallis, whose sensational novels – published under the male synonym Henry Ellis

¹²⁰ A paratext, as defined by Gérard Genette, constitutes 'all of the marginal or supplementary data around the text. It comprises what one could call various thresholds: authorial and editorial (i.e., titles, insertions, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces and notes); media related (i.e., interviews with the author, official summaries) and private (i.e., correspondence, calculated or non-calculated disclosures)'. See: Gérard Genette and Amy G. McIntosh, 'The Proustian Paratexte', *SubStance*, 17:2 (1988), pp.63-77 (p.63).

Margam – frequently cause gentlemen to experience ‘uncomfortable stirrings in the trouser department’.¹²¹ Thompson’s novel concerns itself with the act of writing such fictions, and as readers we are repeatedly teased with sexually promising scenes, but, conscious of the expectations of the genre’s sensationalism,¹²² Thompson refuses to fulfil the expectation he raises. Early on in the novel, we learn that Bella is in a lesbian relationship with Marie Claude, a beautiful French woman, and we are soon provided with a promising view of her lover:

Lying in the bath was a pale young woman [...] Her skin was the colour of pearl, as though at any moment it would become completely translucent, which only served to emphasize how delicately formed she was, how angelically perfect. There was not a single blemish on her nakedness save one – a mole that kept coy company with her navel.¹²³

Yet, our hopes for a lesbian sex scene *à la* Sarah Waters are almost instantly disappointed when we read that ‘Bella was in no mood for aesthetic ecstasies’.¹²⁴

Neo-Victorian fiction and third-wave feminism, then, both occupy a paradoxical position within sexualised Western consumer cultures as they contribute to as well as benefit from it but at the same time also have the capability and willingness to interrogate and critique their participation in the structures and politics of these sexualised economies. This has become an almost inherent trait of third-wave feminist writing, but in neo-Victorian fiction this kind of self-reflexive engagement with the genre’s sexual politics as well as with its historiographic potentials remains, for the most part, reserved for the more sophisticated and literary texts which fall into Heilmann and Llewellyn’s definition of term ‘neo-Victorian’, while others provide merely unquestioning illustrations of the phenomenon that has become the neo-Victorian sexsation.

¹²¹ Brian Thompson, *The Widow’s Secret* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), p.25.

¹²² Kohlke, ‘The Neo-Victorian Sexsation’, p.1.

¹²³ Thompson, *The Widow’s Secret*, p.12.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

The feminist politics of neo-Victorian fiction: chapters and themes

This thesis restricts itself to neither the highly literary and sophisticated nor the purely sexsational examples of neo-Victorian fiction. Rather, as the following chapters demonstrate, the texts discussed here show that neo-Victorian fiction, through its historical settings and/or references to the past, can function as an indicator of feminist issues of the present independent from its intellectual ambitions, be it through an unconscious replication of the Victorian discourses or practices which these texts set out to critique, or be it through a critical and self-conscious interrogation of the issues they thematise as well as of the means through which they do so. Unlike Heilmann and Llewellyn, then, I use the term ‘neo-Victorian fiction’ to refer to texts which return to the Victorian past through their settings, plots and/or themes, be they set in the nineteenth century, or be they set after 1901 or even in the present day, whether they function on metafictional or metahistorical levels or not.

Despite the conceptual allegiances and shared concerns of third-wave feminism and neo-Victorianism which this introduction has outlined, the aim of this thesis is certainly not to lay claim to neo-Victorian fiction as a third-wave feminist genre or to argue that its authors engage explicitly and directly with third-wave feminist theory outright. Rather, the following chapters investigate neo-Victorian fiction’s representations of feminist issues from a contemporary feminist perspective by using third-wave theory, both because of its conceptual commonalities with neo-Victorianism and its direct engagement with the respective themes each of the five chapters explores. In doing so, the thesis highlights neo-Victorian fiction’s concern not only with the history of the feminist themes it addresses but also with their continuing prevalence in Western culture and feminist theory.

Chapter One will continue some of the discussions already begun in this introduction by considering matrilineal narratives both as a significant concept in

feminist theory and as a recurring motif in recent neo-Victorian fiction, most notably Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) and Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women* (2009). In doing so, it proposes that matrilineal narratives in neo-Victorian fiction can function as comments on the (dis)continuities between feminist pasts and presents at the turn of the millennium and, at the same time, as metafictional reflections on the nature neo-Victorian fiction's relationship to nineteenth-century history.

One concern which characterises both Walbert's and Waters' novel is the notion of hereditary mental illness in women, and Chapter Two turns to this issue, which for the Victorians was so intrinsically linked to female genealogy, by focusing on neo-Victorian fiction's representation of the madwoman. Investigating not only the representation of this infamous Victorian figure but also the power structures inherent in her treatment and the narrativisation and pathologisation of the female body, I argue that Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* (2005) and Megan Chance's *An Inconvenient Wife* (2004) can be considered as hystorigraphic metafiction, that is, they contribute to the writing of the history of hysteria while also reflecting contemporary issues surrounding feminist therapy and women's mental health.

Returning once more to Waters' *Fingersmith* but considering also Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007), the third chapter turns away from medical narratives of women's bodies to the representations of their sexualities in pornography. Starling and Waters, I suggest, return to the nineteenth-century pornography trade not only to explore the roots of today's vast sex trade as a feminist concern but also to interrogate women's relationships to pornography, including the liberatory and exploitative potentials it may hold for them. Yet, in doing so, both novels also reflect on the textual politics of their own sexualisation.

Moving from the representational politics of textual, imagined sex to its physical sale, Chapter Four explores the economies of prostitution by investigating more closely

neo-Victorian representations of sex work in Linda Holman's *The Linnet Bird* (2004) and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), texts which, to different extents, illustrate and explore the correlation between Victorian and twenty-first century (feminist) discourses on sex work and which 'pimp' the neo-Victorian prostitute for their own ambiguous textual and political purposes.

The final chapter of this thesis, then, traces turns to a combination of the issues addressed in previous sections by considering the gendered developments and problematics of life writing. Through an analysis of Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008) and Margaret Forster's *Keeping the World Away* (2006), I argue that neo-Victorian fiction can function as third-wave feminist biography, that is, as biography which utilises as well as critically engages with the potentials and challenges that postmodernist and third-wave theories surrounding history, gender and identity pose to the genre of life writing and its practices.

The conclusion to this thesis will synthesise the feminist politics of neo-Victorian fiction and review the effectiveness of the genre as a form of feminist enquiry, before then turning to some of the blind spots of the textual mirror which I evoked in the first pages of this thesis in order to point towards areas of investigation which remain un(der)explored.

CHAPTER ONE

(Re)Writing genealogies: matrilinealism, third-wave feminism and neo-Victorian fiction

If the daughter is a mocking memory to the mother – then the mother is a horrid warning to her daughter. ‘As I am, so you will be.’

Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (1979)¹

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter explores the significance of women and their sexualities in the pornographic writings of the Marquis de Sade, as well as discussing the role of the pornographer himself. Through an analysis of these works’ protagonists (the female libertine and the virtuous female victim), Carter considers, among other issues, de Sade’s representations of relationships between mothers and daughters. In the epigraph above, she illustrates the potential influence a matrilineal history can have on a daughter’s life. Both the idea of the daughter as ‘a mocking memory’ and the notion of the mother as ‘a horrid warning’ acknowledge that a daughter’s awareness of her mother’s past and her consciousness of being her mother’s progeny can have a significant impact on the way she performs her own identity. As Carter suggests, this performance is characterised by a paradoxical connection between imitation of and escape from the inherited maternal narrative, since the daughter can re-enact as well as alter it, but can never wholly free herself from her existence as her mother’s sequel.

It is in this capacity – as a relationship congenitally defined by simultaneous proximity and distance, a tension between past and present, between similarity and difference – that the matrilineal metaphor has gained significance both in feminism and neo-Victorian fiction. Charting first the history and development of the matrilineal metaphor in feminist discourse, this chapter then moves on to an analysis of the

¹ Angela Carter, [1979] *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2006), p.144.

matrilineal narratives in Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women* (2009) and Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) in order to explore two interrelated functions of matrilinealism in neo-Victorian fiction: first, the ways in which it facilitates the exploration of female and feminist identities and issues in the present through the establishment of a relationship with the past while at the same time prompting the interrogation and destabilisation of a generational conception of that relationship; second, the chapter investigates matrilineal narratives in their function as metafictional comments on neo-Victorian fiction's relationship to the (nineteenth-century) past in order to further highlight the genre's historiographic similarities to third-wave feminism and, hence, its suitability as a critical framework for the exploration of feminist issues in neo-Victorian fiction.

Feminist genealogies: histories and contexts

Entwined with the image of feminist 'waves', the 'matrophor' was first adopted by the women's movements in Britain and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s.² In contrast, the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors of this self-designated 'second wave' had favoured imagery which reflected the notion that their movement was an unprecedented but inevitable development in women's history, and hence they employed images of eruption and ignition, such as 'volcanoes, lava, and fire',³ to characterise their work.⁴ Initially, neither American nor British second-wave feminists looked to their nineteenth and early-twentieth-century predecessors when their

² Rebecca Dakin Quinn, 'An Open Letter to Institutional Mothers', *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, ed. by. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.174-182 (p.179). Quinn uses the term 'matrophor' to denote 'the persistent nature of maternal metaphors in feminism' (p.179).

³ Marlene LeGates, *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.188.

⁴ This choice of imagery – of a volcano, which can erupt repeatedly, and of lava, which spreads at a rapid pace after an eruption – appears particularly suitable considering the multiple generations of women involved in this first wave of feminism between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1910s. New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand did also employ wave metaphors, but not to the same effect as feminists of the 1960s and 70s.

movements emerged: feminists in the U.S. saw their origins in the New Left and civil rights movements of the 1960s,⁵ while those in Britain – for whom ‘the most prominent social division centred on class rather than race’ – primarily identified with radical left-wing politics.⁶ The New Left, however, did not consider women’s issues a priority,⁷ and, as Juliet Mitchell demonstrated in ‘Women: the Longest Revolution’ (1966),⁸ Marxism, while focused on issues of social class, failed to recognise the oppression of the female sex entirely.⁹ As a consequence, it was during the early years of the second wave that, in Astrid Henry’s words, ‘women began to identify the previous century’s movement as their history and their political foundation’.¹⁰ In both the U.S. and Britain feminists established a generational and familial framework which, through the wave metaphor and the matrophor, categorised the feminist activities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and of the 1960s and 1970s as ‘two moments in the same movement’.¹¹ This generational conceptualisation has since dominated discourses surrounding feminism’s history and development and has become a crucial means of describing shifts in feminist politics.

For second-wave feminists, designating the women’s movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as their foremothers enabled them to locate their cause ‘within the longer trajectory of feminism’s history’ and to ‘validate feminism at a time when it was often ridiculed as silly and not politically serious’.¹² Identifying themselves as part of a feminist genealogy thus also encouraged the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s to seek empowerment through the recovery of women’s

⁵ Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p.52.

⁶ Sue Thornham, ‘Second Wave Feminism’, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.29-42 (p.28).

⁷ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.53.

⁸ See: Juliet Mitchell, ‘Women: The Longest Revolution’, *New Left Review*, 40 (December 1966), pp.11-37.

⁹ Thornham, ‘Second Wave Feminism’, p.38.

¹⁰ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, pp.57-58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.53.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.58 and p.53.

narratives from the past, which in previous decades had remained invisible or even purposely concealed. How substantial such recoveries and reconstructions were to the conception of second-wave feminist identities and ideologies is evident in the amount of first-wave writing included alongside second-wave pieces in publications of the time as well as in second wavers discussions of their predecessors' politics.¹³

However, unlike the close generational connection between second and third-wave feminism upon which the mother-daughter dyad can be mapped with relative ease and to which it often applies literally, the relationship second wavers established between themselves and the first wave 'cannot so easily be represented as familial'.¹⁴ Consequently, in order to designate their political heritage in the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, feminists of the 1960s and 70s first had to denounce the 'wasted generation' of their biological mothers by committing,¹⁵ as Phyllis Chesler puts it, psychological matricide.¹⁶ By claiming that feminism died in the 1920s instead of 'recognizing the ways in which [it] continued to exist [... and] may have been transformed' after many suffragettes had given up their struggle at the onset of World War I,¹⁷ second wavers were able to claim that feminism was 'reborn' with their movement,¹⁸ rendering them the daughters of what they considered the only other feminist period in history, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Paradoxically, to establish their place in feminist history and reinforce the validity of their concerns, they felt the need to relinquish their biological mothers' and their grandmothers' generations in order to claim their matrilineage in the more distant past and, therefore, their identities as feminists in the present.¹⁹ For many second-wave feminists, then, feminism

¹³ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, pp.73-74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁵ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p.15.

¹⁶ Phyllis Chesler, *Letters to a Young Feminist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997), p.55.

¹⁷ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.66.

¹⁹ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.72.

provided the opportunity to *not* become like their biological mothers and they perceived their denunciation of them as a vital step in defining themselves as feminists. Here, the matrophor's problematic emphasis on age differences proves self-defeating to the project of feminist history as it facilitates the exclusion of these biological mothers, that is, of four decades of women, thus supporting the notion that feminism can simply disappear or die as quickly as it has come into existence.

Although the first wave 'had shown how effectively [women] could mobilise to campaign for specific reforms in the areas of matrimonial law, property ownership, child custody rights, work and educational opportunities, and government regulation of sexual morality',²⁰ the matrilineal relationship second-wave feminists established so selectively with these women through the utilisation of the matrophor was by no means straightforward. As Marlene LeGates notes, that so many of these issues were still on the agenda of the second wave led feminist historians of the late 1960s and early 1970s to criticise their *fin-de-siècle* predecessors for not having achieved more than they did.²¹ Such frustration is palpable, for example, in Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971). Figes highlights the alleged superior insight of feminism's second wave when she remarks that 'it did not occur to' Florence Nightingale that 'for an intelligent, educated woman, nursing was not so much a career as a form of martyrdom'.²² Equally, Greer invalidates the first wave's achievements by juxtaposing the outdated 'genteel middle-class ladies' and 'old suffragettes' of the previous era with the 'middle-class women' of her 'new' and 'younger' wave.²³

Continuing the utilisation of the wave metaphor and the matrophor, third-wave feminists have profited from its use in comparable ways. By representing their feminism as part of an ongoing history of political struggle, '[t]his generation enters into

²⁰ Valerie Sanders, 'First Wave Feminism', *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.16-28 (p.26).

²¹ LeGates, *In Their Time*, p.237.

²² Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (London: Virago, 1978), p.155.

²³ Germaine Greer, [1970] *The Female Eunuch* (London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1971), p.11.

feminism through both rejecting the imagined post-feminism of their immediate predecessors (and some of their peers) and reclaiming the feminism of the early second wave'.²⁴ One obvious but crucial difference to the second wave's relationship to its feminist foremothers is that women of the third wave are contemporaries – and often both the biological as well as figurative daughters – of the second-wave generation (who themselves were much less likely to have to face their foremothers directly). This generational proximity has facilitated dialogue between feminists of both wave, and since the turn of the millennium cross-generational conversation has become a popular form in feminist scholarship in particular.²⁵ While such pieces usually illustrate second and third-wave feminists' perceived similarities and differences between one another within a context of mutual respect as well as scrutiny, they also frequently highlight the assumptions and constructions on which each wave's perception of the other is founded, that is, the ways in which women construct images of their feminist mothers and/ or daughters in accordance with or in contrast to their perceptions of themselves.

But while the third wave, due to this close, existing biological and figurative relationship with a previous feminist generation, has no need to commit psychological matricide, it nevertheless feels the need to reject the decade which, to many third wavers, has by now become almost universally identified with backlash and as the period when feminism, once again, was dead: the 1980s.²⁶ Emulating the exclusion from feminist historical records which the second wave had forced upon the period of and between World War I and World War II, third wavers' utilisation of a generational framework and their construction of the 80s as an era of backlash supports the idea that

²⁴ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.26.

²⁵ Such pieces are numerous, and examples include: Roxanne Harde and Erin Harde, 'Voices and Visions: A Mother and Daughter Discuss Coming to Feminism and Being Feminist', *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), pp.116-137; and Anne Firor Scott et al., 'Women's History in the New Millennium: A Conversation across Three "Generations"', *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy*, ed. by Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A. Erickson and Jennifer L. Pierce (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp.87-108.

²⁶ See: Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).

the women who were in their twenties and thirties during this time ‘can be understood as neither “mothers” nor “daughters” within feminism’s imagined family structure’,²⁷ and therefore they must ‘be metaphorically exiled from feminism’s [fictional] family’ in order for the third wave to establish itself as the (sometimes proud and at other times embarrassed) progeny of the second.²⁸

Perhaps most prominently during its earlier years, the numerical identification of a new wave also prompted some writers to declare their outright rejection of as well as their perceived superiority over their second-wave mothers. Not dissimilar to Figs’ and Greer’s attitudes towards the first wave, early third-wave writers such as Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf – and shortly after also Rene Denfeld and Natasha Walter – have striven to advocate the second wave as outdated, erroneous and as inappropriate for the cultural landscape of the late-twentieth-century Western world.²⁹ To varying degrees, all four authors claim that feminism (a term which they frequently use as a synonym for radical second-wave feminism) has created more problems than it has remedied and has, in fact, itself become the issue. As Imelda Whelehan puts it, for these women ‘the more potent legacies of feminism lie forgotten and the Second Wave comes instead to be remembered as that of whining victimhood and passivity’.³⁰ Once again, then, the (literal and figurative) feminist mother is identified as old and unsuitable, serving as a means to emphasise the daughter’s embodiment of innovation and improvement, even leading Walters to baptise her particular brand of feminism ‘the *new feminism*’.³¹ In

²⁷ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

²⁹ See: Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (London: Back Bay Books, 1993); Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993); Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Virago, 1998); Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman’s Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1995).

³⁰ Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.166.

³¹ Walter, *The New Feminism*, p.4. Walter later realigned her opinions on the relevance of second-wave feminist politics in the twenty-first century in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010), where she comments that she ‘was entirely wrong’ when proclaiming that there was no longer a need for feminism to focus on ‘how women made love, how they dressed, whom they desired’ and

Roiphe's case, feminism represents a set of restrictive rules established by older women for younger women, 'a stern mother telling [them] how to behave'.³² Henry reads this attitude as a sign that feminists' focus on their own generational differences can lead to the dangerous assumption that 'feminism itself [...] has become the enemy' and that within the figurative feminist family, mothers and daughters now tend to forget its 'absent father'.³³

Nevertheless, positions such as Roiphe's must also be considered in connection with the discourses to which they responded because, in contrast to the second wave's relationship with the first wave, the mother figure criticised is still very much alive and active in the debate. Madeleyn Detloff, for example, illustrates how at the 1995 NWSA (National Women's Studies Association) conference in the U.S. 'many of the younger women [...] felt misrepresented, spoken for and spoken at but not heard',³⁴ echoing Ellen Neuborne's claim that '[y]oung feminists have long felt we needed to be invited to our mothers' party'.³⁵ As a number of critics have pointed out, a prime example of some second wavers' (outrightly) patronising and authoritarian attitude toward younger feminists can be found in Phyllis Chesler's *Letters to a Young Feminist* (1997). Addressing a nameless young female reader with the doomed introductory phrase 'When I was your age', Chesler explains how 'I did not know what I needed to know in order to understand my life – anybody's life', presuming that she is aware and in possession of the knowledge her (supposedly unknowledgeable) young feminist readers require and, apparently, crave. Gloria Steinem reinforces Chesler's approach by praising the text as an 'irresistible guide' in which the author 'marks with flowers of wisdom the

insisted that 'feminists could now concentrate on achieving political and social and financial equality' (p.8).

³² Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.1.

³³ Ibid., p.39 and p.183.

³⁴ Madelyn Detloff, 'Mean Spirits: The Politics of Contempt Between Feminist Generations', *Hypatia*, 12: 3 (Summer 1997), pp.76-98 (p.77).

³⁵ Ellen Neuborne, 'Imagine My Surprise', *Listen Up: Voices of the Next Feminist Generation*, ed. by Barbara Findlen (London: Seal Press, 1995), pp.29-35 (p.35).

path she helped clear'.³⁶ Young women, then, are expected – at least by Chesler – to take their place in a hierarchical system in which they are inferior to second-wave feminists and must consequently sit, listen and learn, even though their predecessors claim to reject such authoritarian approaches. As Henry puts it, 'Chesler's presumptuousness is illustrative, if not typical, of a particular kind of generational relationship, one in which young feminists are expected to benefit from the wisdom of their elders'.³⁷

Both the second and third wave's selective acts of rejection and identification with their respective foremothers – biological or figurative – can be read as a manifestation of what Adrienne Rich has termed 'matrophobia', a concept similar to Fuss' notion of disidentification in that it describes an attempt at rejection which is predicated upon the fear of an already established (although not necessarily consciously acknowledged) identification. Matrophobia, Rich suggests, is the 'fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*', caused by 'a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely'.³⁸ For both second and third-wave feminists, attitudes towards sex/uality as well as commonality and diversity have been key to their matrophobic definitions of their respective foremothers as well as of themselves. Figs, for example, deemed the first wave's efforts against sexual double standards self-defeating and futile:

In the nineteenth century the backlash came from many sternly moral feminists, who protested against the double standard of morality, but did not claim sexual freedom for themselves – instead they wanted the male to be as virtuous and restrained as they were themselves required to be.³⁹

Betty Friedan similarly rendered the second wave superior by representing its feminist foremothers as sexually unaware when, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she

³⁶ Gloria Steinem, Review: *Letters to a Young Feminist* by Phyllis Chesler, *The Phyllis Chesler Foundation*, Accessed: 1 July 2010, <http://www.phyllis-chesler.com/books/letters-to-a-young-feminist>.

³⁷ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.8.

³⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976), p.236.

³⁹ Figs, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, pp.87-88.

proclaimed that in the second half of the twentieth century ‘women also had to confront their sexual nature, not deny or ignore it as earlier feminists had done’.⁴⁰

It is ironic, Henry points out, that the second wave, having argued its newness largely on the basis of its progressive attitudes toward sex/uality, would be considered as conservative by subsequent generations on exactly those grounds. Within a movement which attempts to challenge traditional gender roles, the application of the matrophor, then, defeats this central purpose since it evidently reinforces the notion that the mother – even if figurative – can never be sexual. This restriction also extends to lesbian feminisms, despite their reliance upon sexuality as a means of distinguishing themselves from other strands of the feminist movement: as Henry observes, ‘transforming lesbian feminism – and feminism generally – into a mother requires that she be stripped of her sexuality; in fact, she must be asexual, if not explicitly anti-sex, to represent the maternal’.⁴¹

Third wavers’ awareness of and insistence on individuality among women has been the main reason for its rejection of its ‘mother’s’ notion of feminist sisterhood. Because of their ‘preference for defining feminism in their own terms – that is, for each individual feminist to define feminism *for herself individually*’,⁴² their politics and practices have been frequently critiqued for not ‘mov[ing] beyond [...] individual assertions of identity to a larger, collective political identity’ and for focusing too much on women’s ability to make choices and, in turn, marginalising the potential consequences of these choices.⁴³ Yet, optimistic assertions such as Susan Fraiman’s assertion that collections such as Heywood and Drake’s *Third Wave Agenda* ‘fully [direct] our attention away from mother-daughter tensions and back to sisterly ties’

⁴⁰ Betty Friedan, [1963] *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), p.521.

⁴¹ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁴³ Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p.44 and p.45.

should be received with caution.⁴⁴ While the mother-daughter trope may certainly have its disadvantages in that it overemphasises differences within and across generations, the concept of feminist sisterhood and its focus on generalisation ‘seems to offer us the opposite problem’,⁴⁵ that is, it promotes a sense of commonality at the expense of diversity.

Within feminism, then, the matrophor – as a means of conceptualising and chronicling the (ongoing) history of feminism and its developments – has attracted both support and criticism, and Henry speculates that ‘the 1990s may well be remembered as a decade defined by the notion of feminist generations’.⁴⁶ Besides its controversial replication of positivist understandings of (feminist) history and its reinforcement of the image of the mother as an unsexed being, the matrophor imposes further restrictions on feminism because it suggests that feminists can never be anything but mothers and daughters and that their relationship to each other is confined to the paradigms of these particular familial ties. Therefore reducing the possible connections between women to one another, the matrilineal metaphor does not allow for ‘various ideological and political differences among and between feminists and feminisms, reducing such differences to the singular difference of age and generation’.⁴⁷ Consequently, as Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford argue, any generational understanding of feminism posits the problem of women being ‘set up in competition with one another’, an issue which ultimately ‘paralyses feminism’ and renders familial metaphors ‘merely another tool of the backlash’.⁴⁸ Yet, by enabling women to establish a feminist genealogy and, thus, history, the matrilineal metaphor can also facilitate an empowering cross-historical identification for feminist daughters by ‘granting them authority and a generational

⁴⁴ Susan Fraiman, ‘Feminism Today: Mothers, Daughters, Emerging Sisters,’ *American Literary History*, 11:3 (Fall 1999), pp.525-544 (p.543).

⁴⁵ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.182.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.182.

⁴⁸ Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford, ‘Genealogies and Generations: The Politics and Praxis of Third Wave Feminism’, *Women's History Review*, 13:2 (2004), pp.165-182 (p.176, p.165 and p.178).

location from which to speak'.⁴⁹ As with other familiar metaphors, Fraiman suggests, the matrophor can thus potentially also contribute to the articulation of and dealing with conflicts between feminist groups and generations, 'not exacerbat[ing] tensions so much as [... helping] to get a handle on them'.⁵⁰

What becomes clear here is that within the context of feminism the matrilineal metaphor, including its positive and its negative potential, is inextricably linked to issues of historiography, that is, questions surrounding the ways in which we construct the past and those whom we perceive as our predecessors, how such constructions are inevitably shaped by the present and how they signal a simultaneous identification with and rejection of the history we write. Due to their engagement with and espousal of postmodern theories surrounding history and identity, third-wave feminists continually interrogate and destabilise the genealogies through which they define themselves. For the third wave, 'feminism is as disparate and multifaceted as the feminists who purport it, and the multiple histories of feminisms must [hence] be written, critiqued, and rewritten as such to effectively disrupt false boundaries and to destabilize traditional, monolithic history to expose diverse and often opposing experiences and positions'.⁵¹

It is these historiographic issues and their articulation through matrilineal genealogies which comprise the very core of both third-wave feminism and neo-Victorian fiction. If, as Henry suggests, the matrophor in feminist discourse facilitates constructions of the past which display a longing for that past at the same time as they also signal that the passing of time equals progress,⁵² then those ambiguities certainly resemble the notions of nostalgia and moral disdain which have variably been attributed to neo-Victorian fiction's portrayal of the nineteenth century and which also perpetuate the mother-daughter relationships with which it concerns itself. As Tess Cosslett has

⁴⁹ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.3.

⁵⁰ Fraiman, 'Feminism Today', p.527.

⁵¹ 'history, postmodern', *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, ed. by Leslie L. Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.177-178 (pp.177-178).

⁵² Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.5.

observes, matrilineal narratives and the matrilineal metaphor have frequently been utilised in women's fiction of the 1980s and early 1990s, often 'figur[ing] feminist progress, and/or a way to a powerful female past'.⁵³ Within the familial metaphor, the mother is usually representative of feminism's second wave of the 1960s and 1970s, whereas the figure of the daughter has come to stand in for the third wave, which arguably has its beginnings in the 1990s. While, according to Cosslett, in earlier women's fiction, according to Cosslett, there is an implicit possibility that 'the mother is also a sister, another woman with whom there can be a feminist solidarity', in more recent examples of the genre she 'is often the prosaic figure in the middle [and] the grandmother and the daughter can be points of mystery and potential, leading off into the unknown future or past'.⁵⁴

In neo-Victorian fiction, however, it is the mother and grandmother who constitute the 'points of mystery' and whose identities are pivotal both to the discovery of a hidden past and to the daughter personifying the present and an unknown future. In this function, matrilineal narratives have become a prominent theme in neo-Victorian fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, where they are not necessarily limited to the mother-daughter dyad but can also exist in the form of mother-son relationships. In Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* (2005), for example, Jacques Rebiere desires to cure his older brother Olivier from his mental illness because Olivier is the last person alive from whom Jacques can obtain knowledge about their dead mother, knowledge he considers the key to his own identity. Similarly, the frame narrative of John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* (2004) relies on the protagonist's obsession with the secrets surrounding his mother's family tree and the significances these secrets may have for him. Sarah Blake's *Grange House* (2000), Michel Faber's

⁵³ Tess Cosslett, 'Feminism, Matrilinealism and the "House of Women" in Contemporary Women's Fiction', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 5:1 (March 1996), pp.7-17 (p.8).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

The Crimson Petal and the White (2002), Emma Darwin's *The Mathematics of Love* (2006), and Jane Harris's *The Observations* (2006) are only a few of the numerous further examples in which matrilineal narratives play a considerable role in the protagonists' constructions of their sense of self.

Walbert's *A Short History of Women* and Waters' *Fingersmith* – although distinctly different in setting and form – are inherently driven by their female protagonists' genealogies. These matrilineal narratives, I argue, serve to illustrate and explore the problematics and potentials of both the genealogical conceptions of feminist history and of neo-Victorianism's relationship to the nineteenth-century past. While Walbert attempts to redress the gaps the matrophor has created in feminist history, Waters seeks to disrupt artificial feminist and historical genealogies; yet both texts represent the past its flawed genealogical conceptions as inescapable.

'And what of history?'⁵⁵: The feminist genealogies of *A Short History of Women*

A Short History of Women tells the fragmented narratives of five generations of women in the form of disjointed short stories connected principally through the shared lineage of the women they portray.⁵⁶ In random rather than chronological order, we meet Dorothy Trevor (later Trevor Townsend), a suffragette enrolled at Girton College, Cambridge; her daughter Evelyn, who lives through the two world wars and becomes a chemistry professor at Barnard College, New York; Evelyn's niece, Dorothy Townsend Barrett, who takes part in consciousness raising groups in the 1970s, later divorces her husband, develops a research interest in Florence Nightingale, protests against the Iraq War and starts blogging at the age of 78; her daughters Caroline and Elizabeth – Caroline a divorcee who struggles to comprehend her mother's political actions,

⁵⁵ Kate Walbert, *A Short History of Women* (London: Scribner, 2009), p.41. Hereafter this text is referred to as *SHoW* after quotations in the text.

⁵⁶ While Walbert purposely refuses to order the segments of her narrative chronologically, my analysis will do exactly that for the purpose of examining how the novel characterises generational relationships and (dis)continuities.

Elizabeth a married potter artist and busy mother of three living in an anxiety-ridden post 9/11 New York City; and, finally, Caroline's daughter Dorothy, a Yale student who chooses to be known as Dora, taking her inspiration from Picasso's mistress and muse Dora Maar.⁵⁷ Despite its predominantly twentieth-century settings, Walbert's novel is inherently concerned with the ways in which these contemporary stories connect to and are informed by the narrative of their suffragette foremother.

World War I, as historians have frequently noted, marked the beginning of the end of the struggle for women's suffrage and the first-wave feminist movement. The common perception is that 'the majority of feminists in all countries,' as LeGates explains, 'placed war activities before suffrage work,' and the subsequent inter-war years have been generally characterised by '[t]he absence of highly visible and effective organized feminist movements'.⁵⁸ While historians have recently begun to revisit and redress such claims,⁵⁹ Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women* also questions, from the very outset, the definitions of feminism's various ends and beginnings, deaths and (re)births. The novel neither opens in the heyday of feminist activism nor with an account by a suffragette or first-wave feminist. Rather, we are introduced to Dorothy Trevor Townsend in 1914, in the early days of the First World War, through the perspective of her young daughter Evelyn, whom we first meet when she recollects her mother's deathbed, remarking: 'Mum starved herself for suffrage' (*SHoW*, 3). Walbert begins her novel with what appears to be an end – the imminent death of a feminist mother and, by extension, of the first generation of the feminist movement – while at

⁵⁷ Dora Maar (1907-1997), a Croatian-born photographer, was Picasso's muse for several years in the 1930s and 1940s. Maar suffered from mental health problems throughout her relationship with the famous painter, partly because of his treatment of her and partly because she discovered she was sterile (prompting Picasso's portrayal of her as *Weeping Woman* in 1937). See Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar with and without Picasso: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000) and *Picasso's Weeping Woman: The Life and Art of Dora Maar* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2000), as well as James Lord, *Picasso and Dora: A Memoir* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁵⁸ LeGates, *In Their Time*, p.283 and p.281.

⁵⁹ See, for example: Anne Logan's *Feminism and Criminal Justice: A Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), which considers the continuations of feminism between the 1920s and the 1970s.

the same time introducing that ending through a figure who marks a beginning – Dorothy’s daughter – and it is precisely this blurring of distinctions between generations, the recognition of (dis)continuities, the constant subjective revision and perpetual presence of the past, which lie at the heart of the novel.

In Dorothy’s first-person accounts we learn that, when studying at Girton College in 1898, she perceives her education there as another version of women’s institutional incarceration rather than as a glimpse toward their liberation. Plagued by traumatic memories of her childhood friend Hilda’s rape by a group of boys at the age of twelve and Hilda’s death in childbirth a few years later (*SHoW*, 64-66), Girton’s treatment of women continues and reinforces Dorothy’s experience of their oppression: ‘the Building Committee’, she recalls, ‘had originally considered iron bars for the girls [...] but these were sixty pounds and so they counted on watchdogs’ (*SHoW*, 59). Unable to achieve a recognised degree at Girton due to her sex and after a failed relationship with a Cambridge anarchist who, ironically, follows his influential father’s instructions by agreeing to a socially advantageous marriage and taking up a government post,⁶⁰ Dorothy – ‘a contributor to the National Society for Women’s Suffrage’ – marries Ted Townsend,⁶¹ a member of the university’s Explorers Club, despite having previously proclaimed: ‘I might jump out of my own skin first’ (*SHoW*, 60 and 63). Ted vanishes shortly after the birth of their first child, and at the onset of the First World War in 1914 Dorothy finds herself dissatisfied with the suffragettes’ declining focus on the vote. At a fundraising event, she observes how the women at her table ‘wear the requisite lavender, or cream in support of woman’s suffrage, though their attentions have been diverted to war [...] their labor evidence of their patriotic intent and good, bloody

⁶⁰ Women were not admitted to full membership – and thus full degrees – at Cambridge until 1948. See Rita McWilliams Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁶¹ The National Society for Women’s Suffrage was founded in 1867 to ‘co-ordinate the activities and policies’ of already existing local women’s suffrage groups in Sheffield, London and Manchester. See Sophia A. Van Wingerden, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp.x-xi.

conscience' (*SHoW*, 20-21). Telling herself 'she's too hard on all of them' (*SHoW*, 19), Dorothy considers the role she is expected to fill, that is, whether 'to advance [men's] comfort is her job. She could do that, couldn't she? Be useful that way. Women want to be useful, after all, and young boys are dying. They're bred to be useful, or maybe, they're bred to breed?' (*SHoW*, 29). Unable to accept this definition of women's duty, she continues her fight for the vote by starving herself, 'her Votes for Women sash like some kind of badge from an undeclared war' (*SHoW*, 78), and painfully aware that

it is brutal, unimaginable, to think of what she is doing, what she has already done to the children, to think of what the children may grow into, given her absence, given their father's absence. Could she explain to them that she had no other choice? That she had nothing else to sacrifice but her life? (*SHoW*, 69)

Dorothy's death, like the suffrage movement, is overshadowed by the war, and considered to have been 'brought on by modern ideas, pride, a certain vanity or rather unreasonable expectations' (*SHoW*, 76). In the papers, 'her pursuit of dying' is expressed only implicitly because of 'the hysterical and copycat tendencies of the Women's Social and Political Union, and of the precedence of the war news above all else' (*SHoW*, 78-79). In her habituary, her likeness is included not as that of a heroine, but rather 'with those of Sir William Whitehead, [...] husband of fifty-two years to Gwentyth [...]; and Alfred Branford, gardener of the high estates and designer of the mazes' (*SHoW*, 79). Shortly before her death, Dorothy is told by a hospital attendant that the drip connected to her veins is 'intended for dying soldiers [...], wasted on a woman by her own hand' (*SHoW*, 3). Dorothy's death and, by extension, women's struggle for equality, must thus give way to an event perceived as more important and worthy, a war caused, led and fought by more deserving men, an effect which, as we shall see, repeats itself in each of the lives of Dorothy's successors.

It is the narrative of this woman who starved herself for suffrage which variably haunts subsequent generations of Dorothy's family. For Evelyn, her mother's death was, like for many of her contemporaries, not an act of heroism or strength, but rather

quite the opposite, a sign of weakness and a way of giving up. She recalls how starving for suffrage literally made her mother voiceless, how there was initially a time

when she was still speaking, or when she still could be heard, before she twisted into a shape reserved for cracked sticks and hard as that [...] Then I was afraid I might break Mum if I breathed, or spoke a word. Before I had tried and tried. Then I gave up like Mum did and went quiet. (*SHoW*, 3)

Evelyn is surrounded by voices which disapprove of her mother's actions. Her grandmother claims that 'it was just like Mum to take a cause too far', that Dorothy was 'too smart to be so stupid' and that 'nobody is paying a damn bit of attention' (*SHoW*, 3-4). At the same, however, Evelyn is also told that she resembles her mother, that she is 'a fighter [...] just like her, and stubborn as a goat, and wilful and determined and entirely lacking [...] in female wiles' (*SHoW*, 14), that she has 'inherited Mum's will, not to mention her temper', something which, she recalls her aunt saying, 'could either float me in good stead or kill me' (*SHoW*, 12). Dorothy's death therefore results in both sadness and anger for Evelyn, who expresses her frustration in an encounter with a caged bird which she attempts to set free, but which is too accustomed to its confinement to seek freedom:

The little door swings open on its tiny brass hinges but the bird does not move nor sing nor ungrasp its maddeningly rigid claws from its swing [...] I shake the cage hard. The door is *open* [...] It could have done it itself, idiot, no trick to this. It could have used its thorn beak to lift the latch, but it is an idiot bird, an idiot canary, a birdbrain, an imbecile [...] I pull it out, yank it out and it bites the skin of my thumb [...] and that hurts so much I fling it off toward the tree so that it falls a bit into it, then up, flying! And then it's gone. [...] And when the bird flies away I am not as happy as I imagined I would be. I would do anything to bring it back. (*SHoW*, 15)

As with the caged bird, Evelyn feels anger toward her mother, who has the ability to release herself from her suffering, yet when Dorothy dies, Evelyn wishes she was still alive, if in her a weakened (or caged) state.

When Evelyn, gifted in Mathematics, leaves for New York to take up a refugee scholarship at Barnard College, she intends to become a 'blank slate' (*SHoW*, 97) and rejects both her association with her mother and with Dorothy's cause. When a group of

women pacifists approaches her during the passage to America and enquires whether Evelyn's name is Townsend, Evelyn denounces her mother – and her feminist heritage – claiming, ““No relation,” [...] I have sworn I'll start from nothing; that I am now no one's daughter' (*SHoW*, 92). For her, the rejection of the women's movement is the rejection of that which, in her perception, weakened rather than strengthened and eventually killed her mother. This disidentification with Dorothy becomes perhaps most pertinent when, having paid for her journey, Evelyn finds herself unable to purchase food aboard the ship and, due to malnourishment, eventually faints upon her arrival at Barnard College. Ironically, then, Evelyn replicates her mother's actions by starving herself (if less intentionally) in order to take the opportunity to receive a university education, that is, to enable her to pursue the path which the women of her mother's generation have paved for her. Yet, when Evelyn loses consciousness and encounters her mother in a vision she still is unable to acknowledge her mother's suicide as a form of resistance: ‘pale, beautiful, raven-haired, they would have called her, had she been a heroine, though she was not, I could have told her; neither then nor now – not to me, not to anyone. No one will remember you, I want to say to her. No one' (*SHoW*, 93-94). Evelyn's journey to America reflects the effect of the first wave's gains through women's increased access to higher education, while the physical sacrifice required of her along the way indicates literally and metaphorically the continuation of her mother's struggle, no matter how much Evelyn attempts to dissociate from it.

Benefitting from the achievements of her mother's generation, Evelyn's aim is to counter what she perceives as her mother's self-imposed silence by being remembered, by making her mark in the world of science, but despite certain formal advantages, the problems she faces at Barnard still resemble, to a large extent, Dorothy's days at Girton. Taught by a female professor, one of Evelyn's first lessons is: ‘You must be fast [...] You must do things that much quicker than the boys do. And you must understand that

you will do them alone, that no one will pay attention. If they do, they will not be pleased' (*SHoW*, 166). Having lived with Stephen Pope – her 'compatriot, of sorts' (*SHoW*, 233) – ever since her arrival in the U.S. and having become a professor in chemistry, Evelyn does manage to be heard and receives recognition for her work. Nevertheless, just as Dorothy's actions were overshadowed by World War I, a celebratory talk for Evelyn's first *Science* cover is cancelled in 1945 due to the surrender of the Japanese in World War II.

As a university professor, Evelyn also witnesses a new generation of aspiring female academics, and while 'these scholarship girls have summer internships on campus – typing, filing – every hour repaying what has been given them in tuition' (*SHoW*, 170), they also, she notices, have new outlooks and ambitions. Thus, when in the midst of V-J Day celebrations the young Helen notifies Evelyn that she has become engaged but is still planning to become a doctor, Evelyn observes how 'to Helen I am a blur, the vague outline of a woman too old to understand' (*SHoW*, 174). Though not part of an organised women's movement and not a mother, Evelyn's life and career do illustrate a commitment to women's equality, both through her academic achievements in a male-dominated field and in her function as a mentor to female students. At the same time, however, she – unlike her academic charges – perceives it as essential to the success of her career that she remain both unmarried and childless, that she reject the roles of wife and mother whose moral duties Dorothy, her suffragette predecessor, found so incompatible with her struggle for women's equality. This decision – alongside war – remains a central concern for the generations of her niece, Dorothy Townsend Barrett, and Dorothy's daughters.

Dorothy – named after her suffragette grandmother – is the only child of Evelyn's brother Thomas, a musical genius as well as an alcoholic. Born in 1930 and part of the generation which fell victim to the second-wave's matricide, Dorothy takes part in rap

sessions in the 1970s, but perceives that, being in her early forties, ‘she cannot keep up with the modern, liberated woman’ (*SHoW*, 120): ‘I feel like a hollow bone [...] as if I echo, or rather, feel in myself an absence [...] as if I’ve forgotten something, as if there’s a question I’ve forgotten to answer’ (*SHoW*, 151), she seeks a new sense of self beyond motherhood and marriage, and does so by looking back to the past, to Florence Nightingale, but also to her own family history. Dorothy, whose mother left and remarried when she was a child, researches her suffragette grandmother and attempts to trace her aunt, Evelyn, with whom her father lost contact after their mother’s death by starvation in 1914. Having discovered her grandmother’s narrative, Dorothy – unlike Evelyn – has the desire ‘to flaunt the new lineage, to be the lineage [...] which allows her to] stand for something other than mother’ (*SHoW*, 49). What to Evelyn was the traumatic experience of her mother’s self-inflicted death is, to Dorothy, a selfless sacrifice: her suffragette predecessor, ‘a woman she had never met nor heard much of’ from her father, ‘had given her life so that women might, quite simply, do something’ (*SHoW*, 129-30). For Dorothy, then, her grandmother’s suicide functions as powerful message rather than a self-defeating, silent act: ‘it changed things then [...] to do something’, she remarks about her grandmother’s suicide; ‘she made up her mind; she took a stand [...] The point is she did something’ (*SHoW*, 38). Here, the keys to a female – and indeed to a feminist – identity in the present are lineage and history: ‘[o]ne must always look for antecedents [...] You have to start somewhere’ (*SHoW*, 130).

Dorothy, like her grandmother at the onset of the First World War, eventually finds herself disillusioned. In the early 2000s, she stages one-woman protests against the Iraq War and is, as a consequence, imprisoned several times, only to be bailed out by daughter Caroline, who urges her mother to ‘get a life’ (*SHoW*, 38). Frustrated with what she perceives as the apathy of her daughters’ generation, Dorothy reminds Caroline that her ‘great-grandmother starved to death on principle’, yet Caroline, like

most of the political leaders and the medical establishment of the first-wave periods, considers her great-grandmother's behaviour as a potential symptom of hysteria: "“Anyway, you said she might have been unbalanced. A bit insane, wasn't she? You've said that before. She might have been suffering from –” “Hysteria?” Dorothy said, hearing her own tone of voice – hysterical' (*SHoW*, 38).⁶² While Walbert redresses the supposed absence of feminism in the interwar period and during World War II, the novel's illustration of Caroline purports a stereotypical image of the backlash generation who came of age in the 1980s. To Caroline, activism – pacifist, feminist or otherwise – is associated with women who cannot 'find another project' (*SHoW*, 47) and who lack purpose in their lives. Having grown up with (and used to) the benefits which the Women's Liberation Movement afforded her, Caroline 'read Susan Brownmiller [...], spent Wednesday afternoons counseling rape victims [...], had made it into Yale [...as part of] one of the first class of women to be allowed, and was soon to graduate magna cum laude' (*SHoW*, 214). Yet, the university environment represents once again only partial empowerment as Caroline reflects on an affair with one of her professors, aware that as a student she was 'no one her mother would have imagined her to be: an undergraduate spread-eagled on the floor of his [Professor Edwards'] office, a scratchy Tibetan prayer rug against her bare skin' (*SHoW*, 214). Later, Caroline is 'named VP only a few years out of business school' (*SHoW*, 222) and while her mother votes ideologically, for Caroline the professional is the political when she notes that she must 'consider my client base' (*SHoW*, 39) and that 'I should have never told you [Dorothy] I voted for him [George W. Bush]' (*SHoW*, 39). Clearly, Caroline is aware of the contradictions in her life; contradictions which she feels are not accommodated in her mother's or in feminism's expectations.

⁶² This association of feminist activism with mental illness recurs when Dorothy describes how the soldiers attempting to stop her protests talk to her: 'Clearly there's a manual on How to Speak to the Protesters and/or the Criminally Insane' (*SHoW*, 43).

When we discover that, in her late seventies, Dorothy begins to write and publish an online blog – ‘A Proclamation: Ruminations on Florence Nightingale, Old Age, and Life by Dorothy Townsend Barrett, aged 78’ (*SHoW*, 108) – we do so not through Dorothy’s but through Caroline’s story. Ironically, Caroline becomes aware of her mother’s blog when searching, not for the first time, the internet for ‘the original Dorothy’, her suffragette great-grandmother whose ‘dozen or so entries [... and] place in various footnotes of current scholarship’ (*SHoW*, 207) she has memorised. Hoping ‘to find further mentions, a recent book from some feminist press’ (*SHoW*, 208), she instead comes across her mother’s blog. To her and her sister Liz, the idea that Dorothy participates in an interactive online culture does not resonate with her maternal role. DT (Dorothy’s screen name), is ‘a woman once her mother, a blogger’ (*SHoW*, 210), identities which are, in the daughters’ views, incompatible. It is, however, because of this virtual existence of her mother that Caroline finds it possible to respond to her posts – first anonymously, then self-identified through the content of her reply – and thus enter into a dialogue with Dorothy, opening up both about her own life and past marriage and toward those of Dorothy’s concerns which cannot so easily be ascribed to the maternal. Paradoxically, it is through Caroline’s virtual act of psychological matricide, or at least intentional oversight, of her biological mother in her quest for her great-grandmother that she is confronted and, subsequently, enabled to engage with her mother, both as a mother and as a woman, and with the female and feminist identities associated with these roles. It is only by temporarily laying off their familial identities and by assuming new, virtual selves, that mother and daughter can communicate outside of the generational paradigm, and that Caroline is encouraged to seek a connection with the woman who shares her present, rather than looking for a foremother in the distant past.

Virtual reality is also what defines the accounts of Caroline’s daughter, Dorothy

‘Dora’ Barrett-Deel, whom we only encounter in a mediated fashion, through her profile on a social networking site and through Caroline’s narrative. An undergraduate student at Yale, Dora lists authors such as Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich (among others) under ‘Favourite Books’ (*SHoW*, 225), and also quotes Anais Nin, the French diarist and erotica writer. At the same time, Dora’s ‘About Me’ section reads: ‘My great-great-grandmother starved herself for suffrage. Color me Revolutionary’ (*SHoW*, 225). Together with Dora’s reading habits, this casual but nevertheless public acknowledgement of her association with her suffragette relative indicates that Dorothy Trevor Townsend’s rebellious spirit lives on in her great-great-granddaughter; but, with her reading of Woolf and Plath, so does the undercurrent of mental instability which runs through the novel’s stories, generation after generation. Dora Maar, after whom Dora has named herself, suffered a nervous breakdown after her nearly ten-year affair with Picasso, and, according to Mary Ann Caws, ‘was taken to a psychiatric hospital, where for three weeks she was subjected to a series of electric-shock treatments, and was then moved to a private clinic at the intervention of the psychiatrist Jacques Lacan’, who treated Maar for two years, after which she lived largely as a recluse until her death in 1997.⁶³

This continued thematisation of women’s mental health is connected to what are perhaps the most prominent connections between the majority of women introduced in Walbert’s novel: the implications – both practical and psychological – of the achievement of equal access to education and to the professions. Evelyn, in the 1930s and 40s, made a clear choice between career and family, while Caroline in the 1950s and onward feels she has lost her sense of self by being ‘only’ a mother and at the same time wondering, with the same guilt which also plagued her suffragette grandmother,

⁶³ Mary Ann Caws, ‘A Tortured Goddess’, *Guardian* (7 October 2000), Accessed: 25 June 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/oct/07/features.weekend>. See also Caws, *Dora Maar with and without Picasso*.

‘Why couldn’t she just be that?’ (*SHoW*, 49). Her daughters Caroline and Liz have both families and careers, although Caroline had to forfeit her position as VP of a company when she separated from Dora’s father. Liz, a mother of three and in a relationship with the children’s father, is able to return to her career as a potter for five hours a day between seeing her eldest daughter off to school and a nanny picking up the younger twins: ‘five hours before she needs to take the subway uptown: five whole hours. It is nothing and everything. It could stretch out before her like an eternity if she has the will, or it could evaporate in a single moment’ (*SHoW*, 180). At a talk Liz attends at her daughter’s school on ‘Raising a Calm Child in the Age of Anxiety: Or, How to Let Go and Lighten Up’ (*SHoW*, 177), the room is filled with a ‘throng of mothers [and] the few stay-at-home dads or those fathers whose schedules allowed them to be flexible’ (*SHoW*, 184). Clearly, the ability to have it all – family and career – comes at a high cost, with the ability ‘to let go and lighten up’ still only accessible to few and only with professional training at that.

The impact of war recurs once again not only because Liz lives in post 9/11 New York, where at schools ‘emergency contact cards have been filed in triplicate’ and ‘each child has an individual first-aid kit and a protective mask’ (*SHoW*, 185) but also because it becomes a metaphor for a mother’s relationship to her child’s education. The school is, Liz tells us, ‘one of those places where mothers are kept on their toes and organized into various committees for advance and retreat, their children’s education understood as a battlefield that must be properly assaulted’ (*SHoW*, 177). A mother’s purpose, then, are her children and the wars of the domestic sphere, whose existence and safety are threatened and, ironically, also supposedly protected by the global battles of the male domain which, as in previous decades, relegate feminist concerns. If, as Dorothy Trevor Townsend puts it before her death in 1914, ‘war is a man-made institution’ (*SHoW*, 132) then this is certainly felt, despite all advancements, in the generations which follow

her fight for women's suffrage.

But the history Walbert writes is neither one of commonality nor individualism, sameness or difference. Rather, the tracing of matrilineage enables both the author as well as her characters to explore a subtle collective history as much as the developments and changes which characterise that history. The answer to Caroline's question 'And what of history? [...] Lineage?' (*SHoW*, 41), is not 'Stop gnawing the bone, ladies. History is behind us, or at least it's over' (*SHoW*, 179). History and lineage are what inevitably defines these women, and their matrilineal narratives, their mothers' pasts, are what they actively utilise and revise – be it through direct identification or disidentification – in order to create and negotiate their identities in the present. Female genealogy, in Walbert's hands, is by no means unproblematic, yet were are prompted, in Henry's words, to 'try to think through its signification rather than abandoning it at the outset'.⁶⁴ Female and feminist genealogies, then, are both fruitful and fraught, restrictive as well as liberating, but they are inescapable, as Evelyn discovers in the closing lines of the novel, in her dying memories of the mother whom she tried so hard to reject for most of her life: 'I climb into bed with her, into that place where she is and if I get caught, if I am found here, I am sorry, I will tell them: There is nowhere else to be' (*SHoW*, 237).

Not my mother's daughter: *Fingersmith's* matrilineal fictions

Unlike *A Short History of Women*, Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* does not only problematise generational relationships between women but challenges and destabilises their very existence through its web of complex and fragmented matrilineal narratives. The novel centres on Susan Lilly and Maud Trinder, two girls who were swapped by their mothers shortly after their births and who have consequently grown up as Susan

⁶⁴ Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, p.11.

Trinder and Maud Lilly, ignorant, for most of the narrative, of who their real mothers are. Sue, the illegitimate daughter of the gentlewoman Marianne Lilly, grows up with the baby farmer Mrs Sucksby in Lant Street, London. Once old enough to write, Mrs Sucksby's biological daughter Maud, relegated to an asylum during her early years, experiences the fate that Sue was spared through the swap: a life as the secretary of Christopher Lilly (Marianne's brother) at the secluded country house Briar. On Sue's eighteenth birthday, the girls will supposedly be told the truths about their mothers and are each to receive half of Marianne's fortune, but Mrs Sucksby intends to sacrifice Sue for her biological daughter and acquire both girls' inheritances. With the help of the villain Richard Rivers, she makes Sue believe that she is to assist Rivers in tricking Maud into marrying him by playing Maud's new lady's maid. Supposedly, after the marriage ceremony, Maud will be declared mad and confined to a mental institution, leaving Rivers and Sue with her fortune. However, it is Sue who is actually disposed of at the asylum, while Maud, who has been promised a share of her fortune and a life free from her uncle, is brought to Lant Street against her will and there comes to know the truth about her own mother as well as Sue's, and about Mrs Sucksby's plan.

While 'mothers in Victorian fiction are distinguished by their absence',⁶⁵ in numerous novels of the period and particularly in the sensation genre, deviant and/or mad mothers, despite their frequent absence, commonly have a threatening and dangerous presence in their daughters' lives, who by heredity carry at least the potential for or tendency toward their mothers' behaviours or illnesses.⁶⁶ Through its changeling plot, *Fingersmith* disrupts both this pathologised genealogy between mother and daughter and the idea of hereditary female identity more generally since the swap of Sue

⁶⁵ Sally Shuttleworth, 'Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era', *Re-writing the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*, ed. by Linda M. Shires (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.31-51 (p.44).

⁶⁶ See, for example: Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848), Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), Esther Summerson in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853) and Lady Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).

and Maud results also in an exchange of their maternal narratives. Each girl grows up believing the other's actual or fabricated maternal prehistory to be her own, hence believing in what I will call a matrilineal fiction. In London's criminal underworld, Sue's matrilineal fiction of her murderous mother, purportedly a thief and murderess executed for her crimes, is told with pride rather than shame or fear:

‘What a thief!’ Mrs Sucksby would say. ‘So bold! And handsome?’
 ‘Was she, Mrs Sucksby? Was she fair?’
 ‘Fairer than you; but sharp, like you, about the face; and thin as paper. We put her upstairs. No-one knew she was here, save me and Mr. Ibbs – for she was wanted, she said, by the police of four divisions, and if they had got her, she'd swing.’⁶⁷

Mrs Sucksby also claims that she has witnessed Sue's mother's death on the gallows from the window of the room in which Sue was born, a fiction spatially linking the girl's birth with her mother's death and vice versa. Sue's own admiration of this maternal narrative is evident:

I supposed it was a pity my mother had ended up hanged; but since she was hanged, I was glad it was for something game, like murdering a miser over his plate [...] some girls I knew had mothers who were drunkards, or mothers who were mad: mothers they hated and could never rub along with. I should rather a dead mother, over one like that! (*FS*, 12)

Not only does Sue thus prefer her to be dead rather than mad – an irony considering that her real mother is the madwoman of Maud's matrilineal fiction – but she is also thankful that her mother was hanged for a ‘proper’ crime.

As she threatens the Lant Street bully John Vroom with shears and the words ‘bad blood carries. Bad blood comes out’ (*FS*, 80), it becomes clear that Sue believes she has inherited her mother's criminal potential. Indeed, she fosters this idea of a hereditary maternal identity throughout the novel. Later, when Sue realises she has fallen in love with Maud, the person she intends to betray, she considers the possible consequences of a return home without the promised money: ‘They would laugh in my face! I had a certain standing. I was the daughter of a murderess. I had expectations. Fine feelings

⁶⁷ Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2002), p.11. Hereafter this text is referred to as *FS* after quotations in the text.

weren't in them. How could they be?' (*FS*, 135). Sue's identity as her mother's daughter evidently causes her and others to anticipate that her character must be similar, or even identical, to that of the supposed murderess, an assumption which causes Sue to be surprised at her ability to have 'fine feelings', feelings which do not exist in her maternal fiction.

Equally, her belief in sharing her mother's pedigree and her ambition to live up to her mother's criminal career provide her with confidence when she assists Maud in her escape from Briar in order for Maud to marry Rivers: 'All my nervousness had left me, and I was suddenly calm. I thought of my mother, and all the dark and sleeping houses she must have stolen her way through, before they caught her. The bad blood rose in me, just like wine' (*FS*, 151). When Sue returns to London after her escape from the madhouse, she does so ignorant of the fact that Maud has also been betrayed and is convinced that it is Maud, not Mrs Sucksby, who tricked her into the asylum and who has now taken her place at Lant Street, an assumption which makes her exclaim: 'Oh I'll kill her, tonight!' (*FS*, 476). Based on the fact that during their time together Sue has (un)consciously adopted and imitated aspects of Maud's identity (later allowing Rivers to pass Sue off as a 'lady' to the doctors and install her in the asylum under Maud's name), Lucie Armitt argues that now 'Sue also mirrors Maud's previously articulated desire for murder' – albeit redirected from a male to a presumed female victimiser.⁶⁸ However, considering Sue's belief in the matrilineal fiction which renders her mother a murderess, this desire also represents her final re-enactment of what she believes is her inherited maternal identity.

In Maud and her maternal fiction we find very similar concepts of inheritance and identity, but rather than feeling admiration, Maud, like Walbert's Evelyn, disidentifies

⁶⁸ Lucie Armitt, 'Dark Departures: Contemporary Women's Writing after the Gothic', *Postfeminist Gothic*, ed. by Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.16-29 (p.26).

with the woman she believes was her mother. Having spent the first years of her life in the asylum in which Marianne Lilly died, Maud is convinced it was here that Marianne gave birth to her as well as dying. Significantly, this idea again links the daughter's birth to her mother's death, as in Sue's matrilineal fiction and as in Walbert's introductory story to *A Short History of Women* when we meet Evelyn at Dorothy's deathbed. As soon as Maud is able to read and write, Christopher Lilly installs his 'niece' as his secretary at Briar, where he raises her to copy and catalogue his collection of pornographic texts. Commenting on the locket with her mother's picture, he remarks that 'wear[ing] her mother's likeness [...] will remind her of her mother's fate, and may serve to keep her from sharing it' (*FS*, 181) and makes Maud believe she has inherited a potential for her mother's madness. Like Sue, Maud thus feels she has become heiress to the identity of the woman she thinks gave birth to her, an idea that particularly manifests itself in her mind in the course of one her uncle's peculiar punishments:

Then he has my knife taken away, and I must eat with my fingers. The dishes he prefers being all bloody meats [...] my kid-skin gloves grow crimson – as if reverting to the substance they were made from [...] I am served it [wine] in a crystal glass engraved with an M. The ring of silver that holds my napkin is marked a tarnished black with the same initial. They are to keep me mindful, not of my name, but of that of my mother; which was Marianne. (*FS*, 196)

Here, Maud perceives that by drinking wine from the glass marked with her mother's initials, she, like her gloves through the contact with bloody meat, 'revert[s] to the substance' she was made from – her mother's blood and what she believes to be her mother's history. Although her maternal fiction of madness is a potentially harmful inheritance, she fosters the idea of sharing her mother's blood in a similar fashion to Sue. When Maud forces herself to carry out Gentleman's plan and consequently betrays Sue despite her feelings for her, she suspects that her ability to do so must be a sign of 'madness, my mother's malady, [which is] perhaps beginning its slow ascent in me' (*FS*, 270). This continually present fear evokes a hatred for her mother which becomes so strong that Maud wishes she could kill the already dead Marianne Lilly, a desire she

fulfils by imagining ‘it was my birth that killed my mother. I am as to blame for her death as if I had stabbed her with my own hand’ (*FS*, 122). Reinforcing the link between her own birth and Marianne’s death, Maud has developed an excessively bloody fiction accompanying this idea of being her mother’s murderess:

I imagine a table slick with blood. The blood is my mother’s. There is too much of it. There is so much of it, I think it runs, like ink [...] There is only, still, that falling blood – *drip drop! Drip, drop!* – the beat telling off the first few minutes of my life, the last of hers. (*FS*, 179-180)

Evidently, Maud fosters both the idea of ‘having her mother’s blood *on* her hands’ as well as *inside* herself.⁶⁹

This murderous fantasy also draws attention to the fact that Maud’s identity as her mother’s daughter is inescapably linked to her existence as Mr. Lilly’s secretary: she describes her mother’s blood as ‘run[ning] like ink’, the liquid with which her uncle’s hands and tongue are ‘stained all over’ (*FS*, 75) and which, of course, is the fluid in which his pornographic literature and his index of it are written. Her association of maternal blood with ink consequently suggests that, with her belief in her inheritance of her mother’s blood, she has also inherited her uncle’s oppression, that is, she is not only heiress to a matrilineal fiction, but a fiction written by men. This connection, then, hints at an indivisible and ironic link between matrilineal inheritance and patriarchal oppression, namely that the latter is continued by constituting an ineradicable component of female heredity. Rivers therefore tells Maud that ‘your history as your mother’s daughter, your uncle’s niece [is] in short all that marks you as yourself’ (*FS*, 227), and when Maud discovers that she is neither Marianne Lilly’s daughter, nor Christopher Lilly’s niece, she has to realise that her ‘life was not lived [...] it was a fiction’ (*FS*, 337). This fiction of an inherited maternal identity and of inherited patriarchal oppression, then, was not only created by her uncle but, rather, by Marianne Lilly and Mrs Sucksby, while it was ultimately fostered and performed by Maud herself.

⁶⁹ Armitt, ‘Dark Departures’, p.27, my emphasis.

Fingersmith thus not only ‘concerns itself with *living with* a maternal prehistory’,⁷⁰ but, more specifically, with *re-enacting* it.

However, both girls not only cultivate their own fictional, matrilineal identities, but also each other’s. Rivers is practiced in the creation and alteration of fictions, because he ‘spent a year putting French books into English [...] putting them slightly different each time, and pinning different titles on them, and so making one old story pass as twenty brand-new ones’ (*FS*, 21) – an act similar to the means by which he creates new identities for the female protagonists. He presents Maud to the illiterate Sue not as a girl who copies and reads pornographic texts, but as ‘an innocent, a natural [who] has been kept from the world’ and who is ‘of sense, understanding and knowledge [...] perfectly shy’ (*FS*, 30 and 24). As he rightly predicts, Sue soon believes this false narrative of Maud because ‘[s]he will be like everyone, putting on the things she sees the constructions she expects to find’ (*FS*, 227). Accordingly, at their first meeting Sue is convinced that Maud ‘was an infant, she was a chick, she was a pigeon that knew nothing’ (*FS*, 66), unaware as she is that she herself is the intended ‘pigeon’ who will be betrayed. Maud similarly is told that Sue is nothing more but ‘a sort of thief – not over-scrupulous, not too clever in her ways’ (*FS*, 226), an image which is clearly proven false by Sue’s skilful escape from the madhouse and return to London. Still, Maud likewise believes Gentleman’s construction of Sue’s character and is confident that the girl only sees her ‘white flesh [...] but not the quick, corrupted blood beneath’ (*FS*, 251). The young women’s encounter with each other is, then, obscured by the narratives constructed by Rivers and those which they believe of each other. Both meet as fictions of themselves, fictions presented to them by Rivers, but which are, first and foremost, engineered by a female force, Mrs Sucksby.

This female complicity in oppression and exploitation – in the form of Maud’s

⁷⁰ Armitt, ‘Dark Departures’, p.17, my emphasis.

and Sue's intended betrayal of each other and, most of all, Mrs Sucksby's initiation of the criminal plot – is simultaneously a product and a generator of the maternal fictions which complicate the female protagonists' sense of identity. This is evident if we consider *Fingersmith's* gender economics through its complex network of criminal transactions and through its relation to the problematic connection established between female identity and hereditary matrilineal narratives. Feminist critics, philosophers and anthropologists of previous decades have agreed that in patriarchal societies women usually serve as commodities within transactions between men (be it through marriage, prostitution, or other cultural customs); consequently, in such a structure, they are unable to act as autonomous transaction partners themselves.⁷¹ In this case, for a woman, the act of stealing may represent a criminal offence that enables her to acquire a certain degree of agency by disrupting the masculine system of exchange, and it is the attempt of such a disruption which we repeatedly encounter in *Fingersmith*.

Sue's maternal fiction of a thieving and murdering mother is also a maternal fiction of female agency, a detail crucial to Sue's participation in what she believes to be Rivers' plan, since the criminal plot seems to offer her exactly such agency. Striving to live up to her mother's supposed criminal talents and unaware that she herself will be betrayed, Sue believes that she will be a partner in a transaction with Rivers in which Maud and her fortune are the currency. Clearly, Mrs Sucksby has constructed Sue's maternal fiction carefully from the night of the infant swap onwards: when Sue is initially in doubt about whether to play her part in the plan proposed, Mrs Sucksby is able to persuade her easily by promising that Sue's mother 'would have done it, and not given it a thought. And I know what she would feel in her heart – what dread, but also what pride, and the pride part winning – to see you doing it now' (*FS*, 47). For Sue,

⁷¹ See: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), and Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp.157-210.

participation in the treacherous plan is thus a chance to continue her dead mother's criminal career and to perform the identity she believes to have inherited from her, an identity premised on criminal female agency.

If we reconsider Maud's situation at Briar in such terms, it becomes evident that in her case theft promises not imitation of but escape from a matrilineal identity defined by madness and her uncle's oppression. Rivers tells Maud that the plot he presented to Sue is only a pretence to assist the betrayal of Sue herself and, therefore, Maud believes '[s]he will persuade me, first, into marriage with him, then into a madhouse. But there she will take my place' (*FS*, 227). As in Sue's case, it is the belief in her maternal fiction that drives Maud into Mrs Sucksby's criminal plot. Rivers reminds her that, since it is her maternal prehistory which renders her Lilly's commodity, Sue's confinement in a madhouse under the name Maud Lilly 'will pluck from your shoulders the weight of your life, as a servant would lift free your cloak and you shall make your naked, invisible way to any part of the world you choose – to any new life – and there re-clothe yourself to suit your fancy' (*FS*, 227). For Maud, the attraction of Gentleman's plan therefore lies in the opportunity to rid herself of what she has come to know as her maternal history and the patriarchal oppression inherited with it, an opportunity which she describes as 'the liberty – the rare and sinister liberty – he [Rivers] has come to Briar to offer. For payment he wants my trust, my promise, my future silence, and one half of my fortune' (*FS*, 227). Sue will therefore not, as she believes, profit from a collaborative deceit of Maud, but, instead, it is she who is to be exchanged for Maud's liberty, that is, for her escape from her own name, her matrilineal identity, and her uncle's tyranny – or so Maud believes.

Yet, in the novel's final twist, the gains both girls believe to make from each other's exploitation is rendered meaningless by the revelation that Mrs Sucksby is the ultimate beneficiary and, indeed, the mastermind of the plot in which they are both mere

chess pieces. Ultimately, her undertaking is the result of an exclusively female transaction between herself and Marianne Lilly in which both their daughters are to receive equal financial compensation on their eighteenth birthdays. However, Mrs Sucksby betrays the dead woman and raises Sue solely with the intention to utilise her as a currency to be exchanged for Maud and Sue's own share of Marianne's fortune. Since at the madhouse Sue is assumed to be Maud Lilly, Gentleman's wife, he is the legal recipient of the other half of the money, which is his reward for bringing Maud back to Mrs. Sucksby. Hence, through their beliefs in their matrilineal fictions, both young women become female commodities of Mrs Sucksby.

What can be observed in Sue's and Maud's agreements with Rivers, as well as in Mrs Sucksby's pacts with him and Marianne, is that the agency offered and the method with which it is acquired reinforce rather than challenge patriarchal gender economics. Each woman is willing to utilise the other as an exchangeable good for her own profit, that is, they are willing to reinforce the status of women as commodities in masculine transactions by imitating the masculine role of the transaction partner who trades in women, hence not altering the status or nature of the commodity. Consequently, the role of the transaction partner remains a masculine one, independent of sex. The only aspect altered in comparison to the male transactions of Mr. Lilly is the commodity's value. Clearly, for Mrs Sucksby, Sue's value lies in her exchangeability for both Maud and Maud's money. Maud, however, possesses not only a relative monetary value, in respect of her share of the fortune of which Mrs Sucksby will claim ownership; she is also the object of Mrs Sucksby's maternal love, giving her a value within herself, though never wholly apart from her role as a sort of 'possession' of her mother, just as earlier on she functioned as her presumed uncle's 'property'. The acquisition of female agency thus replicates and reinforces the masculine system of commodification, exchange, and exploitation of women. While *Fingersmith* is, then, indeed a novel which

explores the ‘possession and betrayal between women’, it does not portray this relationship as ‘fraught with its own power relations’ but as fraught with those of patriarchal gender economics.⁷²

Nevertheless, Marianne Lilly’s and Mrs Sucksby’s initial agreement does represent a challenge to these economics and to patrilineal inheritance, since their contract is drawn up ‘in defiance of [... Marianne’s] father and brother’ (*FS*, 532), guaranteeing that Marianne’s fortune is to be passed on to her daughter rather than to her daughter’s male guardian or husband. In her betrayal of Marianne, Mrs Sucksby utilises the marriage laws of mid-nineteenth-century British society which, as Elaine Showalter points out, rendered women ‘legally powerless and economically marginal’.⁷³ Mrs Sucksby’s manipulation of this system enables her to use Rivers’ marriage to Maud to rid herself of Sue, securing – with Rivers – Marianne’s full fortune rather than merely Maud’s half of it. Hence, Mrs Sucksby defies a patrilineal system of inheritance on the one hand, but also Marianne’s will on the other, proving that none of the agencies sought by Sue, Maud, or Mrs Sucksby through the adoption of a masculine role within an established patriarchal system can offer more than a sinister liberty.

What solution, if any, does *Fingersmith* propose, then, for its female protagonists, whose lives and sense of identity are undeniably distorted and determined by their matrilineal narratives, by fictions they believe are their pasts? For Maud, rejection and escape from her identity as Marianne’s daughter does not have the positively liberating effect for which she had initially hoped. To the contrary, the loss of her maternal prehistory is, if at all, bound to be a problematic success, considering that her matrilineal fiction and the male oppression attached to it are all that comprises her identity. Hence the loss of the maternal fiction appears to Maud as ‘gaugeless, fearful,

⁷² Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.111 and p.112.

⁷³ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p.73.

inevitable as death' (*FS*, 230). This dying process, so to speak, is initiated when, in line with Sucksby's plan, she gradually starts to transfer her own identity onto Sue by transforming the London thief's looks into those of a lady – those of herself. From this point on, Maud perceives herself as 'a ghost' (*FS*, 288), as the visible disembodied soul of a dead person, because the substitute 'new life' Rivers promised she could 're-clothe' (*FS*, 227) herself in is not yet available to her. Maud experiences this loss of her identity as Mr. Lilly's niece and Marianne Lilly's daughter not as a self-liberation, but instead as a process which renders her literally self-less. If Mr. Lilly has made her like a book and if, as she says, she 'suppose[s] all printed words to be true ones' (*FS*, 186), then her eventual destruction of her uncle's personified books at the end of the novel becomes, symbolically, another part of her erasure of her old identity, something that initially poses difficulties, but nevertheless results in relief: 'Still it is hard – terribly hard, I almost cannot do it – to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper. I am almost afraid the book will shriek, and so discover me. But it does not shriek. Rather, it *sighs*, as if in longing for its own laceration' (*FS*, 290).

Similar to the destruction of Mr. Lilly's texts, Rivers' and Mrs Sucksby's deaths are necessary if both Sue and Maud are to define themselves outside of their matrilineal identities. By murdering Rivers, Maud kills the person who has created the fictional identities with which Sue and Maud first met one another. By remaining silent when Mrs Sucksby claims to have committed his murder and is subsequently hanged for it, Sue (although at this point still ignorant of the fact that Mrs Sucksby has betrayed her) and Maud (who committed the actual murder) kill the woman responsible for the creation of their matrilineal fictions and their betrayal. In Maud's case, her fiction of being her mother's murderess becomes true, but, more generally, it eliminates the authors of Sue's and Maud's matrilineal identities, who have to die if the young women are to define themselves outside the artificial prehistories constructed for them.

Finally, Sue and Maud both have to become aware that the maternal prehistories they believed to have inherited are untrue. Once Maud has discovered that she is not Marianne Lilly's but Mrs Sucksby's daughter and Sue has discovered that her mother 'was not a murderess, she was a lady' (*FS*, 533), this process of realisation is followed by acceptance. In order to 'become properly defined *as* women',⁷⁴ both Sue and Maud must recognise that their lives and hitherto performed identities were someone else's inventions. They also have to acknowledge that these fabricated maternal fictions have shaped them to the point of becoming part of their current, and perhaps permanent, identities. As Maud eventually explains on Sue's return to Briar, neither Mr. Lilly's death nor her destruction of his books changes the fact that, as a product of him and her artificial matrilineal fiction, she continues to exist: "'Don't pity me,' she said, 'because of *him*. He's dead. But I am still what he made me. I shall always be that. Half of the books are spoiled, or sold. But I am here'" (*FS*, 546). Clearly, she accepts that the fiction remains a substantial aspect of who she is now or might become in the future, an aspect which she is unable to erase with the adoption of someone else's identity or the destruction of the texts that dominated her life. It is only this realisation that allows Sue and Maud to renew their relationship, though never perhaps wholly outside the shadow of Rivers', Mrs Sucksby's and Christopher Lilly's fictions.

Nevertheless, Briar itself remains representative of a dark past, with 'the dusk [...] gathered in the shadows already, waiting to creep and rise' (*FS*, 537). *Fingersmith's* distorted and fragmented matrilineal fictions function, then, as a critical comment on the applicability and appropriateness of the 'matrophor' itself. Sue is not the daughter of a murderess and Maud is not the offspring of a madwoman; yet both have performed and fostered identities determined by these matrilineal fictions. Consequently, any generational links established through their belief in the inheritance of their mothers'

⁷⁴ Armitt, 'Dark Departures', p.28.

blood are entirely artificial and illusory. The mothers about whom they fantasise do not exist, and neither do their similarities to their ‘daughters’. While utilising the familial feminist metaphor of matrilinealism, *Fingersmith* simultaneously undermines its very concept and the cross-generational continuity between feminist waves thereby implied: for the novel’s daughters, any affiliation to their mothers is not biologically given, but psychologically constructed.⁷⁵

This destabilisation is further substantiated in Maud’s and Sue’s handling of their matrilineal fictions, as well as in the novel’s plot development. Both girls are unable to define themselves as individuals outside the (l)imitations of their matrilineal fictions, until Mrs Sucksby – a mother figure of sorts to both of them – is dead. However, rejection and death are not effective solutions. Mrs Sucksby’s (and, for that matter, Rivers’) death is symbolically necessary to terminate Sue’s and Maud’s fictional identities; yet even as they are rendered parts of their pasts, their matrilineal fictions become enduring components of their future identities, though no longer representing them entirely. While *Fingersmith* does not provide a definite answer, it certainly offers a suggestion in the form of its ending and Maud’s ambiguous occupation as a female pornographer. Despite Mrs Sucksby’s criminal intentions, which defy not only Marianne’s brother and father but also Marianne herself, both Sue and Maud eventually profit from the agreement their mothers signed. Implicitly, apart from Maud’s wage as a writer, they ultimately live on what their mothers, in this case materially, enabled them to inherit.

In *Fingersmith*, matrilinealism highlights neo-Victorian fiction’s and third-wave feminism’s central concern with constructive ways of dealing with what has come

⁷⁵ This destabilisation of matrilinealism in the novel also functions as an emphasis of the lack of lesbian history and of lesbian feminist foremothers. For detailed discussions of this see: Rachel Carroll, ‘Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 39:2 (Fall 2006), pp.135-147; and Paulina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one’: Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 9:1 (Spring 2008), pp.69-86.

before (be it events, identities, or generations) and of reflecting on how these shape the present without either dismissing or simply imitating previous movements or refusing to acknowledge one's own indebtedness to their achievements. Any continuity between feminist generations or historical periods, then, is a fictional one, characterised – like Waters' matrilineal fictions – by fragmentation as much as unity, by disavowal as much as obligation.

Conclusion

Both *Fingersmith's* sensationalist plot and *A Short History of Women's* collection of stories rely on matrilinealism and the exploration of the relationship between different generations of women and feminists. However, they also question, and in Waters' case destabilise, the genealogical conception of these relationships through their non-chronological and fragmented narrative structures as well as through their emphasis of their heroines' paralysing disidentifications with their mothers. Daughters' psychological matricides and the fears of identification these acts represent resemble the ambiguous motifs for our contemporary fascination with the Victorians in fiction. *Fingersmith* and *A Short History of Women* are not so much concerned with the origins of the protagonists' mothers as they seek to explore the impact of matrilineal histories on the daughters. Through Waters' focus on Maud's and Sue's imitations of their mothers' identities and their eventual acceptance of their matrilineal fictions as parts of themselves, and through Walbert's investigations of each mother's impact upon later female generations of their family, these novels highlight the ways in which we actively create our present through our past, both in the case of contemporary, third-wave feminism and its constant negotiation of its relationship to feminism's second wave, and in terms of neo-Victorian fiction's compulsive need to (dis)identify with the Victorians. At the same time, however, Waters and Walbert highlight that our 'present [also] shapes

the interpretation of the past',⁷⁶ as is evident in Maud's and Sue's imaginative additions to the fictions they have been told and in Evelyn's, Caroline's and Dora's different interpretations of their matrilineal histories.

What neo-Victorian fiction's continuing utilisation of matrilinealism suggests is that no identity – be it literary, national, cultural or personal – can properly define itself except in comparison to what it perceives to be its past, and without (re-)negotiating, fictionally or otherwise, its relationship with that history. Matrilinealism, then, offers neo-Victorian fiction a way into a feminist past and a model for the exploration of feminist issues in that past as a fruitful of further interrogating the present. Yet, while Walbert's and Waters's texts critically appraise the very means through which neo-Victorianism and third-wave feminism conceptualise their histories, they also indicate the inevitability of the genealogical concepts which dominate the writing of these histories. Although highly sceptical of the matrilineal metaphor and its historiographic implications, neither novel provides viable alternatives, indicating that feminism in particular is perhaps inescapably stuck in its own genealogical conceptualisation of itself, rendering it all the more important that its proponents remain acutely aware of the problematics and limitations the continuation of this concept poses.

⁷⁶ Dana Shiller, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', *Studies in the Novel*, 29:4 (1997), pp.538-560 (p.544).

CHAPTER TWO

Hystoriographic metafiction: women, madness, therapy and power

In line with their destabilisation of matrilineal genealogies, Walbert's and Waters' narratives of female madness also challenge the Victorian notion of women's mental illness as a hereditary affliction by highlighting, instead, the processes and cultural anxieties through which their characters are labelled as mentally ill. This chapter considers the recurring figure of the madwoman in neo-Victorian fiction and establishes the significance of authors' return to this infamous character of nineteenth-century fiction and medicine. In returning to 'the period when the predominance of women among the institutionalized insane first becomes a statistically verifiable phenomenon',¹ Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* (2005) and Megan Chance's *An Inconvenient Wife* (2004) participate in the writing of what Elaine Showalter has termed 'hystories', that is, the histories of hysteria, while their novels are themselves conditioned by the contemporary contexts and the feminist issues they set out to critically explore. These works are, I suggest, hystoriographic metafictions, a combination of the genre Linda Hutcheon has termed historiographic metafiction and of Showalter's hystories. They, like the work of the 'New Hysterians',² demonstrate how 'rewriting the history of hysteria becomes a way of achieving an understanding of, and perspective on, ourselves and our social world',³ that is, within the scope of this chapter, how neo-Victorian fiction provides a means of critically investigating contemporary issues surrounding women's mental health and third-wave feminist therapy theory.

¹ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p.52.

² Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1997), p.7.

³ Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.182.

Feminism and mental health: hystories and theories

Studies such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985) and Lisa Appignanesi's *Mad, Bad and Sad* (2008) have explored the close relationship between a society's gender ideals and its definitions of mental health. As Appignanesi explains, 'not conforming to a norm risks the label of deviance or of madness', and although mental health theories and practices as well as gender norms shifted throughout the nineteenth century, the widespread idea that 'duty was sacred, and for women [...] lay in marriage and the purity of motherhood' persisted.⁴ Consequently, women who diverged from or neglected these duties by seeking satisfaction from activities outside the family became objects of a male medical gaze which judged their behaviour not only as deviant but also as unnatural and a symptom of illness. The most common medical labels classifying female deviation from normative femininity changed from monomania to neurasthenia and, eventually, to hysteria, as a result of the rapidly developing and splintering field of mental health, which was variably contested by neurologists, alienists, pathologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts as the century progressed.⁵

As both Showalter and Appignanesi have highlighted, the connection between Victorian mental health theories and gender ideals became perhaps most obvious towards the turn of the century, when feminists began to rebel collectively against the restrictive roles assigned to their sex and when 'often enough a nervous woman was also a "new woman"'.⁶ At this point, it '[became] clear that emancipation, feminism and neurasthenia, or its sometimes twin sister, hysteria, took shape in the same nervous soil'.⁷ Accordingly, in her discussion of the transition from 'psychiatric Darwinism' to

⁴ Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2008), p.7 and p.104.

⁵ For discussions of these various medical approaches, see: Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*; and Showalter, *The Female Malady*.

⁶ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p.102.

⁷ *Ibid.*

‘psychiatric modernism’,⁸ Showalter calls attention to how during the 1912 Holloway Gaol protests suffragettes were treated by the government as hysterics were treated by doctors, a reaction signifying that feminism and hysteria had become synonyms in the course of the *fin-de-siècle*.⁹ Victorian and Edwardian medical theories were thus informed by contemporary gender ideals and, in turn, they reinforced and sought to provide scientific evidence for what was widely perceived as the biological attributes of, rather than constructed roles for, the two sexes. Victorian writers often used their works to express and explore contemporary medical theories surrounding madness and gender: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1848), Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860), Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) are only a few of nineteenth-century fiction’s most famous representations of the figure of the madwoman which ‘put the many concerns Victorians had about insanity into dramatic perspective’ and variously explored the supposed links between women’s mental health and their racial identity, social class, sexuality and female heredity.¹⁰ Both literary as well as scientific narratives, then, are indicative of the theories and ideologies which shaped the definitions and treatments of mental health and illness during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For feminists of the 1960s and 70s medical and literary representations of the figure of the Victorian madwoman have, consequently, been particularly crucial, if also divisive. Questions of agency and power became central to their readings and critiques of these narratives. Are the ‘insane’ women of Freud’s case histories and of Victorian novelists’ imaginations victims of patriarchy driven into madness by the confining gender ideals to which they were unable to live up? Are they, as several French feminists have famously argued, rebels and martyrs who in the name of feminism

⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.17. In her study Showalter distinguishes between psychiatric Victorianism (1830-1870), psychiatric Darwinism (1870-1920) and psychiatric modernism (1920-1980).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.162-164.

¹⁰ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p.87.

express their protest against normative femininity in the form of hysteria?¹¹ Or should we consider such protests as futile because madness ‘as an alternative to patriarchy ultimately traps the woman in silence’,¹² therefore reinscribing the dominant cultural condition it seeks to challenge while also ‘duplicating the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first place?’¹³ The crucial question underlying all of these readings is whether we decide to consider madness as a way of life and expression that women are able to choose freely and consciously, or as an involuntary affliction that befalls them against their will.

While interpretations of literary and medical illustrations of the female insane were, and still are, diverse, second-wave approaches to ideas regarding the reformation of women’s roles in mental health practice and theory have been equally numerous and manifold. As a result of first-wave feminist efforts, women were no longer excluded from the medical profession and were, consequently, able to put theory into practice when it came to therapeutic concepts and methods. Feminist therapists of the 1960s and 70s agreed that women faced particular problems in society and culture and that ‘traditional psychology and therapy ignored this’.¹⁴ In their influential work *Psychotherapy for Women* (1977), Dianne K. Carter and Edna I. Rawlings summarise the issues surrounding power, agency, sex and gender which most feminists perceived as the flaws of traditional therapy:

The values, structure, and goals of sexist therapy are destructive to women [...] Clients in therapy move closer to the values of their therapists. Sexist therapists accept the traditional/ cultural definitions of women as essential to an adequate sexual identity, the sine qua non of mental health. However, we feel the traditional role of women in our culture is demeaning, powerless and negatively valued.

¹¹ See, for example: Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

¹² Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p.4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁴ Susan Contratto and Jessica Rossier, ‘Early Trends in Feminist Therapy and Practice’, *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy*, ed. by Marcia Hill and Mary B. Ballou (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.7-26 (p.8).

Internalization of this role leads to low self-esteem and self-hatred. If sexist values are learned from a therapist, a woman client will be discouraged from expressing assertion, independence and power.¹⁵

However, feminists differed in their views on what exactly a non-sexist alternative to these traditional theories and treatments should comprise. Writers such as Nancy Chodorow and Jean Baker Miller, for example, saw potential for feminist revision in psychoanalytic theory,¹⁶ while Hannah Lerman and Juliet Mitchell,¹⁷ amongst others, argued that such appropriations would be inevitably flawed because ‘the core [was] essentially rotten’ and a fundamentally new theory was needed.¹⁸

The diverse body of work on feminist therapy resulting from these divisions and alliances is now, in the context of third-wave feminism, becoming vital to the ongoing development of feminist theory and practice in psychotherapy. Works such as Liz Bondi and Erica Burman’s special issue of *Feminist Review on Women and Mental Health* (2001), Marcia Hill and Mary Ballou’s *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy* (2005) and Ellyn Kaschak’s *The Next Generation: Third Wave Feminist Psychotherapy* (2001) highlight the blind spots of and suggest improvements for modern feminist therapy after the second wave. Like third-wave feminism more generally, the contributors to these works argue that at the very basis of the development of feminist therapy must be a mutual understanding, respect and openness between second-wave feminist therapists and the new generation of feminist practitioners now entering and contributing to the field. This theory of collaboration between generations is put into practice in the collections themselves, which include pieces by established feminist therapists and doctoral students respectively as well as essays which are the results of

¹⁵ Edna I. Rawlings and Dianne K. Carter, *Psychotherapy for Women: Treatment toward Equality* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher Ltd., 1977), p.49.

¹⁶ See: Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978) as well as Jean Baker Miller, *Psychoanalysis and Women: Contributions to New Theory and Therapy* (New York: Brunner/ Mazel Publishers, 1973).

¹⁷ See: Hannah Lerman, *A Mote in Freud’s Eye* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1986) and Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

¹⁸ Contratto and Rossier, ‘Early Trends’, p.10.

fruitful collaboration between members of two or more generations. A successful and productive relationship between second and third-wave therapists can only be possible, Ellyn Kaschak argues in the introduction to her collection, if young feminists cease to consider the feminism of previous decades ‘as if it is incapable of development, as if frozen in time in its infancy’,¹⁹ while, in turn, second-wave feminists must acknowledge that

the tasks before young feminists are different because of all that we accomplished and did not accomplish and because it is a different world from the one in which we fought for freedom and equality. Yet they need the connection with the previous generation and with each other as much as we do.²⁰

A crucial aspect of this different world is the influence of postmodern theory on almost every academic discipline, including psychology and psychotherapy. ‘The [...] context into which we were born, raised and trained’, Cindy M. Bruns and Colleen Trimble point out, is one ‘in which the postmodern movement has challenged notions of reality and truth at fundamental levels’.²¹ One effective aspect of feminist therapy which arises from this influence is the practitioner’s creation of a space in which ‘members of society with the least access to traditional means of power [can] claim their personal experience as the basis of truth and knowledge’,²² since multiple truths and histories are considered not only as valid but indeed essential. This also extends, on a larger scale, to feminist theory, as third-wave feminist therapists ‘all share the position that there is no single reality, no one “right” feminist theory or epistemological position about women’.²³ Consequently, radical, liberal, global and women-of-colour feminisms, among others, all

¹⁹ Ellyn Kaschak, ‘The Next Generation: Third Wave Feminist Psychotherapy’, *The Next Generation: Third Wave Feminist Psychotherapy*, ed. by Ellyn Kaschak (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2001), pp.1-4 (p.2).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²¹ Cindy M. Bruns and Colleen Trimble, ‘Rising Tide: Taking Our Place as Young Feminist Psychologists’, *The Next Generation: Third Wave Feminist Psychotherapy* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.19-36 (p.20).

²² Laura S. Brown, Laurie E. Riepe and Rochelle L. Coffey, ‘Beyond Color and Culture: Feminist Contributions to Paradigms of Human Difference’, *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy*, ed. by Marcia Hill and Mary B. Ballou (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.63-92 (p.77).

²³ Natalie Porter, ‘Location, Location, Location: Contributions of Contemporary Feminist Theorists to Therapy Theory and Practice’, *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy*, ed. by Marcia Hill and Mary B. Ballou (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.143-160 (p.145).

have a rightful place in and influence upon third-wave therapy theory. As Carolyn K. West argues, within the realm of feminist theory, multiplicity accommodates and enables development and transformation. Feminism, to her, is

a landscape holding many ideas and many truths. Its questions allow ambiguity, entertain difference, invite reflection, and encourage investigation into new perspectives without being reductionist, without needing to dismiss, edge out, or shout down. This allowing, [...] this ability to stay open in the face of ambiguity, provides the space for a transformative process that is akin to the very nature of development itself.²⁴

Inextricably linked to these notions of ambiguity and difference are third-wave therapy's concerns with diversity, particularly the putting into practice of theories on women's diversity. In the 1980s, Brown, Riepe and Coffey note, 'feminist therapy theorists began to abandon a unidimensional model of women that ignored women's diversity and complexity, focusing instead on the intersections between gender and other components of identity and social location'.²⁵

However, we are also reminded of third-wave feminism's willingness to self-critique, as the same authors observe with caution that feminists' undertakings to understand diversity amongst women are far from complete. While issues of colour and race as well as of sexual orientation and age have been and are still being explored widely, both in feminist theory in general and in feminist therapy, aspects such as disability remain underexplored. In the field of feminist disability studies, Adrienne Asch, for example, has raised awareness that 'it is a convention of albeit social construction to define all women with disabilities as members of the same group', a generalisation which should be replaced by a practice in which we 'think in specifics about this particular person, this particular disability, and its particular meaning in the

²⁴ Carolyn K. West, 'The Map of Relational-Cultural Theory', *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy*, ed. by Marcia Hill and Mary B. Ballou (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.93-110 (p.95).

²⁵ Brown, Riepe and Coffey, 'Beyond Color and Culture', p.64. There are some examples of theorists concerning themselves with diversity amongst women already in the 1970s, but they are few and almost exclusively concerned with issues of social class.

current relational field'.²⁶ Therapists such as Brown have argued that, frequently, 'the assumption is made that paying attention to issues of racial diversity will cover matters related to class as well, as though the two variables were isomorphic'.²⁷ Such sweeping examinations of social class, she continues, 'perpetuates dominant cultural stereotypes equating middle-class status with white people and poverty with people of color'.²⁸ While awareness of gender and sexism has been raised in the past decades, third-wave therapist practitioners and theorists now call attention to the areas of women's diversity which remain underexplored, or even silent. Feminist therapists, Brown, Riepe and Coffey suggest, must break these silences and, as difficult and complex as these areas may be, acknowledge the problems they present and 'create a space for uncomfortable difference, perhaps unresolvable differences, between one woman and another'.²⁹

An uncomfortable difference resulting from women's diversity and impacting especially on the feminist therapist-patient and mentor-student relationship is that of power. Here, the perhaps most significant issue of second-wave feminisms was its frequent failure to acknowledge inequalities in power amongst women in favour of an appearance of commonality. As Bruns and Trimble observe, 'while winning significant battles supporting the rights of women and adding women's voices to the psychological discourse, i.e. gaining power, feminists simultaneously denied power differentials existed, at least between women'.³⁰ Since therefore neither the concepts of egalitarianism (the denial of and discomfort with the use of power) or hierarchical power (the use of power over others, as utilised by patriarchy) can be applicable or useful in a diversity-conscious feminist practice, many third-wave therapists and theorists have explored and argued for the potentials of relational power, or relational-cultural theory.

²⁶ Brown, Riepe and Coffey, 'Beyond Color and Culture', p.64.

²⁷ Laura S. Brown, *Subversive Dialogues: Theory in Feminist Therapy* (New York: Basic, 1994) cited in Brown, Riepe and Coffey, 'Beyond Color and Culture', p.79.

²⁸ Brown, *Subversive Dialogues*, cited in Brown, Riepe and Coffey, 'Beyond Color and Culture', p.79.

²⁹ Brown, Riepe and Coffey, 'Beyond Color and Culture', p.85.

³⁰ Bruns and Trimble, 'Rising Tide', p.28.

As in third-wave theories concerning the relationship between feminist generations, we find mutuality at the centre of these approaches:

Relational power is the dynamic interplay between two *active* processes in which the ability to be influenced is an active openness to, and inclusion of, another in our world of meaning and concern. This openness, in turn, contains the potential to influence the one to whom we have opened ourselves, who by their own active openness and inclusion may once again influence us.³¹

The seemingly passive act of being influenced is thus turned into a conscious, active and, most importantly, mutually beneficial practice which allows each participant to gain the best out of others.³² Especially for young feminists and their therapist mentors this praxis promises the productive collaboration between generations so desperately encouraged in recent feminist writing, allowing for a utilisation rather than a silencing of power differentials and providing ‘a means of subverting patriarchy without relying on the master’s tools’.³³ As West makes clear, awareness, here, leads to action: ‘It is not the denial of power differences, but the recognition of them, the mindful attempt to minimize differentials, and to, within the context of relationship, be *empowered* and to *empower* another that creates the change inherent in growth and development’.³⁴

Despite these developments in feminist therapy and feminist therapy theory, Mary Ballou acknowledges that even in its third-wave feminist therapy is still facing problems. Who, for example, decides how health and illness are defined outside of physical medical practice, in areas where numbers cannot reflect ‘normality’ or wellbeing? Even though norm groups supposedly give indications of what can be considered average or normal, they are, Ballou points out, constructed by researchers, meaning that ‘those dominant in the social structure have developed the tests based on

³¹ Bruns and Trimble, ‘Rising Tide’, p.30.

³² Unfortunately, what seems problematic is the absence of practicality in the works discussing this promising new approach to therapy and power and to human relations in general. How can such theories be implemented or be advocated outside the academy, for example? Although theories on relational power are inspirational, how exactly is one to practice them? What actions equal these theories? While such questions represent a significant gap in current feminist scholarship, it is not within the realm of this thesis to explore them.

³³ Bruns and Trimble, ‘Rising Tide’, p.35.

³⁴ West, ‘The Map of Relational-Cultural Theory’, p.103.

their views of normality, and their trained representatives continue to interpret these tests on the bases of dominant socio-cultural normative standards'.³⁵ Nevertheless, it is exactly this awareness, indication and analysis of problems which also adds to the impact and, hopefully, effectiveness of third-wave feminist therapy.

Feminist literary theories surrounding madness and the issues its gendered representations evoke for women have been translated into neo-Victorian fiction since the 1960s. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys famously revisits Brontë's Bertha Mason by providing readers with a fictional account of the supposed madwoman's life before her marriage to and incarceration by Rochester. In doing so, Rhys addresses the interconnected issues of gender, race, colonisation and hereditary female insanity and lends the original madwoman in the attic the voice she was denied in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys demonstrates that for Antoinette (Bertha) the slip into madness is neither a conscious choice nor an empowering act, but that, instead, it signifies her surrender: as she tells us, 'words are no use, I know that now'.³⁶ With this remark and by 'giving up words', as Marta Caminero-Santangelo observes, '[Antoinette] gives up the battlefield to the Rochester figure's representations, which will come to stand as universal'.³⁷ Madness, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, becomes therefore 'not a challenge to constraining representations but a complete capitulation to them',³⁸ a loss rather than an achievement of agency and power. Over three decades after the publication of Rhys' novel, the madwoman remains as compelling a subject to authors of neo-Victorian fiction as she once was for their Victorian counterparts. While texts such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night* (2006) revisit, like Rhys, the famous madwoman in the attic, works such as A.N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* (2005)

³⁵ Mary Ballou, 'Threats and Challenges to Feminist Theory', *The Foundation and Future of Feminist Therapy*, ed. by Marcia Hill and Mary B. Ballou (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.201-210 (p.204).

³⁶ Rhys, Jean. [1966] *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p.135.

³⁷ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p.17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.16.

and Justine Picardie's *Daphne* (2008) have created the contemporary figure of the fanatic Victorianist – the hysteric scholar – for whom reality is replaced with and reason lost in their subject of study.³⁹ The novels which are of particular interest for the purpose of this chapter, however, are those which revisit female insanity in explicitly medical settings by focusing on the doctor-patient relationships created in therapy and the politics of power evoked in that context.

Through an analysis of *Human Traces* and *An Inconvenient Wife*, this chapter demonstrates that not only feminist literary theories on the madwoman but also issues concerning feminist therapy are reflected and explored in these neo-Victorian novels. While the texts are concerned with Victorian concepts of madness and the power differentials between male doctors and female patients in *fin-de-siècle* therapist praxis, the very fact that they concern themselves with these issues is indicative of the themes' continuing significance in a twenty-first century and third-wave feminist context. Faulks' and Chance's novels can, therefore, be considered as fictional equivalents to the work of the New Hysterians. Because of the inextricable link between gender and medicine, the nineteenth century has proved a fruitful ground for this group of scholars to demonstrate that records such as case histories and patient classifications – both historical and contemporary – can be considered as narratives which reveal as much, if not more, about the cultural values and anxieties of the societies in which they were conceived as about the patients, symptoms and conditions they set out to describe. The New Hysterians acknowledge hysteria as a set of multiple phenomena which are historically, culturally and politically conditioned and significant. Both their subjects as well as their methods, then, 'express the age as much as the disorders they analyse'.⁴⁰ What becomes clear from Showalter's investigations as well as from works such as

³⁹ Wilson's protagonist is a doctoral student whose obsession with Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) eventually leads to her inability to distinguish between the events of her own life and those of the story. One of Picardie's characters is a specialist on Branwell Brontë and fixated on the hopeless task of finding more significance in Branwell's writings than they have previously been granted.

⁴⁰ Showalter, *Hystories*, p.8.

Mark Micale's *Approaching Hysteria* (1994) is that hysteria and, I argue, mental health theory and practice in general, can be of cultural and political significance on several levels in historical and contemporary contexts. Symptoms, disorders, treatments, representations and scholarship on any or all of the former are expressed in narratives, each of which also carries a meta-narrative about the contexts in and processes through which it is conceived.

Medical – and especially psychiatric and psychotherapeutic – practices and theories therefore produce narratives which are always, if to varying extents, culturally constructed and thus bear a close resemblance to fiction. It was, ironically, Sigmund Freud – the man who turned so many of his female patients' biographies into notorious psychoanalytic fictions to match and hence confirm his own theories – who noted this connection in his *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and, with some concern, admitted that his case histories lacked the scientific form of psychiatric reports and could well 'read like short stories'.⁴¹ Steven Marcus persuasively argues that 'Freud's case histories are a new form of literature; they are creative narratives that include their own analysis and interpretation'.⁴² If, as Marcus suggests here, psychoanalytic case histories can be read as fictions, then we cannot help but ask whether fiction, in turn, can read like a case history of the society and culture that produces and consumes it. Consequently, this chapter analyses the gendered politics and power relations of the patient-doctor relationships central to Faulks' *Human Traces* and Chance's *An Inconvenient Wife* in order to explore the ways in which these novels engage with and consider historical subjects through contemporary feminist theories surrounding women's mental health.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, [1895] *Studies on Hysteria*, ed. and trans. by James and Alix Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p.231.

⁴² Steven Marcus, 'Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History', in *Dora's Case: Freud – Hysteria – Feminism*, ed. by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp.56-91 (p.90).

Rewriting and overwriting the Victorian madwoman: *Human Traces*

Set for the most part in the *fin de siècle*, Faulks' *Human Traces* is concerned with misreadings of the female body and its symptoms and, through this, explores the power relations and manipulative narratives of the discipline which was, then, yet to become known as psychoanalysis. The novel's narrative follows the lives of Englishman Thomas Midwinter and the French Jacques Rebière. Both medical students, the young men discover their shared passion for the science of the mind when their ways cross at the age of twenty around 1880. Each of them is, initially, interested in the different theories and practices prevalent in the other's country, but their intellectual paths soon divide as their careers progress. As Thomas explains, he and Jacques 'are in the same room, but [...] looking out of different windows', since his 'guiding light' is Darwin and Jacques, like Freud himself during the mid-1880s, is influenced by Charcot.⁴³ Throughout the plot, Thomas emerges as the contemporary voice of medicine as his theories are modelled on philosophical, humanistic and anthropological studies of more recent decades.⁴⁴ However, it is Jacques – the novel's Freud – on whom I want to focus first and foremost. His desire to study the human mind is motivated by his determination to cure his older brother Olivier from a mental illness he developed in late adolescence. Olivier, who is forced by his father to live in chains in the stable, is important to the young doctor mainly because their mother, who died giving birth to Jacques, is metaphorically locked up with his brother, since Olivier's memories are Jacques' only access to information about her. Jealous of his brother's recollections – however fragmented and incomplete – Jacques becomes obsessed with the search for a cure for

⁴³ Sebastian Faulks, *Human Traces* (London: Vintage, 2006), p.413. Hereafter this text is referred to as *HT* after quotations in the text.

⁴⁴ In his notes and acknowledgments Faulks cites Julian Jaynes' *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1977), David Horribin's *The Madness of Adam and Eve: How Schizophrenia Shaped Humanity* (London: Bantam, 2001) and the works of Professor T.J. Crow as the major influences for the theories Thomas develops and presents in the later parts of the novel.

Olivier's mental disorder and, considering this desire for his absent mother, it is not surprising that towards the *fin de siècle* he is increasingly drawn to the then emerging discipline of psychoanalysis.

In their Austrian countryside sanatorium he and Thomas have opened together, Jacques takes on the case of Fräulein Katharina von A, also known as Kitty. In the first paragraphs of his report, he records that she is 'a young woman, aged twenty-five years, [who] had been complaining for some time of severe lower abdominal pain, accompanied by infrequent vomiting' (*HT*, 379) and 'in addition [...] reported chronic joint pain in the shoulders, elbows and fingers' (*HT*, 380). This is where Jacques' scientific observations end. Instead of starting his treatment with a physical examination to either determine the physical cause of Kitty's pains or to eliminate any potential physical reasons for her illness, Jacques immediately begins to probe his patient's social background and life story to establish grounds for a psychoanalytic analysis of her problems. From the outset, he is convinced that Kitty is 'a young woman of outstanding character' (*HT*, 379) as well as 'of considerable education and self-possession' (*HT*, 380), but he also quickly forms the opinion that all these traits merely mask the hysteria which must be lingering underneath: 'the initial impression that this evidently thoughtful young woman gave to the world concealed an extremely troubled interior life' (*HT*, 382). Despite his observation that Kitty 'seemed bemused by her symptoms' (*HT*, 381), he attributes her ability to bear her suffering to 'what Charcot called the *belle indifférence* of the hysteric' (*HT*, 382), that is, the patient's lack of concern regarding the causes and consequences of her symptoms.

An adaptation and amalgamation of the cases of Freud's Ida Bauer (Dora) and Emma Eckstein, as well as of Josef Breuer's Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.),⁴⁵ Jacques' fictions regarding the connection between Kitty's physical pains and her life and

⁴⁵ For detailed descriptions and analyses of these cases see: Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester's *Freud's Women* (London: Phoenix, 2005).

sexuality grow increasingly improbable as his treatment of her continues. Like Freud's Ida, Kitty has had homosexual fantasies and encounters as an adolescent; like both Ida and Bertha, she has experienced brief losses of her ability to speak; and similar to the case of Emma – in which Freud persisted there were psychological reasons for a bleeding which had, in fact, been caused by a half-meter gauze which was left in Emma's nasal cavity after a surgery – Jacques insists in the psychological causes of Kitty's afflictions, which are later revealed to originate from ovarian cysts and rheumatic fever. Like Freud, then, Jacques misreads the narrative of Kitty's bodily symptoms. His determination to find traumatic sexual encounters as the causes of her somatic troubles leads him to several astonishing interpretations of her relationships with friends, parents and lovers. Once his patient has told him about her affectionate relationship with her father, her fear of small animals, her homosexual desires and experiences as an adolescent, her subsequent habit of masturbating and her anger at her dying father's replacement lawyer entering her bedroom without knocking, Jacques believes that this information provides him with 'a fairly clear picture of the trauma that had precipitated her hysteria' (*HT*, 390). Not only that, but he is certain that this picture 'must by now also be taking shape in the mind of anyone to whom the outline of the case has been related' (*HT*, 390). Hence mistaking his approach and interpretation of the case as common sense, he finds that

beyond doubt [...] a traumatic incident had been deliberately suppressed by her conscious mind because she found the implications of it intolerable [and] this sum of psychological excitation, being denied proper release, had converted itself easily through the pathways of somatic innervations into the distressing symptoms. (*HT*, 391)

Yet, Jacques insists he is an objective observer, much like his idol Charcot, who despite his sensational stage performances famously explained: 'I am absolutely only the photographer; I register what I see'.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Martin Charcot cited in Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.151.

In his version of Kitty's life story, Jacques claims that her abdominal problems, which first occurred when she heard of her father's death, are not a reaction to the loss of a man she had been close to, but are supposedly a sign of her desire for her father's lawyer, Herr P, whom she has always disliked.⁴⁷ Kitty's anger at Herr P's abrupt entrance on an occasion before her father's death is, consequently, also easily explainable: not only was it actually Herr P – rather than his replacement – who entered the room that day but he also, contrary to Kitty's memory and narrative, caught her masturbating. The aphonia Kitty reports to have experienced twice in her life is therefore, too, magically accounted for, since it is apparent to Jacques that at the time Kitty was caught masturbating, she was also fantasising about performing an act of fellatio on Herr P, which later physically manifested itself in the loss of her ability to speak. Finally, and possibly both most amusingly and disturbingly for the modern reader, Kitty's fear of small animals apparently stems from the nickname 'little weasel' (*HT*, 393), which she was given by Frau E, the woman with whom she had her first sexual encounter. To Jacques, the significance of this is that

in Katharina's unconscious, the act of masturbating had become associated with the idea of small animals in their holes or burrows; doubtless Frau E-'s successful manipulation had involved the appearance of the clitoris from within its protective hood, like a timid animal that subsequently withdrew. (*HT*, 393)

In this parody of Freudian analysis, sexual fantasy, vivid imagination and professional ambition merge, here, into one. Jacques plans to present and receive praise for his case history at a symposium in Vienna, an event at which a predominantly male audience would ponder collectively and scientifically over women's 'timid' and animal-like genitals during lesbian intercourse.

Once Jacques has finished his 'psychophysical resolution' (*HT*, 420) of Kitty's case, the last step towards a cure, so he believes, is for her to accept his fiction as her

⁴⁷ This is not dissimilar to the way in which Freud, in the case of Ida Bauer, argued that Ida's desire for and relationship with Frau K was actually a displaced desire for Frau K's husband, Herr K.

own narrative, one he insists reflects the true traumatic events responsible for her physical illness. However, to his surprise, Kitty is unwilling to believe his invention of events which never happened and he notes: 'Fräulein Katharina [...] would not concede that the incident I had *interpolated* into her story was necessarily true [and] she was not in a position to recognise it as something she had actually experienced: I believed it would have taken hypnosis to achieve that' (*HT*, 397-398, my emphasis). Jacques' unconscious intention with regard to Kitty is, therefore, the same as Freud's was with Ida, that is, 'to penetrate the sexual mysteries of [...] her] hysterical symptoms and to dictate their meanings to her'.⁴⁸

Despite these clear representations, Faulks lacks confidence in his readers (and in Kitty) to recognise the at best suspicious nature of the medical narrative Jacques has constructed. It is Thomas, who, having been asked by Jacques to give his opinion on the case history, instantly realises that Kitty is by no means a hysteric, but instead suffers from rheumatic fever and, as the hospital surgeon finds, has two cysts in one of her ovaries. With Thomas thus having heroically rescued Kitty from the potentially fatal misdiagnosis of his partner, Faulks feels the need to explain to us, step by step, the flaws of Jacques' analysis in a painfully unsubtle way, namely by presenting us with Thomas' written evaluation of the case. For Thomas, with whom the modern reader is clearly supposed to identify, the problem with Jacques' practice of psychoanalysis is his lack of consideration for physical symptoms and causes of illness, his misreading of them as a narrative which suits the needs of his theories and interpretations rather than serving an effective diagnosis and treatment of the patient. As Thomas aptly puts it, for Jacques even Kitty's 'apparent sanity is a symptom of her insanity' (*HT*, 429), and, therefore, 'she is trapped either way' (*HT*, 429). In fact, the only consistent rule underlying Jacques' analysis of Kitty's life, sexuality and dreams is, as Thomas cynically observes,

⁴⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.159.

that ‘everything is the opposite of what it seems – unless it is not, when it may be itself again. Anything can represent anything else – or its opposite!’ (*HT*, 433).

For Thomas, a firm believer in the potential of emotional care, it is not the act of talking as a therapeutic method which is at fault, but the fact that Jacques abuses his patient’s narrative to construct his own story. Jacques’ aim is, consequently, not to cure his patient by whatever means, but to find what he wants to find, that is, to alter Kitty’s narrative with his rigid, still underdeveloped theory rather than shaping his theory with consideration of her narrative. Mirroring the way in which ‘some of the openness to women’s words and feelings displayed in *Studies on Hysteria* had become codified in the interests of Freud’s emerging psychoanalytic system’,⁴⁹ Jacques’ supposedly scientific case history, then, is more representative of the male doctor’s than the female patient’s fears and desires. Appignanesi argues that today, ‘depending on the interpreter or historian’, Freud is either is ‘the heroic conquistador of the secrets of the unconscious, the great innovator whose talking cure definitively altered the treatment of madness, or the manipulative fraudster who launched a movement out of a mixture of fabrication and speculation’.⁵⁰ Considering his representation of Jacques, it seems that for Faulks he is certainly the latter. Despite this critique of psychoanalysis as a male overwriting of women’s narratives and Thomas’ more promising therapeutic strategy ‘of love and care’ (*HT*, 658), from a feminist point of view *Human Traces* evokes a sense of disappointment. The cases of Ida Bauer, Emma Eckstein and Bertha Pappenheim have all acquired feminist significance in their own right: Ida’s story has become an admired expression of female homosexuality, her decision to walk out on Freud and quit his treatment has been championed by feminists of various camps, providing, as Emma’s case does, ‘a paradigm case for catching patriarchy with its pants down’.⁵¹ Similarly,

⁴⁹ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.158.

⁵⁰ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p.194.

⁵¹ Appignanesi and Forrester, *Freud’s Women*, p.146.

Bertha's hallucinations and her frequent loss of the ability to speak her native tongue have been considered as feminist rejections of the patriarchal order.⁵² However, although Faulks utilises these cases in his construction of Kitty, the novel lacks a gendered critique of psychoanalysis and its power relations, as its interrogations of mental health practices remain strictly scientific ones.

Accordingly, the story's female characters are of little consequence. Sonia (Thomas's sister and Jacques' wife) as well as Kitty are generally portrayed as relatively witty and intelligent, but they always remain within the realm of the famous angel of the house and act as their husbands' complements, not their equals. Unlike Ida with Freud, Kitty does not walk out on Jacques, but, instead, has to be rescued from his misdiagnosis by Thomas. Even though she does not fall in love with her psychoanalyst, like Bertha did with Joseph Breuer, she does eventually marry her heroic rescuer Thomas and, ironically, does not become the first female analyst as Emma Eckstein did, or a feminist activist like Bertha, but is, instead, content with co-managing the sanatorium's accounts.

Indeed, Thomas admits it is Jacques' case history, his friend's sexual fiction of Kitty's life, which made him fall in love with her in the first instance and her intellectual capacities are only of interest to him for his own benefit. His feelings towards her were, he claims, intensified 'when she showed such interest in his work' and when he recognised that 'only Katharina had been able to connect the different parts of him' (*HT*, 444). Sonia, Kitty's sister-in-law, is repeatedly noted to be perfectly content and fulfilled by her role as mother and (betrayed) wife. Motherhood, to her, resembles complete fulfilment, so much so that she believes all mothers' complaints regarding the difficulties of raising and looking after their children are no true complaints at all, but simply strategies of disguising their so perfect and infinite happiness as mothers. As mothers, Sonia assumes, all women share the same experience:

⁵² Dianne Hunter, 'Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.', *Feminist Studies*, 9:3 (1983), pp.465-488 (p.474).

She talked for hours with these young mothers about their children and their husbands and their lives [...] and they were not women she thought might otherwise have been her friends, but the intensity of what they shared was such that it dwarfed all differences. It was such a common human experience, thought Sonia – by definition, perhaps, the commonest of all; yet to each of them, she could see, it was a private rapture so intoxicating that they were forced sometimes to play at being blasé, to complain about the work, the sleepless nights, the loss of time alone, when she could see that all they really felt was incredulity that something so mechanically natural was in truth so sublime. (*HT*, 487)

This unconditional maternal surrender and the supposedly inherent and natural pleasure in it also define Sonia's identity as a wife. She is convinced that loving one's husband means 'to bend all your powers to their happiness. All of them. To be everything' (*HT*, 777). To be everything extends even to feign ignorance regarding Jacques' affair with a young Russian woman, Roya, and leads Sonia to secretly console her husband by sending him a letter she has made out to be from his mistress, with a fictional explanation of why Roya left him. In both Sonia's and Kitty's case, then, being a woman in the medical world means, after all, to be nothing but a part of one's husband, to be, as it were, Adam's rib. Despite its critique of power relations in therapy, then, *Human Traces* reinforces what feminists of the 1960s and 70s so desperately fought against, namely the 'psychological characteristics attributed to them by patriarchy [and] naturalised and internalised as truth', that is, the roles of men as 'active producers' and of women as 'passive reproducers and care-givers'.⁵³

This is also the case for some of the other patients in Faulks' novel. In his function as heroic rescuer, Thomas also becomes the god-like doctor, the creator of women. During his first employment at an English asylum, Thomas secretly removes and later employs two misdiagnosed and ill-treated working-class women, Daisy and Marie. While the ambiguous power relations of psychoanalysis are critiqued, they are reinstated all the more through Thomas' relationships with these female characters. As Daisy tells him toward the end of the narrative:

⁵³ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p.368.

You gave us a life. Me and Mary. It was like being born again into a better world. Look at us now. We both do our best work at the hospital, I'm a married lady with a nice husband and a house and a fine boy [...] Don't you know how we worshipped you? You were our god. You saved us [...] and me and Mary we just wanted to go down on our knees and kiss the place you'd walked on. (*HT*, 771-772)

The modest and good doctor supposedly employed his power to empower others, but, nevertheless, these working-class women now fall on their knees before him and labour in his sanatorium to display their infinite and life-long gratitude – an ambiguous liberation.

Eventually, it is Thomas' own fate which puts the novel in an undoubtedly contemporary context. It can be no coincidence that, at the age of sixty, he starts to suffer from Alzheimer's disease, a mental illness for which even today cause and cure have not yet been identified. Addressing historical as well as contemporary therapy theories and practices of mental health, *Human Traces* certainly critiques Victorian as well as Edwardian approaches to women's mental health. However, in its historical critique and through its continuous and at times tedious representations of the minute details of medical discourses on mental illness, its uncritical reproduction of the gendered inequalities they create, and its underdeveloped and ambiguously empowered female characters, Faulks' contribution to hystorigraphic metafiction illustrates as much as it exemplifies the ways in which medical and literary practices – historical as well as contemporary – can overwrite women's bodies and the stories they tell. *Human Traces*, then, employs the insights of second-wave psychotherapy theories on gendered power relations, but fails to turn its critical eye upon itself and consider, as third-wave theorists and practitioners do, the fraudulent power relations it reinforces in its critique of the past.

An Inconvenient Wife: hypnosis, power and the ambiguities of liberation

While Faulks' Jacques believes that hypnosis would have allowed him to overwrite

Kitty's history and memory with his own psychoanalytic fiction of her life, Megan Chance's *An Inconvenient Wife* explores this idea of the therapist's potential power to create a new person and takes it significantly further. Chance takes us away from Britain and the Continent to mid-1880s New York. Here, Lucy Carelton, descendant of one of the first settler families, suffers from headaches and breakdowns when in society. Lucy married William for love, but William, a self-made man and newly-rich stockbroker, appears to have used her as a means to gain access to the circles of society which would otherwise have remained out of his reach. Desperate to have Lucy return to her duties in society and marriage in an adequate fashion, William has taken her from doctor to doctor and has had his good-willed wife endure any treatment imaginable. At the time the novel begins, the only alternative left to avoid the young woman's incarceration in a private asylum promises to be Dr. Victor Seth, a Jewish neurologist from the Continent who, like Faulks' Jacques, is inspired by Charcot. Victor's initially promising treatment of Lucy through hypnosis, however, soon comes under scrutiny when William realises that her new doctor attempts to free his wife from her ailments by suggesting that she must break from the gendered restraints her social status and her husband have imposed on her artistic aspirations and sexual desires. Victor's intervention becomes more questionable when he influences and even controls Lucy's mind and behaviour through hypnosis and when their doctor-patient relationship becomes a sexual one. Lucy eventually kills her husband to free herself from him and to be with Victor, and she escapes a sentence because of her gender, her station and her lawyer's claim that, at the time of the crime, she was temporarily insane.

Chance's novel does not introduce us to the narrative's madwoman through a doctor's report on her mental condition. Instead, we are presented with Lucy's own voice, accompanied by extracts from her therapist's journal. Like Faulks' novel, *An Inconvenient Wife* initially concerns itself with the misdiagnosis of the female

protagonist. When we read Victor's first notes about Lucy it becomes apparent that, as with Jacques Rebière, professional ambition influences his approach to and treatment of patients, as does, in Victor's case, their sex and social status. Dismissively, he predicts that like all other ladies Lucy will very soon

be gone from my office completely, restored to her usual uncomplaining, parasitic existence. Though her husband desires discretion, they will both laud my accomplishments and recommend me to another bored invalid. These are the times I begin to despise the turn my practice has taken. Though I am adequately rewarded financially, these women only provide fodder for my critics and keep me from pursuing real knowledge.⁵⁴

Replicating the prejudice he endures due to his Jewish working-class background, Victor ironically judges Lucy and her peers as parasitic due to their class and sex despite the fact that it is he who, like a parasite, lives off their ailments. In his further entries we learn that he considers his women patients as easily treatable because of their 'suggestibility' (*IW*, 71), allowing him to hypnotise them and then plant suggestions in their minds which will subsequently influence their behaviour or alter their thinking in critical – or hysterical – moments. He goes on to claim that he will be 'profoundly grateful' when Lucy has no more need of his services, although 'there will simply be another to take her place. Another invalid, another bored society matron' (*IW*, 71). This condescending disinterest is directly linked to his professional ambitions because these everyday cases cannot add to his profile as a researcher and practitioner and, thus, deserve only contempt. Of importance can only be what helps him gain his fellow physicians' respect and 'such a thing cannot be found in treating upper-class neurasthenics' (*IW*, 71).

Victor's ultimate aim is to prove that hypnosis is a valid and effective form of therapy, that 'the mind itself can cure, that the unconscious can be trained to direct the will' (*IW*, 71). Inspired by Charcot, he is particularly taken not by his idol's treatment of

⁵⁴ Megan Chance, *An Inconvenient Wife* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), p.54. Hereafter this text is referred to as *IW* after quotations in the text.

hysterics, but by his creation of them. He passionately criticises his colleagues for not believing

that at Salpêtrière, Charcot himself is *creating* hysterics through suggestion! They are afraid to believe such a thing is even possible! And if they do not believe that such a thing is possible in those who suffer from true madness, how then will they come to believe my own experiments, performed as they are on those who suffer from self-indulgent invalidism? They will not – that is the only answer. Yet I cannot help but persist in believing that someday I will find a way to convince them all. (IW, 71)

The judgement which is explicitly made here is that occurrences of madness in women of the upper classes are usually self-inflicted and therefore easier to cure than ‘true madness’, meaning it is less prestigious to cure them, whatever his method. Lucy only becomes of higher interest and value to him when he realises that his usual treatments do not achieve the expected results and that she appears to present an usual case. Victor’s methods consist in part of electrotherapy, which he uses repeatedly to bring Lucy to a climax, causing a sexual relief which she is denied in her passionless marriage and which is intended to balance her mental condition. He notes that ‘faradization has brought her to climax quickly, and she achieved a trance through touch-induced stimulus – which leads me to believe that Mrs. C. has normal female passions that have been severely discouraged, perhaps by her husband, perhaps by others in her life’ (IW, 86-87).

However, although Lucy responds positively and as expected to this treatment, Victor’s first attempts to influence her unconscious are less successful and heighten his interest in her. When she is under hypnosis, he suggests to her the image of a forest, a relaxing scene which is supposed to form part of her memory and which her unconscious will recall whenever a hysteric episode looms. Other women respond well to such suggestions and are content when the artificially created image enters their conscious minds. Lucy, however, notices that there is something unnatural about this scene and notes that ‘there was a falseness about it [...] as if it were a set staged for me

alone, a memory told me that I had grasped hold of and made my own, though it was not mine' (*IW*, 77). It is this resistance which, in contrast to Faulks' Jacques, leads Victor to establish that his initial diagnosis and prediction were significantly flawed: 'I have always believed that hysteria lies in egoism and wilfulness', he reflects, 'but [...] I had the opportunity to observe the etiology that underlies Mrs. C's fits, and I begin to question my own hypothesis' (*IW*, 102).

Lucy's unconscious is as resistant to *fin-de-siècle* gender norms as to the artificial memory he attempted to place in her mind during hypnosis. As becomes clear in her following therapy sessions as well as in her first-person narrative, Lucy's spells of headaches and her emotional outbreaks are the result of her struggle with the gender norms imposed on her. Hysteria expresses the clash between her desire and her inability to be the wife she is supposed to be, but it is neither a conscious nor an effective act of expression or rebellion since it leads not to empowerment but to a mind-numbing laudanum addiction and the prospect of incarceration in an asylum, a threat which her husband issues subtly though repeatedly throughout the novel.

While Lucy is convinced that she wants to be the flawless angel in the house and tries her hardest to be 'an obedient wife' (*IW*, 115), Victor challenges this assumption. 'But you aren't, are you?', he prompts her and continues,

You've taken refuge in hysterical fits for years, and therefore achieved just what you wanted: some wretched imitation of autonomy. You've done everything you possibly could to fight the constraints of your life while still clinging to the semblance of it. In what way do you believe you're an obedient wife? (*IW*, 115).

Step by step he discovers that Lucy's life has been an ongoing and enforced repression of artistic and sexual passion, defined largely – as in the case of Maud in Waters' *Fingersmith* – by her identity as her mother's daughter. When Lucy was still a girl, she watched her mother being driven to suicide by the same restrictions Lucy now experiences in her own life as a wife; she even comes to envy her mother, to some extent, for the freedom she gained through death. Anxious that his wife's mother's

discontent with the traditional feminine role and, thus, the tendency to suicide, could be hereditary, Lucy's father forbade his daughter any activities which might cause supposedly unhealthy excitement in her, most notably poetry and drawing. While under hypnosis in one of her therapy sessions with Victor, Lucy recalls the crucial encounter with her father and the words which would lead her into her current passionless life: "It's best you learn how to be a wife." He said I should have children and devote myself to them. Not painting. Not poetry. "You'll only be unhappy," he said. "Believe me. I know" (*IW*, 106-107). After her marriage to William, her father ironically cautions her that the pursuit of her wifely duties, her natural role, is the best cure for – rather than the cause of – her nervous spells. 'Be a wife to your husband', he advises, '[and] if you make his world a comfortable one, that'll go a long way toward calming your nerves' (*IW*, 58). Lucy's identity as her (supposedly mad) mother's daughter determines her existence as her father's child, and in her marriage she can escape neither since her father tells William of Lucy's mother's suicide and advises him never to allow her to touch either paintbrush or book. This instruction closely resembles Dr. S. W. Mitchell's prescriptions to Charlotte Perkins Gilman after he had first treated her with the (in)famous rest cure, advising her, Perkins Gilman writes in her autobiography, to 'have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live'.⁵⁵ Significantly, Lucy is threatened with Mitchell's rest cure by her husband in the novel's closing stages, and her perception of William's arm as 'an iron bar beneath my fingers' (*IW*, 26), that is, as the embodiment of her confinement within normative femininity and of the threat of physical incarceration at male hands, functions as an early pointer toward the fate of Perkins Gilman's heroine in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892).

Having realised that Lucy, contrary to her own claims, has no 'true' or 'natural'

⁵⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, [1935] *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.96.

desire to pursue the Victorian feminine ideal and ‘feel[s] no need to commit to what is considered to be woman’s sole purpose’ (*IW*, 105), Victor’s subsequent insights into the contrast between his patient’s unconscious desires and the role she has been assigned appear promising at first:

To see such emotion in this woman was fascinating. It explained much that has puzzled me. Her hysteria no doubt comes from her unconscious confusion – to long for something and be denied that longing with no hope of ever achieving it. I began to believe that despite the inclinations of her sex, perhaps she truly does not want children, that such a circumstance might drive her to deeper levels of despair. I also understood why her unconscious mind did not grasp my suggestion urging calm. To be at peace is not what she wants. To be like other women is not her desire, as much as she protests that it is. It is clear that she does not want to be well in this world her father and husband have made for her, a world as a wife and mother, without the passion that exists within her, a passion that has no outlet but hysteria. (*IW*, 108)

Yet, it soon transpires that the potential options arising from these findings are disturbing ones, overshadowed as they are by a dangerous power imbalance between the male therapist and his female patient. Victor is aware of his opportunity to make Lucy content with her traditional feminine role by oppressing – through suggestion – what he now knows to be her true needs, or he can attempt to encourage her artistic and sexual passions and complicate her life as an upper-class woman much further because, as friend Millie tells Lucy, ‘your behaviour was acceptable [only] as long as it was simply a fit now and then, or headaches’ (*IW*, 152). Obsessed with the potential Lucy may hold for his research, and for his career, but also aware of the unethical implications of his ideas, Victor consequently remarks in his journal that it is

fascinating, but impossible that such an opportunity for research exists in this woman. This woman who is everything I’ve dismissed so contemptuously before now. I know I cannot pursue this. It is irresponsible if my suspicions are correct, the passion she tries so hard to hide and control would ruin her were it brought to light. She would no longer be able to exist within her world, and I have no faith she could exist out of it. Yet what could it harm to learn more? (*IW*, 109)

Having come to the conclusion that ‘any suggestion I make that more firmly urges her adaptation to this world may not be successful’ (*IW*, 108), Victor decides, without

Lucy's or William's knowledge, to conduct an experiment which will determine whether his suggestions to his patient's unconscious can make her act against her better judgement, that is, against the social norms ruling her day-to-day life. Reminiscent of the significance of Maud's gloved hands in Waters' *Fingersmith*, Victor makes the suggestion to Lucy, under hypnosis, that she take off her gloves while dancing with her husband at their next public outing, despite his awareness that such an action would contradict everything she 'has known, learned, or understood about her life' (*IW*, 127). At the same time, he also reminds Lucy of and encourages her sexual desires. In their subsequent session she confesses, 'I took off my gloves [...] I couldn't bear the feel of them another moment' (*IW*, 124). William, unsurprisingly, deems Lucy's behaviour at the dance and, later, her sexual advances towards him as wholly inappropriate for a woman of her social status and thus warns Victor not to 'turn his wife into a whore' (*IW*, 170) or 'one of those New Women' (*IW*, 119),⁵⁶ neither of which, he ensures Victor, will be accepted by him or their social circle.

Crucial, Victor now realises he can not only make Lucy a New Woman, but, in fact, any new woman. As he points out to her,

'You've led an entire life ruled by a will not your own [...] Your father's will, your husband's will. What if you could be the woman you were meant to be? What if you could escape from this' – he gestured futilely about the carriage – 'this dull acquiescence?' (*IW*, 111-112)

From this recognition and from the events that follow, a series of fundamental issues ensue regarding the ambiguities of power, identity and liberation. Arguably, Victor is in a position to help Lucy find and acknowledge something we may call her 'true' self, yet paradoxically any intervention would be an act of manipulation, rendering Lucy the

⁵⁶ As Sally Ledger explains, the term 'New Woman' first came into existence in 1894 and New Woman writers such as Sarah Grant and Mona Caird propagated, through their fictions, different visions of what exactly defined this New Woman. However, 'those women who persisted in the belief that married women should be enabled to lead a full and independent life as man's equal were the New Women most vilified in the periodical press during the last two decades of the nineteenth century'. See: Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp.10-11.

subject of not exclusively her own but also of his will, a thought which is mute if we accept identity as a fluid combination of performance and construction rather than a fixed entity. If Victor did plant suggestions which comply with Lucy's desire to paint and to be free of social constrictions, she could supposedly be a new woman, but not of her own making. Victor's options also centre around the question of where we draw the line between a patient's unconscious will and a therapist's construction and potential encouragement or further suppression of that will. After all, if the gender conventions Lucy attempts to obey are alike to the artificial suggestions Victor makes to her unconscious, then so is the idea of a free will, or indeed the suggestion of liberation. Victor is aware of and tormented by some of these questions and by the choices he now has, as well as their implications:

My theory had proved correct. When presented with the opportunity, her *unconscious mind can overpower her will*. This is a stunning discovery, and it made me wonder what power her unconscious could have if it were given free rein. Could I lead it, through hypnosis, to completely overtake her reason? Could I change her will? To be given what I so ardently wish for – to have in my hands a subject who can help me win the respect of my colleagues, one who can help me prove the power of the unconscious mind [...] To remake her in the way I wish is to destroy the life she claims to want so desperately, I know this, and yet what shall I do? Make her into another useless parasite? Shall I let scientific knowledge pass because of the wishes of one woman who cannot hope to understand the secrets she possesses? (*IW*, 127-128)

There is a certain ambiguity and tension surrounding Victor's feelings towards Lucy and his potential to be either her oppressor or liberator. He closes the above diary entry with the words, 'I would be less a scientist [...] if I conceded to her wishes [to be a traditional wife and mother]. She is only a woman' (*IW*, 127-128), another sure indication that Lucy's value for to him lies exclusively in her potential as an object of scientific observation.

While her identity as a human individual is of little consequence here, Victor nevertheless appears to have certain positive intentions towards Lucy when, at least initially, his aim is to 'create in her the need to be free' (*IW*, 158) in the hope that she

will then be able to choose whether to disregard or comply with social convention in order to meet this need for freedom in her own way. Similarly, Victor wonders if he should utilise Lucy's romantic feelings for him for what he considers her benefit by showing her 'what true satisfaction can be, to lead her ever further into the sublimity of the experience that her upbringing has kept from her' (*IW*, 158). Unlike Lucy's perception of William as literally incarcerating her with arms like bars, she remarks of Victor how he 'wrapped his long fingers delicately around the thick cup as if afraid he might crush it' (*IW*, 49), representing, to her, not a threat, but care and security.

However much his good intentions may at first outweigh his scientific curiosity and professional ambition, Victor is soon led astray by the power hypnosis offers him over his patient and the professional recognition Lucy may bring. He thus continues where Faulks' Jacques (involuntarily) left off. Once he has ensured that he can manipulate Lucy's behaviour, Victor begins to refer to her as 'Eve C.' in his journal entries, leaving no doubt that from now on the role of therapist equals that of a god, a creator, while the female patient becomes his creation, reminding us, this time, of Thomas' ambiguous role as liberator in *Human Traces*. Despite his own cravings for recognition and his evocation of himself as a creator of life, Victor does not see the irony which is evident in his comparison of science and religion: 'Most gods have flaws', he claims, 'Even your God [...] He demands sacrifices to His ego. Like any common man. Science has no ego. It's rational and logical' (*IW*, 178).

Equally, when promising Lucy freedom from the confines of her class and sex, he does not recognise that it is now he who, in his attempt to liberate her, dictates and restricts her existence through his determination to 'make [his] influence stronger than any of the other influences in her life, including those of her husband and social ostracism' (*IW*, 129). Implicitly, his objective is to demonstrate that a doctor's abilities can equal those of a god, since 'our will can be molded, [...] a "soul" can be created. I

am creating a new woman – and succeeding beyond my greatest expectations’ (*IW*, 157). What particularly excites him about being able to make a new woman out of Lucy is ‘to be able to mold her passion, to watch her come alive’ (*IW*, 158), to re-enact, on a psychological rather than biological level, the creation of his fictional namesake, Victor Frankenstein. As the narrative progresses, we read less of Victor’s journal and are provided, instead, more and more with Lucy’s perspective. Consequently, it becomes difficult to distinguish or judge which thoughts may or may not have been planted in her mind in the form of Victor’s suggestions. Although the voice of the madwoman is not strictly speaking silenced, we know it is potentially distorted and not entirely her own.

As a result of his new, selfish intentions, Victor begins to disregard the implications his interventions have on Lucy’s every-day life and, ultimately, he loses control. He admits that ‘there forms a great attachment between patient and doctor, as is inevitable when one divulges one’s greatest secrets’ (*IW*, 158) and purposely begins to abuse the feelings Lucy has developed for him (or which he has suggested to her) as her treatment continues. When he encourages her to start drawing again secretly, she finds in it the only means of self-expression available to her. However, Victor soon also motivates her to show William the sketches, each of which demonstrates her ‘longing [...] for freedom. For passion’ (*IW*, 160). But, unsurprisingly, rather than understanding these longings, William burns his wife’s pictures and, realising that Lucy took up painting at Victor’s suggestion, tells her that he will end her treatment. Lucy reacts to this shock by seeking out Victor at his home in the slums of the city, where, against his better judgment, he sleeps with her. Sexuality becomes the second defining characteristic of Lucy’s release from social confinement. After her first experience of an orgasm during intercourse she describes how she ‘could not move for the intensity of [her] release’ (*IW*, 195) and perceives that Victor has ‘freed’ (*IW*, 195) her. Although Victor claims that sleeping with Lucy is a therapeutic strategy, he also admits that, at

this stage of her treatment, it was a mistake. What is even more unsettling perhaps is that sleeping with female patients seems common therapeutic practice not only for him but also for his colleagues: ‘I was never so careless before; in the past I have approached this level of treatment with the utmost care, as have all of the physicians I’ve known’ (*IW*, 208). Victor tries to remind himself that he must not ‘*allow [his] own passions to gain sway*’ (*IW*, 209), but it is clear that his falling in love with Eve (rather than Lucy) is inevitable. She is his own creation, a woman who through his intervention, in his opinion, ‘is becoming a truly marvellous creature’ (*IW*, 240). When Lucy confesses her love to him, Victor regains control of himself once more and warns her that ‘love only complicates things. It can only imprison you. You said you loved William when you married him, didn’t you?’ (*IW*, 214).

Once he has negotiated the continuation of Lucy’s treatment with William, Victor finally becomes, like William, her incarcerator. With triumph he reports that

Eve has not only agreed [to continue her treatment], she has given me carte blanche. Today I planted the suggestion that she would want above all things to see me, in spite of any persuasion by her husband or anyone else against me. I have also reinforced my insistence on secrecy and instructed that she continue her life *as it is* until I determine she is ready to make decisions about her future. (*IW*, 216)

It is from here on that Victor, like William, confines Lucy. During his stay with Lucy at the Carleton’s Newport house, he continues his affair with her and claims, ‘You are not William’s but mine. I created you’ (*IW*, 261). Here, the potential for liberation and care Lucy previously saw in Victor fades as she describes how ‘he held me close, so tightly I could barely breathe’ (*IW*, 261) and slowly but surely becomes suspicious of his influence on her. Any hope for liberty, however, is literally taken away from her when William, on his return, surprises the two during a public display of affection on the beach. Once back at the house and in her room, Lucy shows how dependent she has become on Victor and how little of a free will he has given her: ‘Desperate for my instruction, I wanted to ask him what he wanted of me, what my role should be, but

William made sure that such a meeting was impossible. I had no hope of rescue. I was paralyzed by the weight of my future' (*IW*, 265). Like a religious fanatic, then, Lucy's existence has become dependent on her god, on Victor. Despite his initial intentions and his promising insights into Lucy's situation, his professional ambition and carelessness result in Lucy's incarceration by William first in her room, then – under the influence of laudanum – in an asylum. Victor tries to convince himself that the loss of Lucy as a patient does not matter, since he has collected enough evidence to present his case to his colleagues, but, nevertheless, struggles to feel indifference towards her:

I tell myself it is for the best: I have done the research required for my paper; I have no doubt that when I present it to the Neurology Association this fall, it will receive the accolades it deserves. [...] She remains my creature. And yet perhaps I did not completely see. Experiments flourish best in a controlled environment, and Eve's environment is not within my hands. I must ask myself why I continued to work with her when I had succeeded in doing what I set out to do. I have felt desperate at the thought of losing her, and my rational mind says this should not be so. [...] The results are gathered. I cannot think of her. I must not think of her. *I must not want her.* (*IW*, 269)

While Victor seems to have sacrificed his patient for his career, Lucy suffers humiliating treatments and punishments at the asylum, where she is also led back into a severe laudanum addiction.

The attending doctors are helpless in her case and soon invite a specialist to observe her and advise them with regards to her treatment – the specialist is, a little predictably, Victor. Lucy learns from him that she is due to be cured and released by October, which is when she is expected by William to host the first ball at their new house on Fifth Avenue. Shocked by what he has done to Lucy, Victor now uses his power to empower her. He forbids the asylum's superintendent to treat Lucy with laudanum, and his patient slowly regains full consciousness and clarity of thought. At his next visit, Victor confesses that he loves her, but, no longer under his influence, Lucy is cautious and cynical, asking 'What other fame can I provide for you?' (*IW*, 306). Having overcome her addiction with his help, Lucy is now able to assess her

situation critically and assert her own will:

I understood for the first time the power I had over him. My mind was my own again, and I realized that we were equally matched, that he had not lied to me. [...] I was his obsession, as he had once been mine. It was exhilarating. It inflamed me, because I understood how to take what I wanted; I knew how to be free. 'Very well', I said to him, and he smiled in satisfaction. He leaned to kiss me again, and when he was near my lips, I whispered, 'But this time, Victor, I get what *I* want.' (*IW*, 307)

Lucy is conscious that she cannot rely on anyone but herself to construct her own identity and her own life and, consequently, we now read no more case histories about her.

Once released from the asylum, Lucy makes her entrance at the ball at Fifth Avenue only to shoot William, a scene which she finishes with the words, 'All I felt was free' (*IW*, 319). Following the murder, Lucy begins to construct and perform her own identity with the help of the media and her lawyer. She decides that it should not be her father's renowned family lawyer who should be called to her defence, but William Howe, a man known for his theatrical behaviour in court, 'a man who'd bought life from nearly certain death sentences with his rhetoric and his crocodile tears' (*IW*, 328). Early on in the novel, at a dinner party, Lucy realises how easily manipulated public perception is in her circles: that evening, 'the conversation was sparking; everyone kept saying so [...] how could an evening be boring when all kept remarking that it was not?' (*IW*, 9). By hiring William Howe and taking her fate in her own hands, she utilises this knowledge in her favour. Howe ensures that only journalists in favour of Lucy interview and write about her, portraying the murderess as an innocent, abused woman who was driven to temporary insanity by her husband. Similarly, Lucy is aware that the judge is a friend of her father, making this the first instance in which she is able to truly profit from her identity as his daughter. The only thing we hear from Victor in this process is his statement during the trial regarding Lucy's mental condition and his judgment that temporary insanity would have been possible at the time she murdered

William. Lucy's high social station thus enables her to control the media's construction of herself.

Eventually, the jury's verdict is 'not guilty by reason of temporary insanity' (*IW*, 400) and, although her father attempts to regain his control over her by wanting commit her into the care of the well-known Dr. Weir Mitchell and his rest cure, she decides to take the first ship across to the Continent, accompanied by Victor. As it turns out, Lucy now also consciously plays with Victor's belief in his power over her and the narrative closes with the following lines:

'I told you it would work, Lucy, didn't I? What a remarkable creature you are.' 'Yes', I murmured back. 'We are so clever.' 'I love you, Lucy', he said. 'Just think of how we will be together', and I smiled. He was so confident. He still thought he could control me, and I wanted him enough to let him believe it. For now. Yes, we would be together for now. Until the day I cut the thread that bound us. (*IW*, 404)

Victor continues to call her a 'creature' and gives the impression that all this was part of his plan. The question therefore remains whether Lucy's last actions – the murder of her husband, her cunning decisions regarding the trial – were indeed hers, or whether they were carried out by her at Victor's suggestion. Similarly, there is no way of telling whether Lucy has genuinely turned the tables on the power relations between herself and Victor, or if Victor selflessly suggested to her that these schemes were her idea and that she will one day leave him because he knows this to be the only way for her to liberate herself, as far as possible, from his influence.

Chance's novel therefore leaves its heroine ambiguously empowered. The traditional male-female doctor-patient relationship appears to have been overturned, or at least disrupted, yet the narrative's ending leaves no doubt as to the ambiguity and complexity of the newly created power relations between its protagonists. No matter how optimistic or pessimistic we choose to read the novel's final pages, there is no doubt that *Inconvenient Wife* not only critically explores the gendered power structures at work in Victorian definitions and treatments of mental illness but that it also gestures

toward the potentials and problematic of the therapist's duty to empower their patient to empower herself, independent from the shape which this self-empowerment may eventually take. Resembling contemporary attitudes toward sex/uality and toward the Victorians, Victor pathologises sexual repression and the absence of sexual satisfaction in women. Yet, the novel's ambiguous ending blurs this popular neo-Victorian juxtaposition of the sexually repressed hysteric and the sexually liberated and therefore mentally healthy woman by challenging the very notion of psychological and physical liberation.

Conclusion

Like the critical studies of Showalter and Appignanesi, Faulks' *Human Traces* and Chance's *An Inconvenient Wife* are concerned with the exposure and criticism of nineteenth-century male practitioners' misreadings of their female patients' symptoms and their abuse of the powerful position in which they found themselves as doctors. These texts seek to demonstrate the ways in which women and their stories – physical and oral – could be interpreted and rewritten by doctors and therapists as medical narratives and theories which complemented and conformed to dominant discourses and/or contributed more to doctors' professional ambitions and standings than to their patients' improvement. In these texts, practitioners and the dominant cultures they represent are therefore authors rather than scientists and their reports fictions rather than scientific observations, indicating the practitioners' rather than the patients' anxieties: their narratives becomes, as Appignanesi puts it, 'expressions of the culture's malaise, symptoms and disorders [which mirror] time's order – its worries, limits border problems, fears'.⁵⁷ Ursula Link-Heer has argued that studies concerned with the ways in which 'women are constituted historically and discursively' tend to treat the history of

⁵⁷ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p.5.

hysteria either as ‘a patriarchal defamation and violation of real women who in truth were not hysterics, or one that uncovered supposedly genuine feminine characteristics behind the label “hysteria” and identified with them’.⁵⁸ While Faulks’ *Human Traces* certainly counts toward the former category, Chance’s *Inconvenient Wife* goes beyond the dichotomy Link-Heer observes.

Hystorigraphic metafiction does not simply criticise gendered medical discourses of the past, but, to varying extents, illustrates and explores the ways in which gendered issues are still central to the theory and practice of mental health. As studies such as Elizabeth A. Klonoff and Hope Landrine’s *Preventing Misdiagnosis in Women* (1997) and Denise Russell’s *Women, Gender and Madness* (1995) have shown, despite modern scientific advances, there are still illnesses and disorders which, if not diagnosed and treated properly, can lead to ‘a woman’s being confined to a mental hospital for her entire life or even result in her untimely death’.⁵⁹ Although hystorigraphic metafiction does not explicitly represent third-wave feminist therapy theory, it critically engages with the issues and concepts which lie at the heart of third-wave work in the field, most notably the ambiguity and fluidity of power relations and of identity. If traditional psychotherapies, as Appignanesi puts it, ‘attempt an understanding of the self that marries past with present’,⁶⁰ then hystorigraphic metafiction which critically investigates women’s mental health in the present by revisiting the past certainly has the potential, like third-wave feminist therapy, to help us interrogate the discourses and issues which continue to define women’s current positions as patients in the mental health professions.

⁵⁸ Ursula Link-Heer, “‘Male Hysteria’: A Discourse Analysis”, *Cultural Critique*, 15 (1990), pp.191-220 (p.192).

⁵⁹ Elizabeth A. Klonoff and Hope Landrine, *Preventing Misdiagnosis of Women: A Guide to Physical Disorders That Have Psychiatric Symptoms* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.xix.

⁶⁰ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p.481.

CHAPTER THREE

Sexual f(r)ictions: women, sex and pornography

While Faulks and Chance investigate the narrativisation and pathologisation of women's bodies by revisiting the gendered power relations inherent in Victorian histories of female madness, other authors of neo-Victorian fiction have opted to explore representations of women's sexualities not within the context of medicine but within the realm of pornography. Its infamous existence in the nineteenth century is peripherally acknowledged in a number of neo-Victorian novels,¹ but to date two texts in particular have engaged with the topic in significant depth: Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) and Waters' *Fingersmith*, whose matrilineal narratives I explored in Chapter One. In these novels pornography occupies a central place as Starling and Waters utilise their mid-Victorian settings to trace pornography back to its roots, to the time when the term first entered the English vocabulary in its contemporary definition,² referring to 'printed or visual material' which contains 'the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity [...] in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings',³ and when the production and distribution of such material first became an industry.

Both authors are concerned, to varying extents, with the inherent and intersecting

¹ In Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (London: Canongate, 2002), for example, William Rackham studies *Exploits of a Seasonal Traveller, or, Around the World in Eighty Maidenheads* instead of the particulars of his father's perfume business. Deanna Raybourn's *Silent in the Grave* (London: Mira Books, 2008) treats the subject with equal brevity, but conveys a little more detail regarding the diversity of nineteenth-century pornographic material when heroine Lady Julia Grey finds an album in her house's servant quarters which does not only contain photos of women in 'a provocative state of undress [...] staring at the camera with a saucy expression' but also pictures which 'were thoroughly obscene, not because they were sexual, but because they were violent' (p.272).

² Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p.57; Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.3.

³ 'pornography, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (June 2011), Accessed: 31 July 2011, <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/148012>. This general definition of the term acts as the starting point for the discussions in this chapter, although several competing and more specific understandings of what constitutes pornography exist, particularly among different feminist factions. These varying definitions will be addressed in the introduction to this chapter's historical and contemporary contexts as well as in relation to the novels discussed.

constructions of gender, class and race relations which defined pornography in the nineteenth century and which, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have remained intrinsic both to its depictions of sex/uality and to feminist debates surrounding the politics of those depictions. Tracing the history of pornography from the mid-nineteenth century and charting, in particular, the discourses and developments which have defined critical approaches to the topic since the mid-twentieth century, this chapter explores the ways in which *The Journal of Dora Damage* and *Fingersmith* utilise their Victorian settings in order investigate pornography as a contemporary feminist issue and illustrate women's increasingly complex relationships to it. However, Starling's and Waters' representations of their heroines' sexual experiences and of their encounters with sexually explicit material also raise questions regarding their own novels' sexsationalism and concerning the extent to which their narratives function as contributions and/or challenges to the neo-Victorian sexsation and our readerly consumption of it.

Pornography in Britain: definitions, contexts, debates

Despite the *Oxford English Dictionary's* succinct explanation of the term, definitions of what constitutes pornographic material have always been ambivalent and subject to interpretation. The libraries of notable nineteenth-century collectors such as George Cannon (1789–1854) and, in subsequent decades, Henry Spencer Ashbee (1834–1900) consisted of literature, drawings and photographs and ranged from copies and translations of illustrated ancient texts such as *The Kama Sutra* to publications like Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (ca. 1353) and more contemporary texts, such as *The Lustful Turk* (1828), which catered to a variety of sexual preferences, including homosexuality, bestiality and flagellation.⁴ As Lisa Z. Sigel notes, definitions of what is

⁴ Ian Gibson, *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (London: Faber and

considered as pornographic are seldom stable, and ‘pornography varies as a culture and the symbolic meanings in that culture evolve’; some materials collected as obscene in the nineteenth century ‘may seem unpornographic, unerotic, or downright decent, while others may appear unerotic and downright disgusting’ to twenty-first century beholders.⁵ Both the contents of pornography and the application of its label are thus dependent on historically and culturally-specific contexts.

From the mid-nineteenth century in particular, pornography became defined, by law, according to not only its content but also, and more significantly, the identities of its viewers and readers. When John Campbell, Lord Chief Justice 1850–1859, first introduced the bill which would eventually become England’s first obscenity statute, the Obscene Publications Act 1857, it became clear almost immediately that what exactly constituted pornography was near impossible to define according to a work’s content alone. In response to Campbell’s first demand for the legal suppression of the ‘poisonous’ trade,⁶ the Lord Chancellor highlighted that ‘the line which separated poisons from medicines was extremely difficult to define’.⁷ The proposed bill met further opposition within Parliament on similar grounds, the general fear being that works of ‘genuine’ artistic and literary merit may fall prey to the new regulations and could be destroyed. Indeed, Lord Wensleydale suggested that ‘there was not a library in which books could not be found containing passages which a strict-dealing magistrate might consider to bring them within the operation of this Bill’.⁸ Wynford, a defender of the Act, admitted to the lack of precision in its definition of the term ‘obscene’, but contended that ‘works [of merit ...] were preserved, not on account of the exceptional

Faber, 2001), pp.43-44; Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), pp.40-41.

⁵ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.4.

⁶ UK Parliament, ‘Sale of Poisons and Poisonous Publications: Question’, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.145 (11 May 1857), Accessed: 22 July 2011, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1857/may/11/sale-of-poisons-and-poisonous>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UK Parliament, ‘Sale of Obscene Books, &c., Prevention Bill: Second Reading’, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.146 (25 June 1857), Accessed: 22 July 2011, <http://hansard.millbank systems.com/lords/1857/jun/25/second-reading>.

passages which were objectionable, but for the noble and elevating sentiments which they inculcated'.⁹ The act certainly engendered debates regarding the difficulty of differentiating art from pornography, but, aware that strict distinctions were almost impossible to draw and would potentially endanger the freedom of the press and the liberty of the subject, Campbell and his contemporaries did little to further define the boundaries between the two, and similar problems would continue to accompany the legislation and critical discussion of pornography throughout the twentieth century.

Yet, while obscene content may have been difficult to define, the identity of its audience proved invaluable in pornography's distinction from work of merit. Although illiteracy and low earnings excluded the working classes from the consumption of the more expensive publications, Sigel contends that it was nevertheless a 'cross-class phenomenon', albeit one which generally 'favoured the well-to-do'.¹⁰ Passed in 1857, his Obscene Publications Act enabled police to search premises for and destroy pornographic materials which were intended for display and sale.¹¹ The law did therefore little to interfere with the activities of men of the upper classes and gentry who commissioned, wrote and/or privately acquired the works in question (a task which would indeed have been difficult to achieve considering the numerous eccentric synonyms under which such works were published). Indeed, 'indecent books of a high price' were not Campbell's chief concern as they were only affordable to the affluent, a factor which functioned as 'a sort of check' and meant that their circulation was inevitably confined to the upper echelons of society, in whose hands pornography was deemed a valid object of interest and study. However, to the untutored (that is, to women, youths and the working classes) they were 'poison more deadly than prussic

⁹ UK Parliament, 'Sale of Obscene Books'.

¹⁰ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.26.

¹¹ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, p.116; M.J.D. Roberts, 'Morals, Art, and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857', *Victorian Studies*, 28:4 (Summer 1985), pp.609-629 (p.610).

acid, strichnine, or arsenic’;¹² the realisation that pornographic material was obtainable by – and in some instances even purposely made affordable for – the lower classes filled Campbell with ‘horror and alarm’,¹³ and thus it was the uncontrolled distribution of cheap ‘periodical papers of the most licentious and disgusting description [which] were [...] sold to any person who asked for them’ that the act sought to suppress.¹⁴ This focus on readership rather than content was further formalised when, in 1868, Campbell’s successor, Alexander Cockburn, established a definition of ‘obscenity’ which his predecessor had failed to provide. In what became known as the Hicklin rule, it was determined that whether a publication was obscene was dependent on its ability to corrupt those whose minds were prone to such corruption, or, as Cockburn put it, ‘those whose minds are open to immoral influences’.¹⁵

It was not only the boundaries between art and pornography which were challenged and blurred by Victorian pornography and implicitly (if insufficiently and shakily) drawn by the Obscene Publications Act and its underlying class politics. Upper-class collectors such as Ashbee were considered – and certainly thought of themselves – as impervious to their libraries’ corrupting potentials. In the introduction to his famous bibliography of pornographic texts, *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877), Ashbee compares himself to ‘a truthful and honest historian’ and likens his approach to the ‘frequently licentious’ material he catalogues and reproduces to a physician’s examination of ‘the naked body of a woman extended on the dissecting table’.¹⁶ His supposedly scientific view of pornography meant not only that ‘the passions are not excited’ by his work but also that, to the contrary, it ‘will inspire so hearty a disgust [...]

¹² UK Parliament, ‘Sale of Poisons’.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Regina v. Hicklin* (1868), cited in Colin Manchester, ‘Lord Campbell’s Act: England’s First Obscenity Statute’, *The Journal of Legal History*, 9:2 (1988), pp.223-241 (p.240); Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, ‘Hicklin Rule’, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York: Facts on File, 2005) p.232.

¹⁶ Henry Spencer Ashbee, [1877] *Bibliography of Forbidden Books* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p.xix and p.xx.

that the reader will be satisfied to have nothing further to do with [the texts discussed]'.¹⁷ Having provided detailed descriptions of the contents of around 150 pornographic publications in his index,¹⁸ it seems at the very least doubtful that Ashbee wrote those words without being conscious of (and perhaps even intending) their irony, considering in particular the numerous pages he devotes to 'the revolting crime of corpse profanation'.¹⁹ Here he includes an account of an allegedly real-life case involving exactly the medical scenario to which, in his introduction, he likened his work – that of the physician examining the body of a dead woman. Ashbee claims that this narrative was communicated to him by a former medical student, who reported that

the body of a well favoured girl of about 15 years was brought to St. Bartholomew's hospital for dissection. Although no marks of violence were apparent, the students were of opinion [sic] that she had not met her end by fair means. One of them introduced his finger into the vagina, and, finding the hymen to be intact, declared that she was a maid. Upon this the porter who was employed to carry the dead bodies in and out, also put his finger up, and exclaiming: 'that he had never had a maidenhead, but that he would take one now, by G—', proceeded to violate the corpse then and there, in the presence of the students assembled.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, Ashbee issues no comment on this passage which so paradoxically reinforces and exposes the class and gender politics at the heart of Victorian conceptions of pornography by juxtaposing the medical student's and the working-class porter's penetration of the dead (and therefore passive) female body, the former's 'professional' action leading only to a factual observation (that the victim had not been raped prior to her death) and the latter's 'vulgar' imitation of it resulting in uncontrollable sexual urges which supposedly justified fears of 'working-class sexual and social indiscipline'.²¹ The female body, in either case, remains subject to male use, be it sexual, scientific or both. Yet, while the scene reiterates and underpins the class politics through which Ashbee categorises his own perusal of pornography as analytical,

¹⁷ Ashbee, *Bibliography of Forbidden Books*, p.xx.

¹⁸ Gibson, *The Erotomaniac*, p.39.

¹⁹ Ashbee, *Bibliography of Forbidden Books*, p.412.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.415.

²¹ Roberts, 'Morals, Art, and the Law', p.613.

scientific and immune to moral corruption, the account complements and becomes itself part of the list of pornographic narratives from which the bibliographer quotes. Here, not only the female corpse but also the medical gaze, and with it Ashbee's own, become sexualised and demonstrate their pornographic potential.

This merge of science and obscenity found some of its most prominent and disturbing expressions in the works authored and commissioned by members of the London Anthropological Society, founded by Richard Burton (1821–1890) in 1863, and its inner circle, the so-called Cannibal Club.²² Characteristic of the group's publications was a 'fascination with biological and cultural differences in sexuality'.²³ Their works ranged from Burton's translation of *Arabian Nights* (1888) and pseudo-scientific papers on the sexual customs and physiologies of the natives of the British colonies to fictional narratives reflecting their personal preferences for both homo and heterosexual intercourse, sadomasochism and flagellation, to name but a few. Despite the diversity of their materials, one guiding principal of the Cannibal Club's pornography was the notion of inherent sexual and racial difference, and their publications 'created a distance between the male and the female and between the British and the foreign, arguing for an intrinsic, natural sexual difference between peoples'.²⁴ Both imperial and patriarchal, the pornography of Burton and his fellow Cannibals, not unlike Ashbee's representations of the texts in his index, 'further stabilized the social order that benefited them in innumerable ways',²⁵ that is, it reinforced white male superiority by fusing science, sex/uality and pornography.

Evidently, then, pornography – from its creation, publication and distribution to its legislation – was a predominantly male arena; yet, there are some notable

²² Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.50.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

exceptions.²⁶ After George Cannon's death in 1854, his wife continued his publishing business until the mid-1860s, and Andrew Wither's shop on Hollywell Street, Victorian London's most infamous area for the sale of pornography, was run by his widow and son from the late-1860s onwards. Sigel notes that many publishers and sellers who were repeatedly prosecuted and imprisoned under the Obscene Publications Act relied entirely on their families to continue the writing and distribution of the materials on which their livelihood depended.²⁷ Although there is only little evidence to suggest that women were more actively engaged in the pornography trade as authors and readers, Sharon Marcus highlights that the content of women's magazines was frequently appropriated and republished as pornography, not least because both shared an interest in corporal punishment.²⁸ Thus the descriptions of and instructions for girls' physical punishment in the correspondence sections constituted an area in which 'pornography, usually considered a masculine affair, intersect[ed] with fashion magazines targeted at women'.²⁹ In such instances, Marcus concludes, women in Victorian England were able to access sexually arousing material via journals which were directly aimed at them and which, consequently, 'blurred distinctions not only between pornography and the women's press but also between male and female readers'.³⁰ Additionally, areas such as Hollywell Street, where shops often displayed pornographic publications openly, were frequented by both men and women; and while the excessive use of pseudonyms in the sale and purchase of pornography renders it almost impossible to determine exactly who its consumers were, women certainly had access to them, not only as direct buyers but

²⁶ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.141.

²⁷ Ashbee, *Index of Forbidden Books*, p.114; Marcus, *Between Women*, p.141; Iain McCalman, 'Unrespectable Radicalism: Infidels and Pornography in Early Nineteenth-Century London', *Past and Present*, 104 (August 1984), pp.74-110 (p.109); Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.21.

²⁸ Marcus, *Between Women*, p.140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

also potentially via the purchases of their husbands.³¹

Although pornography was produced for and consumed by a predominantly (although clearly not exclusively) male market, women's roles in nineteenth-century pornographic narratives, although not always straightforwardly reductive and oppressive, remained at best ambiguous. Works which feature violence against women and which objectify the female body solely as a means of satisfying male desires were by no means uncommon, but neither were texts which subjected men to the same kinds of fates, be it at the hand of males or females. In *The Lustful Turk*, the Dey's women are repeatedly subjected to rape as a means of forcefully opening their eyes to pleasures of which, supposedly, they would otherwise have remained ignorant. But representations of domination and subordination depended by no means on sex alone and neither were they fixed statically to either gender. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman suggests, for example, that *My Secret Life* (1888-1895), an anonymously published fictional memoir, challenges as well as reaffirms traditional gender and class hierarchies as its protagonist, Walter, desires to identify with the sexual experiences of women and homosexuals and consequently transgresses normative codes of masculine sexuality,³² but at the same time is only able to fulfil these desires through his 'economic power [... as a] bourgeois gentleman'.³³ No matter how disruptive his sexual desires and experiences are, they are chosen at will, predicated upon gendered and class-dependent privilege and, therefore, always an implicit expression of the superiority he retains.³⁴ While the production and consumption of pornography may have well been male-dominated, the sexual politics of its contents can neither be collectively described as objectifying and oppressive nor as outright liberating for women and other disenfranchised groups.

³¹ Marcus, *Between Women*, p.141.

³² Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, *Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.176 and p.191.

³³ Rosenman, *Unauthorised Pleasures*, p.194.

³⁴ Rosenman identifies equally ambiguous politics in G.W.M. Reynold's *Mysteries of London* (1844), a text which 'stretches normative categories' (p.87) at the same time as it 'upholds prevailing sexual values' (p.116). See: Rosenman, *Unauthorised Pleasures*, pp.87-123.

By the early twentieth century, a firmly established consumer culture and the expansion of photography had further complicated these politics by diversifying the pornography market. While until the 1890s the written word dominated the trade, the *fin de siècle* witnessed the rise and, soon, dominance of the sexually explicit image.³⁵ As Sigel observes, in the 1880s in particular the circulation of pornography became increasingly confined to the upper echelons of society because of its high prices and, consequently, ‘the disenfranchised functioned as models for the desires of the wealthy, but these people could rarely see, let alone reinterpret, the goods – based upon them – that circulated in the marketplace’.³⁶ A decade later, however, these objects became more than just ‘the canvases for such projections’ when mass market pornography enabled them to be also consumers,³⁷ and although pornographic content was, as in previous decades, heavily dependent on traditional ideas of class, gender and race, ‘the expanded dissemination of these ideas transformed their meanings by radically resituating them in society’.³⁸ Sigel suggests that the effects of this expansion were twofold: on the one hand, ‘consumerism often channelled sexually subversive tendencies into socially conservative arrangements’ and, thus, the wider distribution of mass-market pornography helped spread and reinforce the dominant notions of social relations and sex/uality commonly portrayed in these materials; on the other hand, through the exposure of these representations to the scrutiny of those who had previously been only their subject matter, the ambiguities, contradictions and subjectivities of these constructions were equally exposed.³⁹

As the circulation of pornography increased, the policing of its new audiences became stricter, although no amendments were made to the 1857 act during the first half

³⁵ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.119.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.118.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.120.

³⁸ *Ibid.*,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.117 and p.154.

of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ In the realm of pornographic literature, the pseudo-scientific approaches promoted by Ashbee and the Cannibal Club had been in decline since the 1880s,⁴¹ and instead ‘descriptive narratives that superficially followed the rough form of the novel flourished’.⁴² These developments reignited debates on how to protect literature of artistic merit from ‘low art’ such as pornography. These discussions resulted, eventually, in the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, which covered the publication of print as well as sound and film material.⁴³ As Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides note, ‘while the 1857 act sought to control pornography, its successor was intended to protect art’,⁴⁴ and therefore it replaced the Hicklin rule with a new test for obscenity which specified that obscene passages must be considered within the context of the entirety of the work in which they appear rather than in isolation from it. Overall, then, an item could still be considered as possessing ‘literary’ or ‘artistic’ value even if it did contain pornographic passages. The wave of scholarship which set out to investigate Victorian sex/uality in the 1960s was equally preoccupied with attempts to reinstate clear boundaries between art and pornography. In his conclusion to *The Other Victorians*, Steven Marcus insists that pornography ‘stands in adverse to literature’ because literature ‘possesses [...] a multitude of intentions, but pornography possesses only one [that is, to sexually arouse]’;⁴⁵ furthermore, whereas language is a valuable and meaningful tool in literature, for pornography it is a ‘bothersome

⁴⁰ In subsequent decades steps towards regulating the pornography trade on a global scale began to be taken in the forms of the *International Agreement for the Suppression of the Circulation of Obscene Publications* (1910), the *International Convention for the Suppression of the Circulation of and Traffic in Obscene Publications* (1923) and the *Protocol to the Agreement for the Suppression of the Circulation of Obscene Publications* (1949). See: United Nations, ‘Chapter VIII: Obscene Publications’, *United Nations Treaty Collection*, Accessed: 2 May 2011, <http://treaties.un.org/pages/CTCTreaties.aspx?id=8&subid=A&lang=en>.

⁴¹ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.93.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides ‘Obscene Publications Act (1959)’, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship*, pp.404-405 (p.404). According to Green and Karolides, in this new act, a person who publishes pornography referred to someone ‘who distributes, circulates, sells, hires out, gives or lends [...], or who offers [...] for sale or for hire’ an obscene article and also covers ‘playing records, exhibiting films and showing artworks that are meant to be viewed by the public’.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, p.279 and p.278.

necessity'.⁴⁶ At the same time as law and critics attempted to establish defined boundaries between pornography and literature they also acknowledged the uncomfortable similarities and proximity between the two which, for them, rendered these distinctions necessary.

With the emergence of feminism's second wave in the 1960s and the 1970s, pornography became a feminist issue and debates shifted away from its (lack of) artistic merit toward its role in women's oppression and liberation. Feminists' focus on women's sexual liberation and on the social, cultural, legal and economic structures and practices which oppressed women meant that pornography and its subject matter could be regarded as a means of acknowledging, exhibiting and stimulating female sexual pleasure as much as it could be interpreted as a contribution to and reinforcement of the oppressive structures and practices feminists sought to challenge. These debates were influenced in particular by the ever increasing availability of pornography and its production through new mediums: by the time feminist discussion reached their height in the 1980s and early 1990s, the new popularity of home videos meant that pornographic films were mass produced and circulated,⁴⁷ including hard-core films depicting rape and other violent acts towards women. The gradual diversification of pornographic material – from literature to photographs to film – had thus added a new dimension to pornography's representation of women and sex, that is, photographs and films required sexual acts to be carried out in reality rather than creating textual images of them. Women (and men) had become physically implicated in the making of pornography rather than being merely its imaginary objects.

Within the feminist arguments which dominated the 1980s and early 1990s, distinctions between textual and photographic or filmic pornography were frequently

⁴⁶ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, p.278. See also: Ronald Pearsall, [1969] *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (New London: Sutton Publishing, 2003), p.373.

⁴⁷ Jane Juffer, *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p.43.

ignored in favour of more abstract debates surrounding pornography's relationships to reality and representation. For feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, pornography did not represent but created women's inferior position in gendered power structures: 'pornography', MacKinnon argued, 'makes the world a pornographic place' and both directly causes and functions itself as physical as well as psychological violence against women,⁴⁸ be it in the form of words or images.⁴⁹ In this conception of pornography, as John Stoltenberg suggests,

male-supremacist sexuality is important to pornography, and pornography is important to male supremacy. Pornography *institutionalizes* the sexuality that both embodies and enacts male supremacy. Pornography says about that sexuality, 'Here's how'. Here's how to act out male supremacy in sex. Here's how the action should go. Here are the acts that impose power over and against another body.⁵⁰

Pornography, here, functions as an essential tool of women's oppression because it normalises and advocates male superiority and dominance in a mass market, furnishing men in particular with the means to act out and maintain that superiority.

Judith Butler, on the other hand, argued that pornography is a form of creative expression and representation of 'the social reality of gender positions' and, hence, it does not 'constitute that reality [and] indeed it is [its] failure to constitute it that gives the pornographic image the phantasmatic power it has'.⁵¹ Similarly, Lynne Segal criticised that feminists' condemnations and demands for the censorship of pornography denied women sexual agency as consumers. Specifically the passionate prose of Dworkin and MacKinnon, Segal suggested, reinstates rather than challenges 'old patriarchal "truths" centred on the polarizing of male and female sexuality',⁵² while also

⁴⁸ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourse on Life and Law* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.68.

⁴⁹ Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.3-4.

⁵⁰ John Stoltenberg, 'Pornography, Homophobia and Male Supremacy', *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, ed. by Catherine Itzin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.145-165 (p.150).

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.68.

⁵² Lynne Segal, 'Only the Literal: The Contradictions of Anti-Pornography Feminism', *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, ed. by Pamela Church Gibson (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), pp.59-70 (p.61).

ignoring that pornography is a form of representation which attempts to *re*-create and interpret structures that are already in place. As Sigel observes in a recent essay on her own position as a pornography researcher, feminist discourses such as MacKinnon's '[work] very much like pornography [...], manipulating and isolating my readerly body, drowning out my story [...] with hers', a story which allows for only two female subject positions, 'the woman in the text or the one who throws stones at the woman in the texts'.⁵³ The censorship of pornography would thus achieve a similar replication and reinforcement of the power relations and oppressive structures which feminists sought to overturn:

If we [women] want to keep any creative space open for ourselves as sexual agents (rather than encouraging fantasies of female victimization) the very last thing we want to do is remorselessly censor certain words and images: trying to fix their meanings independently from seeking to understand their representations and social context, or complex psychic investments.⁵⁴

According to Segal, censoring pornography would deny women a space of potential sexual empowerment and expression while also isolating it from the frameworks in which it exists and through which it is created.

Similar cases were made by feminists whose have frequently become lost in simplified, antithetical accounts of 'anti-pornography' and 'anti-censorship' arguments. Indeed, Susan Gubar provided a critical view on these seemingly opposing theories in a 1986 essay in which she draws attention to other voices which diversified feminist responses to pornography, including the works of Susanne Kappeler and Angela Carter. Kappeler commented in her book of the same year that if pornography 'eroticizes domination and submission and [...] is one of the key sites in which these values are mediated and normalized in contemporary culture',⁵⁵ then these processes are certainly

⁵³ Lisa Z. Sigel, 'Autobiography of a Flea', *Jane Sexes It up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*, ed. by Merri Johnson (London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002), pp.241-257 (p.253 and p.257).

⁵⁴ Segal, 'Only the Literal', p.69.

⁵⁵ Robert Jensen, 'Introduction: Pornographic Dodges and Distortions', *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality*, ed. by Gail Dines, Robert Jensen and Ann Russo (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.1-8 (p.2).

not limited to the medium of pornography, but are – and have been for a centuries – also prevalent in art and literature. In her view, ‘the pornographer only reproduces, on a less elevated level and with a less exclusive circulation, what the artist does in the esoteric fields of high culture; and he derives from it more profit in return for reduced prestige’.⁵⁶ Pornography must, therefore, be considered as one part of a larger culture rather than as the one aspect of it which single-handedly renders that culture oppressive to women. Carter, controversial and, as so often, ahead of her time, had published *The Sadeian Woman* in 1979 and argued that even male-authored and violent pornography such as the works of the Marquis de Sade can be considered to work in women’s favour and that, in fact, women could appropriate pornography as a means of sexual empowerment. ‘Pornographers’, she argues,

are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily and expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never part of it.⁵⁷

For Carter, a plain rejection of pornography suggests an inability to move from object to subject, an unwillingness to rewrite and subvert patriarchal history, and, ultimately, defeat, a notion which Butler would reiterate nearly twenty years later when she insisted that ‘one is not simply fixed by the name that one is called’.⁵⁸ As Rebecca Munford has highlighted, in later decades this diversity of voices was frequently replaced by an image in which ‘radical anti-pornography campaigners such as Dworkin, MacKinnon and [Robin] Morgan stand in for all second-wave feminist activity’ within the realm of pornography.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986), p.103 and p.102.

⁵⁷ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p.3.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p.2.

⁵⁹ Rebecca Munford, ‘BUST-ing the Third Wave: Barbies, Blowjobs and Girlie Feminism’, *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.183-197 (p.187).

At the turn of the new millennium, third-wave feminists picked up where, two decades earlier, Carter had left off, advocating that women could utilise and participate in the pornography trade to gain both empowerment and sexual pleasure. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, pornography expanded once again through a new medium, this time the internet, while outside of the home and the virtual world it was (and still is) also becoming increasingly influential and visible in mainstream consumer culture. As with the rise of pornographic images in the 1890s, the implications of these developments have been at least twofold from a feminist perspective: on the one hand, the mainstreaming of pornography continues to normalise the notion that women are sexual objects who, like any other market products, can be perpetually consumed at will; on the other hand, the pornography industry is now not only ‘as eager to address women as desiring consumers as it once was to package them merely as objects of consumption’ but it has also witnessed a significant rise in the number of women producing pornography.⁶⁰ As Juline A. Koken notes, ‘several women-owned and operated porn companies [...] have arisen in recent years, as women creating porn with an explicitly woman-centred, feminist perspective gain a foothold in the larger adult industry’.⁶¹ Within this new marketplace, women’s positions explode and blur the supposedly mutually exclusive roles of victim, accomplice and emancipated sexual agent which various feminist factions had established for them.

Accepting and embracing the contradictions which various combinations of these roles may create, third-wave feminism does not condemn women’s consumption of pornography. Rather it is considered a legitimate aspect of female sexual pleasure, independent from the preferences for which the material caters. Instead of attempting to classify what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ pornography, ‘third-wave feminists reject the

⁶⁰ Segal, ‘Only the Literal’, p.60.

⁶¹ Juline A. Koken, ‘The Meaning of the “Whore”’: How Feminist Theories on Prostitution Shape Research on Female Sex Workers’, *Sex Work Matters: Exploring Money, Power, and Intimacy in the Sex Industry*, ed. by Melissa Hope Ditmore, Antonia Levy and Alys Willman (London: Zed Books, 2010), pp.28-64 (p.63).

constraints of political correctness on representations of desire'.⁶² If, for example, feminists deem heterosexual masochistic practices as politically incorrect because of their reliance on male domination, there is inevitably the implication of a prescriptive attitude towards sexuality which relies on the highly questionable assumption that 'somewhere there might be 'an "authentic" female imagination, free of all the influence of male domination' and that 'we can clearly separate [those desires and fantasies] which are authentically feminine from those which are masculine, or the effect of social subordination'.⁶³ Consequently, third-wave feminists oppose this notion of 'sexual correctness' and the concept that certain sexual practices are (not) compatible with feminism.

If pornography and the acts it features are thus legitimate stimuli for female sexual pleasure, then the production of pornography can be as much a feminist act as its consumption. Much like Carter, third-wave feminists argue that pornography can be appropriated by women, both on page and on screen. As Melanie Waters puts it:

By describing sexual experiences and fantasies in their own words, but in an established pornographic rhetoric, it might be argued that the authors of [pornographic] works successfully utilise the tools by which anti-pornography feminists claimed women were oppressed in order to subvert the gendered power.⁶⁴

Within the magazine and film industry these trends have been equally evident, with lesbian-focused publications such as *On Our Backs* 'expanding the range of body types represented in mainstream pornography by featuring women with short hair, piercings, tattoos, nonsurgically enhanced breasts, and a range of ethnicities', and video productions by women such as Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano, whose films '[endorse]

⁶² 'pornography, feminist', *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie L. Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.248-250 (p.248).

⁶³ Jean Grimshaw, 'Ethics, Fantasy and Self-Transformation', *Ethics*, 35 (1993), pp.145-158 (p.157).

⁶⁴ Melanie Waters, 'Sexing it Up?: Women, Pornography and Third-Wave Feminism', *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.250-65 (p.261).

butch/femme gender play’ and satirize the objectifying male gaze.⁶⁵ Heterosexual feminist pornography equally attempts to ‘break free of traditional sexual imagery that fetishizes male ejaculation and puts women in the subordinated role’ by focusing, instead, on gender role reversals and on experimentation ‘with the fluidity of power in sexual intercourse’.⁶⁶ In the mainstream pornography market, Jenna Jameson set up her own pornography business (Club Jenna) after having worked in the sex industry since the age of 18.⁶⁷ Instead of attempting to suppress pornography, third-wave feminists suggest that women can subvert and utilise the industry and the medium for their own benefit, in a sexual as well as an economic sense.

Although frequently accused of demonstrating ‘an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations’ through their participation in the normalisation of pornography in mainstream culture,⁶⁸ at the same time as the third wave embraces pornography as a space for female sexual expression and empowerment its proponents also retain a critical view of the structures of the industry as well as of the consumer culture of which it is a part. By considering and by providing a space for the voices of women involved in the industry, many third-wave essay collections do offer analyses of the exploitative practices and politics of pornography, but at the same time they (and the authors themselves) refuse to cast women into the one-dimensional role of the victim. Instead, these texts emphasise how within an exploitative framework women, too, have the potential to become the exploiter and profit from consumer demands. Many anti-pornography feminists accuse pro-pornography or anti-censorship feminists (with whose arguments the third-wave largely aligns itself) of considering women’s involvement in pornography exclusively as a

⁶⁵ ‘pornography, feminist’, *The Women’s Movement Today*, pp.248-249.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.249.

⁶⁷ See: Jenna Jameson with Neil Strauss, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

⁶⁸ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), p.17 and p.18.

voluntary activity, representative of the woman's (or man's) own freely chosen sexual identity and desire, [ignoring] the economic conditions of the sexual exchange, the social and economic power of the producers and consumers, and the poverty, economic exploitation, and sexual abuse that may underlie the lives of those involved in the sex industry.⁶⁹

Yet, this simplification ignores the fact that the third wave acknowledges and investigates both the exploitative and liberating potentials of pornography, including its associations with sex trafficking and prostitution (which are the subject of Chapter Four).

Third-wave feminists, then, 'lean toward a more complex analysis' of pornography, 'attending to the very real concerns raised by antiporn feminists while arguing that one can *both* advocate against censorship *and* formulate serious challenges, critiques, and protests of the objectionable and discriminatory' aspects of pornography'.⁷⁰ Consequently, third-wave writings on the issue very much share the aims and concerns of recent scholars such as Brian McNair, Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, who seek to critically explore – rather than reject from the outset – the mainstreaming of sex in contemporary culture, including its manifestations and the content and politics of pornography. As such, third wavers contribute to the challenge Attwood sets in the introduction to *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualisation of Western Culture* (2009): 'How', she asks,

should we respond to forms of sexualisation which may be profoundly contradictory in the way they mix up oppressive and emancipatory views of sex and gender, and how do we develop a critical language for the analysis of sexualisation without reverting to 'pro' and 'anti' positions on pornography? Whatever stance we take, simply rejecting sexualisation is unlikely to take us very far.⁷¹

Embracing popular culture as a fundamental aspect of women's lives today, third-wave

⁶⁹ Ann Russo, 'Feminists Confront Pornography's Subordinating Practices: Politics and Strategies for Change', *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality*, ed. by Gail Dines, Robert Jensen and Ann Russo (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.9-36 (p.17).

⁷⁰ 'pornography, and feminism', *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie L. Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.247-248 (p.247).

⁷¹ Feona Attwood, 'Introduction: The Sexualization of Culture', *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.xiii-xxiv (p.xvii).

feminism addresses these issues by both embracing and interrogating the contradiction which arise from women's self-conscious and pleasurable participation in a consumer culture which objectifies and dehumanises them, be it through pornography or mainstream advertising.

It is this paradox of simultaneously critiquing and contributing to a sexualised consumer culture which links third-wave theories to neo-Victorian fiction. Novels such as Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* and Waters' *Fingersmith* return to the Victorian past in order to trace the roots of pornography as a feminist issue and explore and critique, to various extents, its liberatory and exploitative potentials. In doing so, however, they illuminate not only women's but also neo-Victorian fiction's and third-wave feminism's ambiguous positions within the sexualised marketplace they interrogate.

The Journal of Dora Damage: pornography's feminist failures

In 1859, two years after the Obscene Publications Act had been passed, bookbinder wife Dora Damage is forced to take on her husband's bindery due to his first crippling and eventually fatal rheumatism. In order to save her family from starvation, Dora is tempted into profitable but dangerous business with *Les Sauvages Nobles*, a group of bibliophile gentlemen, led by Sir Jocelyn Knightley, who publish and collect pornographic and racist anthropological works of literature and photography. In the course of the novel, Dora progressively receives material of a more and more violent and racist nature and, attempting to refuse the continuation of her services, she is forced to remain in business with the group as they threaten physical violence in the form of subjecting Dora's young epileptic daughter, Lucinda, to a clitoridectomy. Reading and binding books of sexual practices previously unknown to her, Dora has to compromise her middle-class respectability for her family's survival, while also discovering, in the

course of the novel, her own sexuality through her relationship with Din, an American fugitive slave whom she employs in her workshop by instruction of Knightley's wife Sylvia and her Lady's Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery.

As a woman of the middle classes, Dora has been raised by her governess mother into the role of the 'angel in the house' (for which Dora lacks both talent and enthusiasm) and, hence, into an identity of which sexuality is only an aspect in the sense that it is absent. Consequently, at the beginning of her narrative, Dora is sexually inexperienced, a factor which significantly shapes her first impressions of the pornographic material she comes to bind for Knightley. Her marriage, like her upbringing, does not encourage sexual acts beyond the purpose of reproduction and, consequently, Dora and Peter have only had sex three times since their betrothal, once on their wedding night and twice thereafter, each time preceded with Peter 'barking instructions at [her] to scrub [herself] all over with carbolic soap and baking soda' (*DD*, 24). Having conceived a child and presumed that Dora's expressions of pleasure during sex must be signs of her being 'a convulsive' (*DD*, 24), Peter cannot not see a reason for a fourth sexual encounter: 'I remember', Dora explains,

suggesting a third time [...] to which he [Peter] replied in wonder, 'What do you want to be going and doing that for?' as if I had suggested we steal a hot-air balloon and see if we could fly to the moon. It was a wrongful disposition for a respectable wife and mother. I learnt to acquire an appropriate aversion. (*DD*, 24)

Due to this inexperience and because of the popular Victorian notion that female sexual desire is, at least in the public eye, inexistent, Dora's first encounter with sexually explicit material is as shocking to her as it seems excessively dramatic to us. Initially unable to determine the meanings of the illustrations in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but then surprised and shaken.

Considering, then, that Dora is confronted with matters for which her 'upbringing and society had not prepared [her]' (*DD*, 163), her contact with pornography inevitably generates problematic perceptions of the extent to which these books represent or create

reality or fantasy. Unlike Maud, who finds herself spatially confined to Briar, Dora is incarcerated by her role as a middle-class wife. The material she reads has no direct application or relevance in her life, and the worlds of Knightley's texts consequently make her 'angry at [... her] ignorance' and at the fact that the books, against her will, 'led [her] into the dark caves of sin, and left [her] there in torment and confusion' (*DD*, 164). However, the novelty of and the shock over the texts' natures wears off quickly and Dora soon finds that it 'felt curiously normal [...] now to be doing this' (*DD*, 185). Now able to reflect on the books' contents, she begins to interrogate her own world, her marriage and herself according to their descriptions and comes to think, 'What a disappointment I must have been to my husband, for not being a docile and willing conduit, a physiological sewer, to the pouring-forth of his mighty Jupiter Pluvius' (*DD*, 186). Pornography, for Dora, initially occupies an ambiguous place in the creation and representation of social reality and its gender relations. Dora believes that the texts and illustrations she encounters in Knightley's books are fantasies of personal fetishes, but that especially those of a sadomasochistic nature are also 'love unromanticised, [and] for that reason, possibly more authentic' than the demure stories of romance novels. The works she binds for *Les Sauvages Nobles* show her, she feels, something for which she 'had previously no visual representation in this world of convention and delicacy', something which 'had often underpinned [her] whole existence as a woman' (*DD*, 163). These forbidden publications, then, represent as well as reinforce already existing gender constructions and hierarchies, that is, they act as a means of maintaining women's subordinate status to men and function as prescriptive guides which distort their female reader's perception of herself into an image characterised by insufficiency.

That pornography, in Starling's novel, has little to do with female sexual pleasure becomes clear when Dora reads in the *Decameron* that every woman should be aware of her best side during the sexual act, that is, from which perspective she is most attractive

to behold for a man. Again acutely aware of her shortcomings in this respect, Dora confesses, ‘I had never beheld these parts of my body in this way, unfamiliar as they were to me as far-off parts of the globe. For the first time in my life, I started to wonder about my best angle’ (*DD*, 161). She continues by explaining that one of the texts ‘mentioned in passing an extraordinary, magical place, called the Clit-oris. The author was unspecific as to its exact co-ordinates, but it sounded as if it should be in Africa or Xanadu, or Timbuc-Tu, so leysian were its qualities, especially for the female of the species’ (*DD*, 161). The clitoris, here, is of minor importance as a means of achieving female sexual pleasure and, as Dora’s comical interpretation makes clear, instead functions merely as an exotic item of male pursuit for male enjoyment.

But for Dora, Knightley’s materials do not only result in a diminished sense of self-confidence; their sexual prescriptions also, because of Dora’s lack of sexual experience, prohibit rather than develop her discovery of her own sexuality and sexual pleasure. Instead of naturally giving in to her passions, in her first sexual encounter with Din Dora finds herself torn between what body desires and what her brain believes is ‘correct’ sexual behaviour: ‘The heat from my body seemed to drain towards that one point; my head struggled to reclaim control, and in the conflict, my body lost. I was feeling too much [...] Instead of feeling too much, I made the choice of feeling nothing’ (*DD*, 362). Convinced that sex must be performed as it is represented in Knightley’s texts and not according to personal feeling, she attempts to recreate the illustrations she has memorised, causing a scene which is as comical as it is pitiable:

‘Forsooth,’ I suddenly remembered, relieved that the last year’s toil had not been in vain. Then, ‘Verily sir, a mighty one.’ [...] I thrust myself forward and tilted the crown of my head towards the floor, and arched my back dramatically, but it was all wrong. [...] Our skulls clunked together and our temples throbbed. ‘A tremulous shudder’ [...] and two or three long sighs, followed by the critical, dying ‘Oh, oh!’ That was it. I tried all those, in turn. Din pulled back, and for the first time I could see nature’s grand master-piece, only his seemed to be wilting. I had not read of that, only of pillars, and engines, and skewers. (*DD*, 362)

Dora soon realises that the ‘knowledge’ she has acquired from her client’s obscene texts

is worth nothing when it comes to real-life experiences of passions and sex, leaving her embarrassed by her behaviour and conscious that she had ‘read of too many fantasies to feel anything than fictitious myself right now’ (*DD*, 362).

Thus unable to inspire female sexual pleasure and, instead, prohibiting women’s discovery of their sexualities by alienating them from their own bodies, pornography, for Dora, offers only mere illusions of female empowerment. Dora is at first flattered by the special position she occupies as Knightley’s confidante, but it soon transpires that her value to them does not lie in her professional skills. Rather, *Les Sauvages Nobles*’ attraction to Dora lies to a large extent in their desire to watch her read, if not in a literal sense then certainly by way of displaying their perverse and obscene sexual preferences and fetishes through the texts Dora binds for them, which, as a rule, she reads before designing their bindings. From the moment of her employment by Knightley, it becomes clear that Dora is an object of his – and the group’s – gaze. On their first meeting, he examines and interprets her physiognomy in detail and, once decided to make her his Mistress Bindress, remarks with satisfaction on the suitability of his new acquisition with the words, ‘Mrs Damage, you are perfect for our requirements’ (*DD*, 107). The pleasure he takes in watching Dora watch also becomes apparent in this first encounter, when, in the presence of bookseller Charles Diprose, he encourages her to inspect closely the anatomical model of a female torso which he keeps in his study. While Dora is ‘fascinated and repulsed’ (*DD*, 104) by what she sees, she in turn becomes the object of observation when Knightley points out to Diprose, ‘See how she looks so’ (*DD*, 104). Meanwhile, noting that ‘he was continuing to watch my struggle with placing my gaze’, Dora realises their ongoing fascination with her reaction to the anatomical model, watching her ‘as if [she] were some scientific curiosity’ (*DD*, 104). Clearly, as a woman of the lower middle classes employed to bind and clothe pornographic texts and pictures, Dora is a ‘scientific curiosity’ to these men on at least

two accounts: her social status and her sex.

Later it becomes clear that to *Les Sauvages Nobles* Dora's biggest attraction is that she knows, through the materials she binds for them, their sexual preferences, their fetishes and perversities. This play of the gazes becomes explicit when Dora is first kidnapped and held hostage by them:

I caught a glimpse of a long, hazy room, a shining table, men in jewel-coloured velvets, a flame lighting a cigar, a flash of gold. It felt tremendously improper for me to witness this male occasion; it somehow felt more shameful than anything I had seen in any book to date. But I could not avert my gaze, and the men within, too, stared back out at me. (*DD*, 239)

Knowing of all their sexual fantasies and activities – ranging from sadomasochism to bestiality and paedophilia – Dora is aware that ‘they were all here, I knew, for I had read their diaries, their letters, their stories, and they knew it too as they watched me watching them’ (*DD*, 240). Having realised that her ‘anger was delighting them’, Dora recognises that she

was one step away from Mistress Venus with her birch rods, and I suddenly realised that her disciplinary procedures were nothing more than an artificially bestowed power, handed to her temporarily by the men who so yearned for chastisement. Mistress Venus was just another job for just another brow-beaten woman, just another task to fulfil, along with cleaning his slippers, filling his pipe, and being the cushion for his rage. (*DD*, 220-221)

Consequently, any sexual power or liberty women imagine they possess through the enactment of heterosexual sadomasochistic practices is merely subject to and created for the satisfaction of male desires and hence of a degrading rather than an emancipatory nature.⁷²

Because of its frequently violent contents, pornography, in Starling's novel, is not

⁷² That for *Les Sauvages Nobles* the pleasure lies not only in the contents of their publications but also in the exposure of these materials to those who are either not their designated audience or who object to obscene literature is further evident in the musings of Mr Prizzy, who claims that his distribution of pornography is politically motivated and a ‘moral crusade’ (*DD*, 228). Prizzy takes great pleasure from trials against sellers of obscene publications because ‘[by] rule of law, each obscene item has to be categorised and described, and read out as the list of indictments in court. [...] Oh, it cheers the heart of a radical *obsceniteur* to hear such words spoken in a court of law by an upholder of the law’ (*DD*, 227). Thus, independent of a case's outcome, those who intend to fight obscene texts and pictures are, ironically, forced verbally disseminate the contents they so fervently condemn and seek to suppress.

only as psychological violence against women by distorting their sense of self and estranging them from their own bodies and desires but it also functions as a form and promotion of physical abuse. Reading *The Lustful Turk* (an authentic piece of Victorian pornography), the pleasure which the Dey's women eventually feel following acts of extreme violation appears to Dora not as a dubious sanctioning of rape, but instead – as the text intends it – as a pain to which men must subject women in order to introduce them to the pleasures of sex. Objectification by and violation for the benefit of the male gaze are taken to the extreme when Dora is destined to become not simply the content but the very material of Knightley's books. Drawing on Burton's *Cannibal Club*, Starling re-imagines an instance when, in 1863, Burton promised Frederick Hankey to bring him a human skin from his next trip to Africa so his friend could have his de Sade texts bound in it; but where Burton failed in his undertaking Knightley succeeds.⁷³ Having been asked to bind a book in a mysterious material without being allowed to open the text itself, Dora discovers that the binding material unknown to her is the skin of a woman from the colonies whom Knightley 'saved' from being burned on her husband's grave. Soon any remaining illusions of her empowerment are crushed as the symbolic and phallic coat of arms of *Les Sauvage Nobles* – 'a weighty implement, like a large bookbinder's tool or stamp' (*DD*, 109) which she first received with pride – is now the template for a tattoo on her buttocks, the skin of which is meant to become the cover of 'Volume Two' (408), rendering her Knightley's '*magnum opus*' (*DD*, 235) and both a fictional and literal part of Knightley's pornographic fantasies.

But Knightley's pornography does not only endorse violence against and the objectification of women; it also promotes racism. Dora discovers that it is the protagonists' ethnic and cultural backgrounds which distinguish Knightley's books and illustrations from others. Dora finds them filled with 'caliphs, emperors, maharajahs,

⁷³ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.50.

and the Dey' (*DD*, 157) and set in foreign lands, reflecting her client's pseudo-scientific obsession with the anthropology and ethnography of the British colonies and their native inhabitants. Knightley claims to have political and moral motifs for his interest in and commissioning of obscene materials, motifs in which science, sexuality and pleasure intersect. He argues that the sexual liberation of the nation – for which pornography is, apparently, essential – will result in an increase in its health: the purpose of his 'scientific study' is, he explains to Dora, 'the liberation of our oh-so-corseted society from the restraints of decency and prudery as an urgent matter of health and well-being' and sexually explicit texts, be they ancient or contemporary, have the power to 'captivate and which liberate', and are 'what England needs. Our literature is chaste and ailing because we as a society are chaste, and ailing' (*DD*, 142-143).

Knightley's primary interest, however, lies in attempts to prove scientifically the inferior nature of the African people through an examination of their physiognomies, hence the symbolic hat stand in the shape of a 'waist-high Negro boy' in the lobby of his house (*DD*, 100-101) and the title *Les Sauvages Nobles* for his club of bibliophiles. His motivation for his research becomes most explicit in the preface to a collection of obscene – or, supposedly, scientific – photographs which Dora is expected to bind and which includes shots such as 'Young wife violated by Negro in revenge for cruelties by master' and 'Stupration of mulatto daughters by father' (*DD*, 204). The preface to this catalogue – the content of which causes Dora to be sick – reads as follows and is illustrative of the pseudo-scientific purpose of its obscene contents:

This volume is for neither the prurient and perfidious, nor the ignorant and innocent. The artist of discernment, who professes the pursuit of truth, the liberation from taboos, and the continued supremacy of Britannia, as the higher motives behind his representations, will be best served by its contents. The nature of such an endeavour compels the reproduction of extreme imagery, which is a triumph of the technology of our age. (*DD*, 204)

Knightley's wife, Sylvia, is a founding member of the Lady's Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery, whose attitudes and behaviours towards African-Americans

do, in principal, not differ a great deal from her husband's and are motivated by equally hypocritical political motifs. As we learn from Din, the so-called assistance he receives from the ladies of the society is in many ways a dubious one, as they appear to exploit Din for re-enactments of their erotic fantasies of black men, which are largely based on the ideas of excessive and animalistic sexuality Knightley seeks to prove. Indeed, Collette Colligan notes that 'there was a tendency among some nineteenth-century English readers to view slave narratives as racy transatlantic products'. Consumed by both men and women, and 'focused on the sexual violence underlying the slave system',⁷⁴ this 'appropriation of slavery imagery was [...] part of a growing underground obscene print culture that fed off cultural fantasies' and, in the 1880s, came to focus on obscene narratives which both 'created and reflected fantasies about the sexual excesses within slavery'.⁷⁵

In the company of the women of the Lady's Society Din becomes the protagonist of their very own version of such a narrative, but also later falls prey to Dora's – and our readerly – sexsational gaze: 'They take me into this room, ma'am, this red room in her house,' he tells Dora,

an' they put the pelt of a tiger round me, an' a spear in this hand an' a shield in that, an' ask me to stand about like a Zulu warrior. 'Ooh, a Zoo-loo, a Zoo-loo,' they cry, an' wave their arms [...] an' they cry tears over me, an' they say, 'Oh, Sylvia, how his skin shines!' an' 'Oh, his teeth be so white an' fright'nin!' (*DD*, 210)

Such scenarios and his relationship with Dora, Din later explains, challenge Victorian discourses of white and male supremacy even more than bestiality or paedophilia: '[It's] seen to be the wrong way round; the wrong balance of power. White over black, man over woman, that's the right way, ain't it? Black man, white woman, though, stirs it all up, causes bother' (*DD*, 365). What is conveyed here is that pornography and the sexual

⁷⁴ Colette Colligan, 'Anti-Abolition Writes Obscenity: The English Vice, Transatlantic Slavery, and England's Obscene Print Culture', *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography 1800–2000*, ed. by Lisa Z. Sigel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp.67–99 (p.71).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.67 and p.73.

fantasies it illustrates can both undermine dominant discourses on race, gender and power and, at the same time, reinforce them as fundamental hierarchies by treating those fantasies as forbidden, dangerous and exotic.

It is her encounter of more racist and violent materials and Din's presence in her workshop which eventually force Dora to reflect upon her attitude towards the texts she binds. Initially, her naïve perception of Knightley's works is facilitated by her unquestioning acceptance of pornographic discourses. Having become familiar with the language and contents of her client's publications, Dora soon admits that because she has become desensitised to their words, the texts themselves have, dangerously, lost also all relationship with reality. At the point at which Dora makes her observation she still has no sexual experience to which she can compare or relate the works she binds. Assuming that the acts they depict are specific to the upper classes and, therefore, of little relevance to her, she reflects:

I learned entire new languages: I accepted words such as *gamahuching*, *firkytoodling*, *bagpiping*, *lallygagging*, or *minetting* as if they were my mother tongue. My world became tinged with unreality; such literature placated with its tone, written with such levity, good humour, civility and incoherence. It came to be endearing, childish, and meaningless. In fact, I came to realise it was rather like the whimsical poems filled with nonce words that I read to Lucinda at night, only a bit wetter. (*DD*, 163)

To Dora, Knightley's books were, at first, mere fantasies which have no impact on or connection with her reality; therefore, any critical scrutiny of their contents becomes unnecessary as they neither contribute to nor represent real sexual and social relations.

Having learned of Din's treatment by the women, Dora eventually (although in vain) attempts to end her work for *Les Sauvages Nobles* and what she perceives as her complicity in both the violence against and women and the racism their works perpetuate. As Dora admits, 'the presence of the stranger was forcing me to accept the transgressive nature of my business' (*DD*, 176), making both her and the reader question her position in the trade she has entered and reflect on whether the fact that she

is not the author of such works really exempts her from any responsibility. There is no question in Starling's novel that its protagonist's involvement in the production of pornographic texts also makes her a passive supporter of the ideologies they advocate.

Eventually, it is only when Dora gives in to her feelings and gains sincerely pleasurable sexual experiences, which are not stages but 'as involuntary as fainting' (*DD*, 362), that she is able to gain a different perspective on pornography and on herself as a sexual being. Her experience of sex is unrelated to any text or illustration she has studied in the past, as 'it was not the chaste embraces of popular novels, nor was it the tuneless organ-grinding of Diprose's catalogue of work' (*DD*, 362). Sex and sexuality are, for Dora, not only personal but first and foremost inexpressible in word or picture. The sex with Din, for her, defeats any label or description one could attach to it, and hence Dora observes, 'I do not have a name for what we did [...] we did it, wordlessly and without name' (*DD*, 362). Dora admits that her sexual encounters with Din have taught her 'more over those five days about the inner workings of our hearts and bodies than [...] over a year of binding erotic texts; I learnt things on which the books could not inform or instruct, written as they were solely to arouse and shock' (*DD*, 372). Their purpose, Dora realises, is not to represent reality or universal truths, but to shock those unfamiliar with these works and their contents or to pleasure those at whose sexual preferences they are aimed. Pornography, then acquires a multiplicity of characteristics. On the one hand it is presented to us as harmful for women and in part responsible for their subordination; on the other hand, Dora illustrates in this last quotation that pornography is a form of fiction, but its function to represent sexual pleasure remains a fruitless endeavour, since true desire and passion cannot be transformed into and represented by words, be they penned by men or by women.

Starling's novel successfully overwrites the male gaze to which Dora is subjected by *Les Sauvages Nobles* and their pornographic materials. The fraught power relations

of Knightley's desire to watch Dora watch are subverted in the latter's relationship with Din. During sex, Din literally shares his view *of Dora with Dora*, 'look[ing] back into [her] eyes as if he could transfer the image to [her] that way' (*DD*, 373) and hence destabilising the power relations associated with her identity as a white woman and Din's as a black man. Dora does not become a text on Knightley's shelves, but authors her own book, *The Journal of Dora Damage*. This, she explains on the first pages, is not a text which prescribes a life, but one which a woman must fill herself:

[The] pages of the [...] book start off blank, and await inscription by the lending of a life of free will according to personal inspiration and divine grace. And the more one's destiny is pursued, the more brilliance the book acquires, until the binding far surpasses any hide, cloth or paper binding ever produced in the finest ateliers of Paris and Geneva, and is finally worthy of joining the library of human knowledge. (DD, 1-2)

In *The Journal of Dora Damage* women can overwrite the male gaze, but pornography – in whichever shape or form – is not the vehicle through which such subversion can be achieved. Rather, it remains a means of initiating and reinforcing a form of male sexual pleasure which is dependent on and maintains women's physical and psychological subjugation in society.

Yet, while Starling draws attention to the troubled gender, class and race politics of nineteenth-century society and pornography in particular, we are also forced to face our contemporary readerly desire for such politically correct critiques,⁷⁶ and, therefore, indirectly, for the sensational (and mostly sexual) illustrations of the acts and practices under scrutiny. This becomes clear when Dora quizzes Din about his experiences of abuse by the Lady's Society. During his account, Dora interrupts him repeatedly with impatient questions, while Din appears to play to her evident anticipation of the sexual details of his story:

'What else did they do?' But he would not answer. He simply sat and smiled. So I

⁷⁶ As Christian Gutleben points out in *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, the impulse to provide politically correct critiques of nineteenth-century society and culture has become a neo-Victorian trope and fulfils readerly expectations toward the genre. See: Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p.37.

moved slightly closer to him. A question burnt my lips; I did not know if I dared ask, until it spoke itself for me. 'Do they touch you, Din?' I said quietly. He paused, and held my gaze, still grinning. 'Oh, Lord' do they touch me!' He whistled through his teeth. (*DD*, 210)

Women's writing – in the form of Dora's journal – thus poses both a challenge to pornography's sexual and textual politics as well as holding up a mirror to its readers' consumption of the neo-Victorian sexsation at the same time as it caters to it by providing us with the sexual experiences of its heroine and the eccentric sexual practices of its villains.

***Fingersmith*: pornography's feminist potentials**

Where Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* contextualises its representations of pornography primarily within discourses of heterosexuality, race and class, *Fingersmith* turns its attention to pornography by focusing chiefly on its engagement with and impact on lesbian sexuality and its representations. As with Dora's relationship to *Les Sauvages Nobles*, Maud's importance to her uncle is at least partly defined by her function as a visitor attraction for his gentlemen guests from London, who, like Mr Lilly, are collectors of pornography and enjoy hearing Maud read aloud the texts and obscene matters she daily catalogues and indexes:

He is used to occasionally entertain gentlemen at Briar: now he has me stand for them and read. I read from foreign texts, not understanding the matter I am made to recite; and the gentlemen – like Mrs Stiles – watch me strangely. I grow used to that. When I have finished, at my uncle's instruction I curtsy. I curtsy well. The gentlemen clap, then come to shake or stroke my hand. They tell me, often, how rare I am. I believe myself a kind of prodigy, and pink under their gazes. (*FS*, 198)

As Rivers indicates to Maud, she is well-known and much-discussed 'in the shady bookshops and publishers' houses of London and Paris', where they talk of her 'as of some fabulous creature: the handsome girl at Briar, whom Lilly has trained, like a chattering monkey, to recite voluptuous texts for gentlemen' (*FS*, 224). Having been raised and trained into this position by her uncle, Maud herself has been created, has

been written – like Mr Lilly’s pornographic books – by, and as an entertainment for, men. Indeed, her uncle makes Maud internalise early on during her time at Briar that he considers her as nothing more than a part of his collection, when he tells his naturally resistant young niece, ‘I have contently passed many tedious weeks in expectation of poorer volumes than you!’ (*FS*, 194). While Maud becomes a sexualised object during her readings to her uncle’s guests, Mr Lilly’s own interest in her is not of a sexual nature but, rather, mirrors the collector’s fondness of the physical object.

Whereas Dora’s sexual inexperience is ascribed to her confinement within her role of middle-class wife, Maud is raised in complete seclusion from the world outside of Briar, where her uncle attempts to raise her as an innocent whose only knowledge comes from his texts and whom he can thus train to be what he is, and what Ashbee claimed to be, ‘the bibliographer [...] who assumed the scholarly apparatus of the scientist to distance himself from the pornographic voyeur [...] [and] pursued objectivity’ by ‘collecting, organising, categorising, and then labelling’ the sexual acts represented in his library without being aroused by them.⁷⁷ Not dissimilar to Dora’s appeal to *Les Sauvages Nobles*, Maud’s attraction to Lilly’s visitors therefore lies in her identity as a sexually unaware and virginal girl who – at least superficially – is emotionally detached from and, hence, does not respond to the sexual material she reads because the texts are written in languages she has been taught to read but not to understand, both literally and metaphorically. If in French or Latin, Maud utters the words without knowing their meaning, and even when written in English, the acts they describe remain a foreign language to Maud, whose secluded life at Briar has so far provided her with no experiences (physical or otherwise) which would allow her to relate to the texts’ contents. It is exactly this detachment which Lilly attempts to foster and maintain in his niece, to both his advantage and to that of his visitors. Considering

⁷⁷ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, pp.60-61.

himself ‘a curator of poisons’ (*FS*, 199) immune to the toxicity of his collection, he aims to bestow this immunity upon Maud, so

that you might assist me [...] For you come here with naked fingers, while in the ordinary world – the commonplace world, outside this chamber – the men who handle vitriol and arsenic must do so with their flesh guarded. You are not like them. This is your proper sphere. I have made it so. I have fed you poison, by scruple and grain. Now comes the larger dose. (*FS*, 199)

For the Victorians, pornography was a valid object of scientific study in the hands of educated upper-class men, but filthy, unrespectable entertainment if consumed by the working classes,⁷⁸ and hence Lilly, like Ashbee, ‘keeps it neat, keeps it ordered, on guarded shelves’ and cautions Maud to ‘remember the rareness of our work. It will seem queer, to the eyes and ears of the untutored. They will think you tainted, should you tell. You understand me? I have touched your lip with poison, Maud’ (*FS*, 199). To outsiders, then, her contact with these texts must inevitably indicate her physical as well as her moral contamination as they perceive woman as incapable of Lilly’s male, detached, scientific gaze.

Consequently, when Maud eventually manages, for a brief time, to escape into this ordinary world, she is no longer an attraction but a dangerous embarrassment. Desperately seeking refuge at Mr Hawtrey’s bookshop in Victorian London’s famously ill-reputed booksellers row, Holywell Street, Maud finds that Hawtrey is unwilling to help the girl he so admired within the secluded confines of Lilly’s country house, reminding her that ‘this is not Briar [...] You were among gentlemen, there’ (*FS*, 380), and delivering her to what he believes is the proper place for a ‘poisoned’ girl like Maud outside the confines of her uncle’s country house: ‘a house for ladies [...] like you [...] Poor ladies, widow ladies – wicked ladies’ (*FS*, 387), that is, a workhouse for gentlewomen.

Maud’s ignorance and inexperience of the world outside Briar, then, also raise

⁷⁸ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p.4.

fundamental questions regarding the nature of pornography. Due to her lack of knowledge, Maud ‘suppose[s] all printed words to be true ones’ (*FS*, 186), that is, she not only supposes them an accurate depiction *of* reality, but to her, they are what *constitutes* reality. Having spent all her life reading about sexual acts of all shapes and forms while being unable to discover her own bodily desires during her adolescence, Maud believes she is not in any way roused by the subject matter of her uncle’s texts because of her profound knowledge of their contents and, when prompted by Gentleman, she asks, ‘aren’t those who know the matter best, moved least? I speak not from experience of the world, of course, but from my reading merely’ (*FS*, 214). Her faith in her uncle’s books goes so far that she even considers herself someone who ‘can never be deceived, for instance, in the matter of a gentleman’s attentions’ (*FS*, 14). As for Dora, for Maud pornography is initially not a form of expression which represents and interprets reality, but, because she does not know anything else, a force which creates reality, which, in MacKinnon’s words, ‘creates gender, creates woman and man in the social form in which we know them’.⁷⁹

However, at the age of thirteen, in an incident far less comical but no less revelatory than the embarrassing sexual experience of Starling’s protagonist, Maud painfully realises her ignorance and the false knowledge resulting from it when her curiosity leads her to observe not only her maid Barbara’s but also her own body, neither of which conform to the pictures and descriptions of her uncle’s books.

Watching Barbara take a bath, she observes:

Her legs - that I know from my uncle’s books should be smooth - are dark with hair; the place between them - which I know should be neat, and fair - darkest of all. That troubles me. Then at last, she catches me gazing. ‘What are you looking at?’ she says. ‘Your cunt,’ I answer. ‘Why is it so black?’ She starts away from me as if in horror [...] ‘Where did you learn such words?’ ‘From my uncle,’ I say. ‘Oh, you liar! Your uncle’s a gentleman.’ (*FS*, 200)

⁷⁹ Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourse on Life and Law* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.149.

Having her mouth washed with soap as a punishment for using the language Mr Lilly's texts have taught her, Maud internalises the idea that her 'lip must have poison in it, after all' and, witnessing her own genitalia becoming more similar to those of her maid rather than to those in her uncle's books, she, like Dora, finally comes to know her the texts 'to be filled with falsehoods' and, consequently, to loathe herself 'for having supposed them truths' (*FS*, 201). It is at this point that pornography destroys any sense of innocence, pleasure or 'natural' feeling in the young girl, for whom adolescent 'restlessness turns [...] to scorn' (*FS*, 201): her uncle's books fail to make her blush now that she recognises them as fantasies rather than accurate depictions of reality and, consequently, their falsehoods cause Maud to detach herself from their subject matter once more and to treat them as hateful objects of study. Pornography, as in Starling's narrative, functions as psychological violence against women, resulting in either a deprivation or a disturbed sense of emotion. This becomes particularly clear when Maud starts punishing her maid Agnes for possessing an innocence which Maud herself has lost, by exerting cruel acts of physical harm which also demonstrate her helplessness, her inability to develop or express any healthy emotions within the quiet confines of Briar:

She is fifteen, innocent as butter. She thinks my uncle kind. She thinks me kind, at first. She reminds me of myself, as I once as. She reminds me of myself as I once was and ought still to be, and will never be again. I hate her for it. When she is clumsy, when she is slow, I hit her. That makes her clumsier. Then I hit her again. That makes her weep. Her face behind her tears, keeps still its look of mine. I beat her the harder, the more I fancy the resemblance. (*FS*, 203)

Maud's punishment of Agnes functions, of course, also as a projected self-punishment born from contempt and as the novel progresses, we find that it is partly Sue's idea of Maud as an innocent which makes her attractive for Maud, who is 'too compelled by her idea – her idea of me as a simple girl, abused by circumstance, prone to nightmare' (*FS*, 251). When Maud first met her uncle at the madhouse in which she had grown up, his decision to take her to Briar with him was made on the basis of her handwriting and

her ability to read, hence her later realisation that her ‘fair characters are her undoing’ (*FS*, 182). To Maud, Sue’s illiteracy is therefore ‘a kind of fabulous insufficiency - like the absence, in a martyr or a saint, of the capacity for pain’ (*FS*, 244) – an insufficiency which, at least to some extent, saves her from becoming a part of the language and system of patriarchy.

Again, it is with positive sexual experiences that the protagonists’ perception of pornography changes. Maud’s relationship towards her uncle’s books is altered when Sue comes to Briar in the guise of Maud’s new maid and both girls discover their feelings for each and their lesbian sexualities. Having a feeling and an experience to associate with the contents of the texts – a real-life referent so to speak – Maud perceives Lilly’s collection as coming to life for her as she begins to discover her own feelings and desires:

Even my uncle’s books are changed to me; and this is worse, this is worst of all. I have supposed them dead. Now the words [...] start up, are filled with meaning. I grow muddled, stammer [...] For the work tells of all the means a woman may employ to pleasure another, when in want of a man. (*FS*, 280)

Yet, within this realm of evidently male-orientated pornography, Maud finds herself trapped since she cannot help but relate her own feelings to and view them through these texts which are written by and intended to arouse men, not women, and which are central to her captivity in her uncle’s power. She continues,

And despite myself - and in spite of Richard’s dark, tormenting gaze - I feel the stale words rouse me. I colour, and am ashamed. I am ashamed to think that what I have supposed the secret book of my heart may be stamped, after all, with no more miserable matter than this - have its place in my uncle’s collection. (*FS*, 280)

What clearly troubles Maud is that, now, her performative act of reading is linked to and expresses her innermost passions and feelings, which become, consequently, mere reflections of men’s fantasies and are made the objects of their gaze. When Maud and Sue sleep with one another, Maud finds herself unable, at first, to break out of her performance and imitation of the scenes she knows from pornographic fiction and thus

encounters the same obstacle Dora faces in her first attempt at having sex with Din: ‘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 [...] I say my part, and she - with a little prompting - says hers. The words sink back upon their pages’ (*FS*, 282). It is only through Sue’s penetration and when Maud gives in to her own desire that she literally comes alive by finding her own sexuality rather than performing what is prescribed by her uncle’s texts and ‘*everything [...] is changed*. I think I was dead, before. Now she has touched the life of me, the quick of me’ (*FS*, 283).

It is because of these discrepancies between sex and text, between individual preference and cultural prescription, that pornography, as in *The Journal of Dora Damage*, is represented throughout *Fingersmith* not only as emotional but also as physical violence against women. Maud’s enforced training to become one of her uncle’s ‘poisons’ involves severe physical punishments, even in her early childhood, all of which are performed with tools used for or associated with the book trade. When, at her arrival at Briar, Maud refuses to wear the gloves she has been given, Lilly presents her with

one of those things that bookmen use - a line of metal beads, bound tight with silk for keeping down springing pages. He makes a loop of it, seeming to weight it; then he brings it smartly down upon my knuckles. Then, with Mrs Stiles’s assistance, he takes my other hand and does the same to that. The beads sting like a whip; but the silk keeps the flesh from breaking. (*FS*, 186-187)

Not long after this scene he threatens, ‘I shall whip your eyes until they bleed’ (*FS*, 189) and as the consequence of a further childish disobedience, threatens Maud with ‘a slim brass knife, blunt-edged, for cutting pages’ (*FS*, 194). Through Lilly, pornography becomes a medium of patriarchy which ‘is physical injury and physical humiliation and physical pain: to the women against whom it is used after it is made; to the women used to make it’.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Andrea Dworkin, ‘Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality’, *Feminism*

However, unlike in Starling's novel, it is also, in the first instance, the utilisation of these masculine tools in which we can witness the novel's attempt to overturn the violence exercised by men through pornography. While ink, throughout the novel, is associated with Mr Lilly and, hence, with patriarchal oppression, its negative connotations begin to shift when Maud describes her desire for Sue by observing, 'I am not dry, like sand. I am wet. I am running, like water, like ink' (*FS*, 282). On the night of her flight from Briar, Maud steals into her uncle's bedroom while he is sleeping to take both his razor and the key to his library with the intention to cut up his precious collection of texts. Her destruction of her uncle's personified books becomes a step towards her liberation from these texts and the oppression she associates with them, even though this destruction of something so intrinsic to her identity proves difficult at first, before resulting in relief: 'Still it is hard - terribly hard, I almost cannot do it - to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper. I am almost afraid the book will shriek [...] But it does not shriek. Rather, it *sighs*, as if in longing for its own laceration' (*FS*, 290).

When at the end of the novel and after Mr Lilly's death Sue returns to Briar and finds Maud writing her own pornographic fiction, Maud soon points out to her that the 'smears of ink on her fingers' (*FS*, 546) which symbolically scar her are not a cause for pity, but a part of her. Neither Mr Lilly's death nor Maud's destruction of his books changes the fact that she continues to exist as his product: "'Don't pity me,'" she said, "because of *him*. He's dead. But I am still what he made me. I shall always be that. Half of the books are spoiled, or sold. But I am here' (*FS*, 546). Clearly, Maud has recognised that her uncle and his pornographic texts have, however negatively, shaped her identity as a woman, an influence which is irreversible and forms a part of her. In terms of the appropriation of the tools and texts which have previously oppressed her,

Maud's liberty remains a sinister and ambiguous one despite what Waters herself calls the novel's *happy ending* (Waters 2007, my emphasis). Indeed, *Fingersmith's* open ending is inherently ambiguous. On her return to Briar, Sue finds that Maud has started to utilise the 'education' her uncle has given her and now writes and sells pornography herself, texts which, she explains to Sue, are 'filled with all the words for how I want you' (*FS*, 547). Arguably, Maud no longer occupies the passive space of the reader and copier of already written narratives but, instead, has become the active creator of her own stories by utilising her uncle's tools and expressing her homosexual desires and fantasies. Waters' novel ends with a hint that Maud teaches Sue to read and write, as Maud 'put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one' (*FS*, 548), sharing her newly gained agency with the so far illiterate Sue. Taking into account their difference in terms of social class, the working-class Sue is removed here from her previous identity as someone whom 'narratives [...], pornographic or otherwise, might be written about, but upon which she herself is supposed to never blacken her tongue'.⁸¹ Sue would, then, be initiated into an appropriated but at the same time still new tradition of pornography as a means of expressing women's sexualities.

Nevertheless, this ending, which Cora Kaplan finds 'ironic, but in no way punitive',⁸² is much less liberating if we consider the previously established links between literacy, exploitation and oppression. As already mentioned, it was Maud's ability to read and write which made her uncle take her to Briar and confine her there as his secretary and, later, she wishes she 'had scrawled and blotted the page' (*FS*, 182). When Rivers intends to fake the marks of a ruptured hymen on their wedding bed by drawing blood from Maud's arm, she threatens him with the words 'touch it and die. I

⁸¹ Mark Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould: Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre', *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.195-210 (p.202).

⁸² Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.113.

have poison in me' (*FS*, 293), showing her acceptance of her uncle's notion that he has permanently poisoned her. It is inevitable to link Maud's literacy with Lilly's exploitation and oppression and one cannot help but wonder whether Maud is poisoning rather than liberating Sue by showing the pornographic work she has produced and, through this, supposedly teaching her how to read and write. This implication brings with it the idea that Maud now occupies her uncle's space, literally - by living at Briar - as well as symbolically, especially since he explains to Maud during her early time at Briar that 'Your hand shall be my hand' (*FS*, 199). From this perspective, Maud merely occupies and imitates a masculine role, adopting rather than challenging traditional gender roles within an already established, oppressive and now exclusively female context. Equally, her own act of writing is a questionable appropriation of 'the sexual and the literary imagination'.⁸³ Maud admits her writing is only profitable when she 'write[s] swiftly' (*FS*, 547), justifying Kohlke's suspicion that her texts represent 'a lesbian profiteering from male desires by simulating fantastic sex on paper, and probably mainly heterosexual sex at that'.⁸⁴

Overall, and in contrast to Starling, Waters clearly recognises and explores the potential women's appropriation of patriarchal concepts and tools such as pornography can hold for the expression of female sexual identity, and despite Maud's destruction of some of her uncle's books, it is adaptation, not destruction, which transforms pornography into a representative space for her. As Waters recently explained in an interview, *Fingersmith* 'ultimately tries to at least gesture towards the possibility that women could write their own porn themselves',⁸⁵ a potentially positive act, as Melanie Waters argues:

By describing sexual experiences and fantasies in their own words, but in an established pornographic rhetoric, it might be argued that the authors of

⁸³ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p.113.

⁸⁴ Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation', p.8.

⁸⁵ Abigail Dennis, 'Ladies in the Peril': Sarah Waters on neo-Victorian narrative celebrations and why she stopped writing about the Victorian era', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (2008), pp.41-52 (p.43).

[pornographic] works successfully utilise the tools by which anti-pornography feminists claimed women were oppressed in order to subvert the gendered power.⁸⁶

To a certain extent Maud thus enacts such a subversion by adapting her uncle's training to express her own sexuality and sexual desires.

Fingersmith, remaining decidedly more ambiguous about women's potential complicity in their own oppression than Starling's novel, argues for the possibility of female appropriation of language as a device for the expression of women's desires, transforming, like Maud, 'the grossest rakes of fiction' into 'the secret book of my heart'. Still, the question remains how genuinely from the heart such works are, seeing as they are, after all, commercial products created for a consumer market, and regularly adapted to the small screen by male directors. In this respect, Maud's position seems to somewhat resemble Waters' own, as she, too, is a lesbian author writing lesbian sex for a readership which is certainly not exclusively homosexual. In Airling Walsh's adaptation of *Fingersmith* we certainly find a number of shots and scenes which lend an air of heterosexually oriented peepshow to Waters' narrative.⁸⁷ Maud and Sue's sexual encounter before the wedding night is, in the screen version, witnessed by Gentleman, who passes the bedroom door which has been left ajar and watches the two women with a deviant smile. As Ann Heilmann has pointed out, this sense of male voyeurism, absent from the novel in this form, is also reflected in the promotional photos for and the DVD cover of the adaptation, in which we see Sue and Maud half-dressed and turned to each other, ignorant of Gentleman standing next to them at a short distance.⁸⁸ Inevitably, this raises issues regarding the extent to which such narratives of lesbian experience can

⁸⁶ Waters, 'Sexing it Up?', p.261.

⁸⁷ In comparison to *Fingersmith* much more subtle in terms of sex, it is not surprising that *Affinity* (1999), despite having been published before *Fingersmith*, was the last of Waters' first three novels to be adapted for the BBC. Here, director Andrew Davies introduced a male fiancé who is non-existent in the book and who attempts to rape the novel's protagonist Margaret, an addition which in part feels like an attempted justification for Margaret's subsequent romantic interest in a woman, the prison inmate Selina.

⁸⁸ Ann Heilmann, 'The New Victorians: Contemporary Fiction in the Nineteenth Century', Inaugural Lecture presented at the University of Hull (7 April 2008).

actually be subversive, compromised – as they potentially are – by market demands and sales targets. The risk which arises here is that homosexuality, like the Victorian, becomes an erotic and exotic, desired other for the heterosexual reader and viewer, leaving Waters an exploiter of the market value of two women making love on page and on screen, rather than a historiographer of lesbian voices.

Kathleen A. Miller concludes her analysis of *Fingersmith* by claiming that the novel proposes a ‘tradition of female erotic literature [which] promises to include: a loving relationship between two consensual partners, as opposed to the female victimization, objectification, and exploitation encouraged by male-dominated pornography,’⁸⁹ but I would argue that, overall, the novel is much less decidedly positive in its treatment of pornography and women’s author and readership. Taking into account Waters’ own position, *Fingersmith* – although not intended to end in ambiguity – certainly reflects the contradictory status of women within the pornography trade, as Maud’s roles as victim, accomplice, consumer and producer merge, like Waters’, into one complex identity, demonstrating that ‘the process of sexualisation, including the pornographication of mainstream culture, has created new spaces for female sexual display’,⁹⁰ and that in order to understand the complexity of these new spaces and women’s position within and towards them, we may, as Clarissa Smith puts it, have to ‘be prepared to let go of some of our fondest assumptions about gender, power and pleasure’.⁹¹ That is, *Fingersmith* forces us to critically engage with female experiences and sexual expressions which cannot be so easily classified within established, neat categories and discourses of women’s sexualities, sexual

⁸⁹ Kathleen A. Miller, ‘Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*: Leaving Women’s Fingerprints on Victorian Pornography’, *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, 4:1 (Spring 2007), Accessed: 1 June 2010, <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue41/miller.htm>.

⁹⁰ Brian McNair, ‘From Porn Chic to Porn Fear: The Return of the Repressed?’, *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.55-73 (p.68).

⁹¹ Clarissa Smith, ‘Pleasing Intensities’, *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.19-34 (p.34).

empowerment and victimisation, and, unlike Starling's text, it does not discard pornography as a potential means of doing so.

Conclusion

In *The Journal of Dora Damage*, Lucinda notes, in an afterword she composed for the publication of her mother's journal, that Dora anticipated the pornographication of culture which has become such a defining aspect of today's Western world: 'My mother must have known [...] that all the abolition of Holywell-street would achieve was the migration of a handful of pornographers into other premises, and an easier thoroughfare for vehicles and pedestrians to navigate' (*DD*, 445). Dora dies when the accessibility of pornography for the working classes started to increase steadily towards the end of the nineteenth century, when it 'had become no longer the privilege of the wealthy, but available from barrows in every market' (*DD*, 445).

In their historical settings, both novels point towards the present day, in which pornography is no longer confined to a small street in London or a secluded estate in the country, but is, notoriously, only a mouse-click away. *Fingersmith* and *The Journal of Dora Damage* utilise the Victorian past in order to investigate critically our own time, when, once again, women's roles in the sexualised marketplace are changing and are yielding some unexpected results regarding women's positions within these new spaces. Starling and Waters certainly force their readers to consider the politics of our consumption of the neo-Victorian sexsation. After all, however critical our readerly gaze, we can neither claim to possess Ashbee's scientific detachment, nor can we deny our delight in consuming – like Knightley or Lilly's guests – the sexual and textual awakenings of our neo-Victorian heroines. As a genre, neo-Victorian fiction, with its ambiguous, sexsational status as a symptom of and contributor to the sexualisation of culture, offers itself as a medium for the representation of the risks and challenges these

new uncertainties pose as well as of the new potentials they may offer. If, as Attwood suggests, sexuality and sexual performance function as means of self-definition in a time in which the nature of identity is becoming ever more fluid,⁹² then neo-Victorianism's obsession with sex is, as in previous decades, not only a way of simply defining ourselves by 'sexually critiqu[ing] and/or liberat[ing] the past' but also a valid and effective avenue through which we can critically and self-consciously explore new and ever more publicised female sexual identities and their implications for women and feminist theory and practice.⁹³

⁹² Attwood, 'Introduction', p.xvii.

⁹³ Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation', p.352.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pimping the neo-Victorian prostitute: the feminist politics of sex work

The issues *Fingersmith* and *The Journal of Dora Damage* raise in relation to the textual and sexual politics and economies of pornography inevitably prompt questions regarding neo-Victorian representations of the non-fictional trading of sex in the form of prostitution. Within this thesis, sex work is the feminist concern which demonstrates the most visible (and also the most depressing) similarities between the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly if we consider the legal, moral and socio-medical discourses which have influenced feminist standpoints on prostitution from the Victorian period to recent decades. In neo-Victorian fiction, the popularity of the figure of the madwoman, discussed in Chapter Two, is perhaps rivalled only by a woman whose sexuality cannot so easily be classified, rationalised and pathologised: the prostitute. As Miriam Elizabeth Burstein observes in her blog *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic*, the prostitute has become a compulsory component of the contemporary neo-Victorian: ‘there must be at least one prostitute’, she notes, ‘who will be an alcoholic and/or have a heart of gold’.¹ This chapter first traces prostitution as a feminist issue from the mid-nineteenth through to the twenty-first centuries in order to then examine the representations of female sex workers in Linda Holeman’s *A Linnet Bird* (2004) and Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) within the contexts of both the historical settings they utilise and the contemporary feminist issues in prostitution which they evoke. Analysing in particular the sexual economies and politics these texts assign to prostitution, I argue that Holeman’s and Faber’s returns to the nineteenth century function, if to very different extents, as critiques as well as replications of Victorian and contemporary feminist discourses surrounding sex work.

¹ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, ‘The Prostitutes’ Progress’, *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic* (27 September 2005) Accessed: 1 October 2011, http://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2005/09/the_prostitutes.html

Constructing the prostitute: discourses and politics

The Contagious Diseases Acts introduced in 1865-1869 were the legal embodiment of the mid-century discourses of contagion which then surrounded and continued to define prostitution. This new legislation and the debates which brought about its repeal in 1886 functioned, in A.N. Wilson's words, 'as a powerful stimulus to the Women's Movement'.² The Acts formalised an already existing link between female sex workers, pollution and contamination since they 'defined [prostitution] as a major health hazard' and caused women in the sex trade to be seen, by many, not as endangered victims of their male clients' diseases, but instead 'as sources of contamination, passing on syphilis or gonorrhoea to unsuspecting men',³ a medical rationale which activists such as Josephine Butler famously challenged.

For the middle classes in particular this physical threat was intrinsically linked to a moral hazard: the danger that the corruption and deviance they associated with unregulated female sexuality and, thus, with prostitutes could contaminate their domestic realm through husbands' and fathers' use of what they considered to be physically and morally 'polluted' women. Hence, it was not for the suppression of prostitution or of the crime and public nuisance often associated with it that the Contagious Diseases Acts were passed, but predominantly for the protection of male clients, especially soldiers, and for the safeguarding of the middle and upper classes. Prostitution as a social and medical issue was considered to originate from the sex worker, who, as a writer in the *Lancet* put it in 1888, allegedly made it impossible for men 'to walk to and from their business without having the social evil thrust upon them night after night and year after year'.⁴ Therefore, it was prostitutes rather than their clients who were perceived as being in need of regulation and who were stigmatised and

² A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Abacus, 2002), p.310.

³ Joyce Outshoorn (ed.), 'Introduction: Prostitution, Women's Movements and Democratic Politics', *The Politics of Prostitution: Women's Movements, Democratic States and the Globalisation of Sex Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.1-20 (p.6 and p.7).

⁴ 'The "Social Evil" in London', *Lancet*, 8 December 1888, p.1146.

criminalised.

Similarly, the Contagious Diseases Acts had consequences only for sex workers. Male sexuality and men's use of prostitutes remained largely unchallenged and were perceived to have entirely natural and unavoidable causes, while women were subject to both physical and geographical regulation, the latter usually taking the shape of attempts to limit prostitutes and brothels to certain districts within a city.⁵ The Acts meant physical control over a wide range of women because not only prostitutes but 'any woman found in the street could be picked up by the police and forced to submit herself to intrusive medical inspection and subsequent detainment in a locked hospital',⁶ allowing 'male clients, doctors, magistrates, and police access to and control of the female body'.⁷

The works of mid-century novelists and social commentators illustrate many of the legal, moral and medical concerns which motivated the passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The threat of the spiritual and moral contamination of the middle classes came to be embodied in literature by the prostitute's close relative, the fallen woman. This sexually deviant female, who had often given in to seduction and hence abandoned her task of upholding the principles of her class (and by extension the health of the nation), was considered as being on the downward path toward the sex trade and, like the figure of the prostitute, an 'agent of connection and of disease both physical and social'.⁸ Mid-Victorian fiction and journalism in particular expressed the sense of danger created by the possibility that such moral and bodily dangers could potentially be concealed behind a respectable facade and infiltrate and contaminate the well-guarded purity of the domestic sphere in the guise of seemingly reputable but in truth

⁵ Outshoorn, 'Introduction', p.7.

⁶ Wilson, *The Victorians*, p.474.

⁷ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.128.

⁸ Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.8.

fallen women.⁹

In 1861, Henry Mayhew expressed a related concern which was to become central to feminist fiction and thought in the later decades of the century. Mayhew could not refrain from acknowledging the similarities between prostitution and marriage when he wrote of the relationship between ‘a kept mistress’ and a man as ‘the nearest approximation [within prostitution] to the holy state of marriage’.¹⁰ This comparison, for Mayhew, functioned as a reinforcement of the idea that prostitution poses a threat of contamination to the middle and upper classes. William Acton, four years earlier, had stated that it was ‘in the interest of the commonwealth’ to prevent women from ‘falling’ because ‘never one of them but may herself, when the shadow is past, become the wife of an Englishman and the mother of his offspring’,¹¹ thus making explicit the threat the kept mistress’ class mobility posed to the nation.

From the 1860s onwards, however, the Contagious Diseases Acts and the ‘whore stigma’ they attached to any woman who dared to walk the streets without a male guardian fuelled feminist writers’ and activists’ critiques of ‘the prevailing social view of women as “relative creatures” [...] defined by their familial relationships with men’.¹² Although women repealers were by no means unanimous in their views, many emphasised that the economic concepts underlying prostitution very much mirrored those of marriage. *Fin-de-siècle* women writers such as Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand and George Egerton, unlike Dickens, Mayhew or Acton, saw marriage not as similar to but as ‘a type of prostitution’ and drew attention to the fact that a woman

⁹ See: Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853), William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), to name but a few. See also the newspaper coverage of the Constance Kent murder trial between 1860 and 1865 in: Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher, or, the Murder at Road Hill House* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

¹⁰ Henry Mayhew, [1861] *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of those that Will Work, those that Cannot Work, and those that Will Not Work*, Vol. IV (New York: Cosimo, 2009), p.213.

¹¹ William Acton, *Prostitution: Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities* (London: John Churchill, 1857), Accessed: 4 August 2009, <http://books.google.com/books?id=XJsrHfQqL5sC&pg=PR3#v=onepage&q&f=false>, p.73.

¹² Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.125.

selling herself to a man in marriage in return for her upkeep and an elevation in social status was accepted as the norm, while outside of wedlock the exchange of sex for money was considered corrupt and a sin.¹³

Many feminist fictions in the later decades of the century hence associated the prostitute with varying degrees of economic and moral agency and constructed her either as a degraded woman deserving of pity, or as a worker attempting to survive in a society in which women's opportunities for paid work were limited.¹⁴ Although by 'contributing to new images of female sexual identity through representations of the prostitute' some novelists of the 1880s and 1890s in particular managed to challenge the restrictive categories which medicine, the law and middle-class morals had created for sex workers, they often fell back on exactly these categories.¹⁵

Equally, the majority of women's groups, early feminists and activists who sought the repeal of the CD Acts actively relied on traditional assumptions regarding female sexuality and normative femininity as the very foundations of their work, reinforcing the roles of 'good' and 'bad' women:

because they found it politically expedient to depict 'fallen women' as passive victims of evil machinations, repealers were understandably not moved to scrutinize the actual motives, social origins, and current life-styles of registered prostitutes. Instead, they relied on Acton's study, or fell back on the already familiar stereotypes.¹⁶

The image of the suffering and mistreated woman served the repeal cause: women who were willing to repent and who admitted to the evil of their ways were worthy of help since they 'were felt to be "appropriate objects of solicitude"', but those who saw no wrong in their profession and rejected religious and middle-class values remained demonised as 'shameless, degraded and evil, not deserving of a feminist's sympathy

¹³ Stephanie Forward, 'Attitudes to Marriage and Prostitution in the Writings of Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, Sarah Grand and George Egerton', *Women's History Review*, 8:1 (1999), pp.53-80 (p.73).

¹⁴ Forward, 'Attitudes to Marriage and Prostitution', p.54.

¹⁵ Emma Liggins, 'Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s', *Critical Survey*, 15 (2003), pp.39-55 (p.53).

¹⁶ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.111.

and care'.¹⁷

Similarly, there was no framework addressing the double standard which feminists themselves upheld through their unquestioning acceptance of a class system in which they were superior to working-class women and without which they would have been unable to pursue their activism: 'Feminist repealers,' Walkowitz explains, 'rarely had personal qualms over the fact that they owed their leisure and domestic freedom to the drudgery of workingwomen. They basically accepted this relationship as a natural feature of existing class relations'.¹⁸ At the same time, feminist discourses surrounding women from the British colonies reinforced rather than challenged existing imperial power structures and the image of the third-world woman as inferior to her British sisters. Antoinette Burton illustrates that feminist and abolitionist illustrations of Indian women often served as a means of justifying British women's intervention and, consequently, their role in the empire:

Discussions of Indian women in feminist papers rarely occurred without reference either to the superior condition of British women *or* to the responsibility of British women for saving their Indian sisters. What feminist writers told their audiences through their representations of Indian women was that colonial womanhood existed in an enslaved state for the purposes of British feminist imperial reform activity.¹⁹

Nineteenth-century feminist criticism of third-world prostitution therefore frequently exemplifies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous assessment that 'the subaltern cannot speak' within critical discourses which are 'the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject'.²⁰ Overall, many activists, commentators and novelists throughout the nineteenth century attempted to draw attention to the conditions of prostitutes in Britain as well as to the consequences they

¹⁷ Liggins, 'Prostitution and Social Purity', p.41.

¹⁸ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.119.

¹⁹ Antoinette M. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p.101.

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp.271-313 (p.308 and p.271).

thought these conditions had for British society and Britain as a nation. In doing so, social purists, abolitionists and feminists alike employed discourses which intentionally or unintentionally re-established rather than undermined the issues and structures at the heart of the politics and circumstances they were determined to challenge.

Since the nineteenth century the legal contexts in which prostitution is considered by national and international law have shifted to a certain degree, but the discourses – feminist and other – which currently surround sex work have undergone very little change since the final decades of the Victorian period. It was in the 1880s that prostitution came to be described as ‘white slavery’ and was put, for the first time, in the context of human trafficking,²¹ a concept which came to define the legislation of prostitution throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day. After the inception of the British and Continental Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Vice in 1875 and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886, abolitionism dominated the international legal developments concerning the sex trade until the middle of the twentieth century,²² a period which also marked the criminalisation of prostitution and its procurement ‘regardless of the consent of the women involved’.²³

Joyce Outshoorn observes that ‘prostitution and the trafficking in women returned to the political agenda of most post-industrial democracies by the end of the 1970s’.²⁴ Little less than a century after the Victorians, this development was once again intricately linked to fears and discourses of contamination and disease. The renewed interest, Outshoorn observes, ‘was accelerated by the emergence of AIDS in the mid-

²¹ Outshoorn, ‘Introduction’, p.9.

²² Ibid., pp.7-8. The term abolitionism, for the purposes of this chapter, describes ‘the position that prostitution should be banned and third parties criminalised, with the prostitute herself not liable to state penalties’ (Outshoorn, ‘Introduction’, p.8). Outshoorn illustrates that abolitionist intent is evident in the International Convention for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic (1910), the International Convention to Combat the Traffic in Women and Children (1921), the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women of Full Age (1933), and the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women (1949).

²³ Ibid., p.9.

²⁴ Ibid., p.8.

1980s, which gave rise to renewed worry about the health hazards of sex',²⁵ linking prostitutes with the threat of contagion by using them as the '[scapegoat] for transmission of AIDS to the general population through unprotected contact with clients'.²⁶ The Victorian link between physical and moral contagion, too, resurfaced when, in the mid-1980s and 1990s, the debates over kerb crawling as an (arrestable) offence 'came on to the public agenda primarily via local constituency concerns about the moral and environmental "pollution" caused'.²⁷

Similarities and continuities between Victorian and modern discourses and practices surrounding prostitution can also be found outside the realm of the political, moral, legal and statistical. In his discussion of nineteenth-century gentlemen's guidebooks to the London sex trade, Ronald Pearsall comments that 'the Victorian "swell" looked for qualities in their prostitutes that would be inconceivable nowadays'.²⁸ These apparently no longer sought after characteristics include, he continues, 'genteel behaviour, [...] lustiness and energy', as well as 'a ready wit'.²⁹ Yet the description of Jane Fowler in the Victorian sex trade directory *Hints to Men About Town* (1840) is not so very different from that of Demi on the much debated website *PunterNet*, a highly controversial, California-run database which holds clients' detailed reviews of prostitutes and establishments: Jane Fowler 'is tall, slender, of graceful form and carriage [...]. Jane [...] possesses excellent tact in managing a charming repulse to the eager advance of a vigorous gallant for the purpose of enhancing the enjoyment, which she well understands how to take share of'.³⁰ Demi's reviewer, in comparison,

²⁵ Outshort, 'Introduction', p.8.

²⁶ Maggie O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001), p.32.

²⁷ Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires, 'Prostitution Policies in Britain, 1982-2000', *The Politics of Prostitution: Women's Movements, Democratic States and the Globalisation of Sex Commerce*, ed. by Joyce Outshoorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.62-82 (p.68).

²⁸ Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2003), p.258.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The Old Medical Student, *Hints to Men About Town* (Liverpool: George Davis and Co., 1840), cited in Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud*, pp.257-258.

notes:

one of the nicest and cleanest places you will ever find. Operates a generous loyalty plan in addition to 45 min appts for the price of a 30 min appt if you arrive before 1pm. [...] Young (18) and well spoken/educated. [...] A very affectionate and passionate young lady who enjoys her job and enjoys pleasing as well as receiving pleasure. She [...] gives a true GFE [girlfriend experience] in all respects.³¹

As many other descriptions from both sources show, cleanliness and an ability to have basic, comfortable conversation are also desirable, and the impression that the prostitute enjoys her job is what constitutes the ‘girlfriend experience’ so frequently praised on *PunterNet*, while a lack of enthusiasm, flawed looks and neglected hygiene are commonly the reasons for negative reviews, relating back, once again, to fears of contagion and pollution.

As has perhaps been illustrated best by Harriet Harman’s 2009 request that Arnold Schwarzenegger, as governor of California, close down *PunterNet*,³² the website illustrates several contemporary feminist concerns surrounding the sex trade. Its database of ‘field reports’ which review the looks, sexual services and prices of female sex workers and which indicate to other punters whether or not the reviewer would return and recommend the woman in question provide a case for both those feminists who consider prostitution as the epitome of women’s oppression and exploitation by men and those who view sex work as a valid form of labour. Especially if one considers the search function which allows visitors to browse the database of reviews by parameters such as name, keyword(s) and location, *PunterNet* can be viewed from either of these positions: the pseudo-scientifically named ‘field reports’ represent, one may argue, a clear form of men’s objectification and degradation of women and their bodies, rendering the term ‘product reviews’ perhaps more appropriate for these

³¹ ‘Field Report No. 70709: “Demi” of Milton Keynes’, *PunterNet*, Accessed: 19 January 2010, <http://www.punternet.com>.

³² See: Deborah Summers, ‘Harman urges Schwarzenegger to “terminate” prostitute website’, *Guardian* (30 September 2009), Accessed: 19 January 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/sep/30/harriet-harman-arnold-schwarzenegger-prostitution>.

evaluations since the system explicitly makes women products to be purchased, rated and (not) recommended to other men; at the same time, however, one may consider *PunterNet* as a business register valuable to both punters and sex workers, since it provides valuable advertisement for prostitutes (whose client numbers will increase with more positive reviews and more online exposure).³³

While Outshoorn acknowledges that up to four feminist stances on prostitution can be identified today,³⁴ she and the majority of commentators agree that these two perspectives outlined above form the general divide in the twenty-first century.³⁵ Such positions are, of course, not mutually exclusive; feminists who regard prostitution as an exploitative ‘patriarchal institution that affects all women and gendered relations’ may disagree, or at the very least consider problematic, the idea of sexual/erotic labour as a ‘freely chosen [...] form of work’, but they may at the same time still agree that prostitutes ‘deserve the same rights and liberties as other workers, including freedom from fear, exploitation and violence’.³⁶ The truly divisive issues, then, is the concept of choice, its limitations, and its potentials. Scholars such as Wendy Chapkis have considered erotic labour as potentially ‘liberatory terrain for women’,³⁷ but others, such as Natasha Walter and Ariel Levy, consider this so-called liberation as an illusion which causes women to reinforce their own objectification and exploitation in a capitalist sexualised marketplace.³⁸ Internationally, the divide has resulted in two major alliances

³³ An *Independent* report stated that prostitutes who use *PunterNet* were, ironically, grateful to Harman for the publicity with which her campaign against the site provided them. See: Jerome Tayler, ‘*PunterNet* prostitutes thank Harriet Harman for publicity boost’, *The Independent* (2 October 2009), Accessed: 20 May 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/punter-net-prostitutes-thank-harriet-harman-for-publicity-boost-1796759.html>

³⁴ Outshoorn, ‘Introduction’, p.9.

³⁵ See, for example: O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.17; and Jo Doezema, ‘Ouch!: Western Feminists’ “Wounded Attachment” to the “Third World Prostitute”’, *Feminist Review*, 67 (Spring 2001), pp.16-38 (p.17).

³⁶ O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.17.

³⁷ Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labour* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.1.

³⁸ Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010), pp.39-62; Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2005), pp.179-182.

against trafficking, namely the Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and the Global Alliance against Traffic in Women (Global Alliance). The former, run from the US, demands the abolition of prostitution, while the Thailand-based latter ‘holds on to the distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution’ and ‘calls for the decriminalisation of prostitution and the combat of trafficking and forced prostitution’.³⁹

One significant difference between Victorian and more recent discussions of prostitution is the organisation and presence of sex workers in dedicated collectives and activist groups. Such organisations demand that ‘prostitution [...] be identified as work, within the context of national and international labour law. They argue that women should have the same rights and liberties as other workers’.⁴⁰ Sex workers’ organisations also draw attention to the fact that ‘[m]any “whores” who are also feminists or feminist-informed’ do not have the opportunities ‘to engage in debate about male oppression and the problems related to supporting patriarchy’.⁴¹ This claim is part of a much wider issue regarding the silencing of sex workers’ voices, be it in feminist activism and scholarship, or in policy making processes. Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires observe, for example, that even if groups such as the ECP (English Collective for Prostitutes) have representation in front of parliamentary groups, evidence from parties such as the police, local authorities, health professionals and residents’ groups are generally given more attention and are addressed to a greater extent in the eventual recommendations.⁴²

This silence is also evident in feminist scholarship and activism on either side of the ‘choice’ divide. In her participatory action research with sex workers, Maggie O’Neill has found that many prostitutes are as suspicious of researchers as they are of male clients and/or pimps. Despite good intentions, feminist researchers often fail to

³⁹ Outshoorn, ‘Introduction’, p.10.

⁴⁰ O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.30.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Kantola and Squires, ‘Prostitution Policies in Britain’, p.72.

engage with the women they encounter, and conduct their work in a manner which can be as objectifying as the act of prostitution itself. O'Neill illustrates how '[r]esearchers are sometimes seen as little more than pimps: coming into the field to take, they then go back to their campus, institution, or suburb where they write up the data, publish and build careers – on the backs of “others”, of those they took data from'; hence, she continues, these research practices 'may be perceived by the women as another form of pimping'.⁴³

Similarly, Jo Doezema draws attention to the discourses employed by CATW, more specifically its leader Kathleen Barry, regarding sex workers in the third world. Comparing Barry's language to that of the nineteenth-century feminist movements investigated by Burton, Doezema demonstrates that, similar to the practices of Victorian feminists, 'CATW's construction of “third world prostitutes” is part of a wider western feminist impulse to construct a damaged “other” as justification for its own interventionist impulses'.⁴⁴ Here, 'the “injured body” of the “third world trafficking victim” [... still] serves as a powerful metaphor for advancing certain feminist interests, which cannot be assumed to be those of third world sex workers themselves'.⁴⁵ While CATW hears and utilises testimonies of women involved in prostitution, they assign to specific testimonies 'the status of absolute truth', meaning that 'only certain versions of prostitutes' experience are considered “true”'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, organisations which support the legalisation of prostitution can equally 'slip into orientalist representations of third world sex workers [... through a] dichotomy between “voluntary” western sex workers and “victimized” third world sex workers'.⁴⁷

Although based on a consciousness of difference and of power discrepancies among women, third-wave feminism has been subject to similar criticisms. Among the

⁴³ O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.50.

⁴⁴ Doezema, 'Ouch!', p.16.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.27.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.18.

major current positions on sex work, it is generally aligned (and aligns itself) with the demand for the legalisation of prostitution. As Bridget Crawford puts it in her assessment of a potential third-wave feminist legal theory surrounding sex and sexual services, it is because of their acceptance of pluralism as given that ‘third-wave writers seem reluctant to label any form of sex-work – whether pornography, prostitution or stripping – as entirely “bad” for women’.⁴⁸ On a theoretical basis, the third wave fits well with O’Neill’s vision of ‘[feminist thought which acknowledges] that for some women prostitution gives a good enough standard of income, relative autonomy and can be fitted in around child care’.⁴⁹ Like Wendy Chapkis, for example, third-wave theory addresses the liberatory and subversive potential of prostitution for women. Sex work, or erotic labour, is considered as a way of performing sexuality, of capitalising on one’s body and, ultimately, of profiting from women’s exploitation by men by using it as a means of ‘taking advantage of men’s apparent need to sexualize and degrade women’.⁵⁰ From this point of view, then, the prostitute, rather than the male punter, ‘has the morally (and perhaps economically) superior position in the relationship’.⁵¹ Within this context, the third wave ‘acknowledge[s] how female submission has been fetishized as what is sexy’, but yet emphasises the ‘potentially subversive role of the so-called dominated female’.⁵²

Third-wave feminism’s acceptance of the postmodern notion of multiple narratives and truths for women’s lives and experiences is central to its treatment of prostitution as a feminist issue. Crawford explains how ‘third-wave feminists do not dismiss categorically sex-work, but they recognize it as multi-faceted – problematic yet

⁴⁸ Bridget Crawford, ‘Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory: Young Women, Pornography and the Praxis of Pleasure’, *Pace Law Faculty Publications* (Pace University Law Faculty, 2007), Accessed: 17 July 2009, <http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/243>, p.49.

⁴⁹ O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.31.

⁵⁰ Crawford, ‘Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory’, p.57.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.50.

profitable to some women',⁵³ yet, this is also where she locates, to a large extent, one of the third wave's major problems. Drawing on Jodie Freeman's analysis of the political theories underlying the positions of prostitutes' rights groups,⁵⁴ Crawford asserts that third-wave feminists' focus on individualism, autonomy and personal choice is a 'theoretical weakness' which leads to an insufficient consideration of the 'relations between men and women', meaning that 'gender subordination and social structures, like prostitution, which reinforce that subordination, remain outside the third-wave analysis.'⁵⁵ While critiques such as Crawford's are common and third-wave feminism's emphasis on the individual is often categorically dismissed as an ineffective and self-defeating practice, its strengths and potentials remain largely unacknowledged.

Individual narratives, self-centred or not, are always defined by the social constructs which impact on and create them and, thus, 'gender subordination and social structures' are concepts which can be analysed and deconstructed on individual as well as broader, more collective terms. Individual narrative and the analysis of societal systems are not, as Crawford perceives, mutually exclusive; rather, the acknowledgement and understanding of sex workers' different and often contradictory realities should result in the formation of theories and practices which address and cater for prostitutes' (shared) needs, instead of putting in place structures and facilities which serve a feminist agenda which relies on an artificially conceived sense of union among sex workers, between sex workers and feminist scholars/activists, and between feminist scholars/activists themselves. To ignore individual narratives as a fundamental basis of feminist theory and practice is to ignore the different conditions of sex workers and the differences in power among women more generally:

⁵³ Crawford, 'Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory', p.50.

⁵⁴ Jodie Freeman, 'The Feminist Debate over Prostitution Reform: Prostitutes' Rights Groups, Radical Feminists and the (Im)Possibilities of Consent', *Pornography, Sex Work and Hate Speech*, ed. by Karen J. Maschke (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), pp.209-244 (p.220).

⁵⁵ Crawford, 'Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory', p.57.

the importance of listening to life-stories is that not only do they give us better access into the complexity of lived relations, the interrelationship between the micrology of our lives and broader socio-political structures of power and signification, but we can more easily engage with the complexities of subjectivities, difference and identities.⁵⁶

Accordingly, O'Neill proposes that individual experience and the 'multiple standpoints of women working in prostitution' must function as the very basis of the 'reflexive interrelationship between feminist thought/research, women's lived relations and policy-oriented practice'.⁵⁷

While the third wave's employment of individual narratives hence certainly does not function as the analytical dead end as which Crawford perceives it, another aspect of her critique remains to be addressed by third wavers and, here, the reliance on the existence of diverse realities and voices could once again be the key. Crawford legitimately points out that third-wave theory's view of sex work as an employment option which women can chose freely poses crucial questions about economic, class and power privileges:

Third-wave feminists for the most part ignore or gloss over the social and economic conditions that lead to prostitution. They view a woman's decision to engage in prostitution as an economically-savvy way of maximizing her own assets [...]. Yet the voices of the third wave are the voices of privileged women who have the time, education and economic ability to write for publication.⁵⁸

Crucially, women's entry into prostitution remains predicated upon their social and economic backgrounds, as does the notion of choice.

However, while this idea does require more complex and less distanced assessment from third-wave theorists, they are by no means as blind to the issue as Crawford claims. They advocate that '[f]eminism and sex work aren't [...] mutually exclusive [and that ...] women need to have the right and freedom to choose how to live

⁵⁶ O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁵⁸ Crawford, 'Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory', p.57.

their lives as sexual beings. This includes prostitution⁵⁹; yet, at the same time, third-wave feminists acknowledge that practices in the sex market ‘aren’t [...] black and white issues’ but are, as Crawford herself puts it, multi-faceted and problematic, to say the least. Although O’Neill does not label herself as a third-wave feminist, the practices she suggests for feminist research and intervention surrounding sex work are motivated by principles central to third-wave theory and could thus make for a fruitful way of translating third-wave theory into (academic) practice. Referring again to the importance of individual narratives, O’Neill suggests that feminists must create knowledge ‘for’ and research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ the sex industry and those participating in it,⁶⁰ that is, they must enable the creation of ‘a space for women involved in prostitution to be heard, and, in turn, for feminist research to inform theory and practice around women’s involvement in the sex industry’, an aim which ‘can serve to resist, challenge and change sexual and social inequalities via feminist praxis on an individual and a collective level’.⁶¹

Holeman’s *The Linnet Bird* and Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*, to different extents, illustrate and explore the correlation between Victorian and twenty-first century feminist discourses on women’s sex work through their engagements with questions surrounding routes into and out of prostitution, sex workers’ choice, and their (economic) agency. However, in doing so, Holeman and Faber replicate Victorian discourses and representations of prostitution. Their novels therefore exemplify the issues which defined the relationships between feminist theory, feminist practice and women’s experiences of prostitution in the Victorian period, and which continue to problematize these same relationships today.

⁵⁹ Kimberley Klinger, ‘Prostitution, Humanism and a Woman’s Choice: Perspectives on Prostitution’, *The Humanist: A Magazine of Critical Enquiry and Social Concern*, 63:1 (Jan/Feb 2003), pp.16-19 (p.16).

⁶⁰ O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.49. O’Neill also emphasises that such work must include the role of men, particularly those who are involved in the industry as pimps and punters, identities which have to date remained largely unexplored. See: O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.154.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.32.

Re-colonising feminism: prostitution and Western superiority in *The Linnet Bird*

Holeman's *The Linnet Bird* is the narrative of Linny Gow, who in 1839 decides to record the events of her so far short but – even by the standards of neo-Victorian fiction – excessively sensational and dramatic life, starting with her recollections of her work in 1820s Liverpool as an exploited and abused child prostitute and later as a streetwalker in a community of female sex workers. Linny is rescued by Geoffrey Smallpiece, also known as Shaker, and, living with her middle-class rescuer and his devout mother, she unwillingly finds herself being educated by Mrs Smallpiece in matters of etiquette as well as in female accomplishments and is soon introduced into the family's social circles as Shaker's orphaned cousin from Morecambe. Linny befriends the seemingly modern-minded Faith and, in 1830, both girls leave England for India; Faith in the hope of finding a husband, Linny to fulfil her desire for travel and adventure. Similar to Holman's later neo-Victorian novels *The Moonlit Cage* (2005) and *In a Far Country* (2008), the second part of Linny's narrative presents us with an exoticised yet also idealised account of the Indian subcontinent and its inhabitants, replicating, through Linny's voice, both nineteenth-century Orientalism and Western feminists' assumed moral superiority.

However, as she discovers the intricacies of British life in India, Somers Ingram, a much sought after but homosexual bachelor, reveals himself to be a figure from her hidden past and the novel's Heathcliff figure who is both violent toward yet attractive to the heroine. Afraid Linny might expose his sexual preferences and jeopardise his professional and social standing, Somers blackmails her into marrying him so he can maintain a masquerade of respectability while pursuing his carnal desires. Linny submits to matrimony with the emotionally and physically violent villain who, on one occasion, rapes her in a fit of combined anger and arousal. Shortly after, in yet another overly dramatic and fanciful plot development, Linny is abducted by Daoud, a Pathan

with whom she then has a short but intense love affair and to whose child she later gives birth, pretending the boy is her husband's. Eventually, Somers dies of malaria, or so it seems, leaving Linny to return to England together with her son, who embodies her love for and memories of Daoud.

Throughout the first part of Holeman's novel, prostitution is a symptom of male violence, consumption and power, and associated with dysfunctional family relations. After her mother's death, Linny is forced into prostitution by her unemployed step-father Ram Munt at the age of ten. Ram attempts to vindicate his actions with his dire financial situation and points out that it is, in fact, a common enough duty for a daughter to sell her body in aid of her relatives, as '[m]any a lass helps out her family when they've fallen on hard times'⁶² (*LB*, 7). Linny's narrative, however, makes it explicit that economic necessity is not the primary reason Ram exploits her body; rather, he seeks to satisfy his own greed and compensate for his incapability to maintain employment: 'I had been put to work for men by Da in the winter of my eleventh year,' Linny writes, because '[h]e was dissatisfied by the small wage I earned at the bookbindery, and had recently been laid off his job at the rope-maker's for turning up top one too many times and spoiling the hemp in spinning' (*LB*, 5). At the same time, Ram passes on the abuse he was subjected to as a young sailor when he reminds his step-daughter: 'Weren't I buggered meself, over and over on the ships, when I were not much older than you? And it did me no harm, did it?' (*LB*, 7). Exercising this sinister power over Linny becomes an act of revenge which is not only materially but also sexually rewarding for Ram. Looking to her step-father for help while her first customer brutally forces her into submission, Linny not only perceives her home as a place of death but also witnesses her guardian masturbating as he watches her being abused:

⁶² Linda Holeman, *The Linnet Bird* (London: Headline, 2004), p.7. Hereafter this text is referred to as *LB* after quotations in the text.

[A] knock across my jaw that sent me flying. [...] My shift was pushed up round my waist, and Mr. Jacobs's body was heavy on mine. [...] Sweat gleamed on his upper lip, even though the fire was out and the room cold as a tomb. But almost worse than the pain and horror of what was happening to me at the mercy of Mr. Jacobs was that Da – when I turned my head to look for him, hoping he might be moved to come to my rescue – watched from his stool, his face fixed in an expression I'd never seen before, one hand busy under the table. (*LB*, 9)

Linny becomes a source of pleasure for some regular, less violent customers, and in retrospect claims that 'in spite of an unnerving evening here and there, the majority of the men were simple and unimaginative, wanting the most basic release from what they saw as their tortured state' (*LB*, 33). Nevertheless, her narrative makes clear that prostitution is a physically and mentally harming practice, caused by men's supposedly 'tortured state' and the assumption that it is their right to purchase and violate women for the purpose of 'basic relief' from that state. That Linny's case is intended as a representation of women's condition in patriarchal society becomes clear if we consider the heroine's mother. Not a prostitute but a fallen woman, Linny's mother was first left by a man when she carried his child and then, homeless, met Ram, her last hope for a life off the street. Linny's fate, it seems, is a hereditary one, as Ram breaks her mother's spirit in a similar way in which he breaks his step-daughter's will when Linny attempts to resist her first punter:

With a bully's thrust of his chest he'd tell us [Linny and her mother] about how he'd discovered her, drenched to the skin and wandering in the rain without a penny to her name. [...] 'I was never one to turn away a maid in distress [...] Took her in and gave her a meal and a fire to warm herself. She might have been proud at one point, aye, but it didn't take long to persuade her that my roof and my bed were a damn sight better than what waited for her out in the streets. [...] In due time I even let her use my name, so she didn't have to carry the shame of a bastard child'. (*LB*, 11-12)

The psychological effects of her sexual exploitation cause Linny to develop conscious and unconscious mental coping strategies, ways of 'making out',⁶³ as Maggie O'Neill calls it. Some women, O'Neill notes, 'manage to make out by separating their body from their soul', but some also experience a 'coldness' in feeling in their 'relationships

⁶³ O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.85.

and interrelationships' as a result of prostitution and such coping strategies.⁶⁴ Linny escapes into a separation of body and mind during her first sexual experience with a punter when her physical pain becomes overpowering: 'My body burned raw at its centre, yet my mind tripped and ran, stumbling away [...] And then I heard my mother's voice, faint but clear. She recited the second stanza of "The Green Linnet", a poem that had been her favourite, and from where she had drawn my name' (*LB*, 9). After the traumatic encounter, Linny resolves to become emotionally 'cold' and states, 'I swore that I would never again cry over what a man might do to me for I knew it would do no good. No good at all' (*LB*, 9). Yet, she fantasises about inflicting violence on her step-father and her clients in revenge for the pain they have forced her to endure; she imagines 'ways to kill Ram Munt. They were varied and usually torturous, and invariably involved my bone-handled knife. I also planned the ways I could kill each of the men my father brought me to' (*LB*, 32).

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, social and geographical segregation was and still remains an issue for female sex workers and is inextricably connected with notions of moral and physical contagion which must be contained. Once Linny is brought to punters on a daily basis after her work at the bookbindery, she becomes excluded from the working-class community in which she has grown up:

There was no time for friendship now. [...] Minnie and Jane accepted my story that I had to feed my step-father, or face the back of his hand, and they still smiled at me often, but I felt the loss of their companionship keenly. I missed the visits to the neighbours too. Some evenings, when the weather was mild, Mother and I had stood out in the court with other women and girls who lived in Back Phoebe Anne Street. [...] Now I'd pass those women with my head down, following Ram, sure they knew what I was off to do. I often heard whispers and mutterings, and knew I was now a regular source of gossip, but no one ever stepped forward to speak to me or ask how I was. They knew their place, these women. (*LB*, 26-27)

Once she has left Ram to work as a full-time streetwalker, she becomes subject to the city's informal spatial segregation and solicits her business on Paradise Street, where,

⁶⁴ O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, p.85.

despite and because of her segregation from working-class communities, she finds the companionship of other prostitutes, all of whom work for the same female pimp, Blue. Unlike Ram, Blue is not abusive and receives a portion (rather than all) of her girls' wages. Linny is 'thankful for her protection' (*LB*, 74) and, despite having to share a room and bed with her fellow workers, often thinks fondly of the sisterhood she experienced during the time she worked for Blue. Having secured, with Shaker's help, a position at the library of a gentleman's club, Linny feels a 'troubling awareness of loss' and admits that she 'no longer shared the easy laughter and camaraderie of the girls in Paradise Street', is 'less spontaneous, more tightly reined in' (*LB*, 155); later, in polite society in India she admits

[t]here were a few times [...] when my thoughts strayed to a crowded, noisy chop house where I had eaten many a greasy pie with the other girls from Paradise Street. There, the stories had flowed easily, the laughter was genuine, the camaraderie honest. I knew I had experienced a freedom there that no one in these rooms had known. (*LB*, 226)

Holeman suggests that prostitution in Victorian England was 'a trade largely organized by women rather than men' and that it could offer a certain form of financial freedom to women,⁶⁵ but the dichotomy she creates is a far too simplistic one by both Victorian and modern standards, as it implies that prostitution is a safe haven of sisterhood when run by women alone, but a violent hell when organised by men. Consequently, when Linny has the chance to become a high-class prostitute for a male pimp, she refuses his offer because his conditions, despite promising a more luxurious lifestyle, are reminiscent of the circumstance under which she was exploited by Ram:

'You'll have your own room and clothing – good clothing [...] You won't need money for anything. All your meals will be brought to you. You won't be going out except for the entertaining I plan.' [...] There was something about him that made me think of Ram and his control over me. What was I doing? I would lose the freedom I now knew. I imagined myself a prisoner in a locked room, the door opening only to allow in a man, then locked again. And if the man proved foul in his requests, or even caused me pain, there would be nobody to protect me, and no means of escape. (*LB*, 84)

⁶⁵ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.25.

One may argue that Linny's positive experience of Paradise Street is due to her choice to become a streetwalker there after having nearly died at the hand of a vengeful syphilitic punter. But choice, in Linny's case, is a very limited concept. When Shaker's mother suggests that her son's new lodger is immoral and proud of her trade, Linny argues that prostitution is economically the most attractive and most promising out of a very small number of options:

If I were still working at the bookbinder's, I would now be earning enough to rent the corner of a room in a lodging-house. I would pay half of my wage to the crimp who cheated everyone under her roof, and live on the same ration of bacon, chalky bread and weak tea. Perhaps one day I would marry, and move to another corner of another room. [...] So I chose the only way I hoped might get me away from that future. (*LB*, 124)

Equally, sex workers' agency and potential for self-empowerment are questionable at best. When working for Ram as a young teenager, the only means of power Linny possesses is to steal from her customers. 'Stealing from the men who took from me,' she explains, 'made me feel powerful in an adult way: I was not only deceiving the customers, but also Ram Munt. The objects themselves were of no importance to me: this new power was the treasure' (*LB* 34). Thievery, as previously discussed in Chapter One in relation to Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*, becomes a way for women to undermine, to whatever small extent, an exploitative patriarchal economy, and hence a way to feel empowered within the confines of that system.

Linny's eventual marriage to Somers Ingram in India and the narrative focus on the British marriage market abroad inevitably draw a comparison between matrimony and prostitution and between the economic and empowering potentials they each may or may not offer. Linny agrees to marry Somers despite her option of returning to England and to a safe life with Shaker. She believes that staying in India with the man who blackmails her into marriage, and whom she perceives with combined 'attraction and repulsion' as 'intriguing, but discomfiting' (*LB*, 237), will help her realise her true potential and the 'true life' (*LB*, 188) outside of prostitution to which she feels

biologically destined: 'I knew it was my blood that made me different [from the other prostitutes on Paradise Street]. And there was something else. I knew I wouldn't be staying in this life: there was [...] something bigger for me' (*LB*, 70). Thus implicitly rendering her fellow sex workers unworthy of 'something bigger', Linny soon realises that life as a 'respectable' woman is not so very different from life as a streetwalker, for illness and physical deterioration ensue from both her initial profession and her marital union with Somers. After having been rescued from the streets by Shaker at the age of seventeen, Linny considers her reflection with shock: 'I didn't know the hollow-eyed woman in the mirror. She bore a resemblance to the ruin I had called Mother. Where was Linny, little Linny Gow, the child with the clear eyes and hair like the ripest of summer's pears?' (*LB*, 127). Later, after the birth of her son David, Linny fears that her son's illegitimacy may be exposed, an anxiety which – together with her husband's violence – leads her into opium addiction and, consequently, mental and physical deterioration. However, the traditional association of the prostitute with moral and physical disease is destabilised. Linny's last customer in her time with Ram Munt is a man who, in the last stages of syphilis, attempts to revenge himself by killing prostitutes and collecting their hair. The association between contagion and prostitution is established, but disease and danger are firmly associated with the sociopathic punter rather than the sex worker (*LB*, 52).

Linny's new life also requires the same, if not more, acting skills of her than her work as a Liverpool prostitute. Already as a young teenager, Linny imitates the people and the talk around her both to further her own social advancement and to entertain her clients. When her regular Thursday appointment, Uncle Horace, takes her out for their customary meal, Linny attempts to learn from the polite society around her: 'I memorized their [the ladies'] language and articulation, which, I now knew, was finer than my mother's had been. It was easy, a game to play' (*LB*, 24). When she finally

comes to utilise this acquired skill first during her time with Shaker and later in India, Linny admits to feeling ‘less genuine’ (*LB*, 155), ‘aware that I had to live up to my created background’ (*LB*, 156), a task which she comes to describe as a ‘charade’ (*LB*, 157). Her marriage to Somers requires her to wear a ‘tight mask’ (*LB*, 293) reminiscent of the ‘thick layer of powder and rouge’ (*LB*, 127) behind which she used to hide her face on Paradise Street. ‘Feigning interest in the men’s stories’ at the numerous parties in India is, therefore, only one version of what Linny calls the ‘tiresome game that I had played too many times in so many forms’ (*LB*, 225). The novel makes clear that women who do not engage in such performances have no hope for survival. Meg, an initially outspoken and seemingly liberated friend of Linny’s who aspires to be a writer also eventually succumbs to opium addiction after her marriage. Faith, Linny’s spirited but naive companion, marries a mixed-race man for love against her father’s will and lives first on the margins of colonial society before committing suicide in order to spare the mixed-race child she carries from the fate of its father, who was lowered to the bottom ranks of the East India Trade Company once his ethnic background had been revealed.

As Kirsten Pullen has argued in her historical approach to sex work’s occupational, cultural and discursive connections with acting, the concept of performance can function both as protection and as a means of regaining agency to contemporary prostitutes. While in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries actresses were commonly likened to prostitutes, ‘the contemporary prostitutes’ rights movement has reversed the trope of the actress/whore in order to insist that prostitutes are “like” actresses’, a strategy, Pullen argues, which enables sex workers to highlight their identities as workers, profit from the high status attributed to actresses in the twenty-first century, and utilise the notion of performance as a means of physical and emotional protection in their work.⁶⁶ For Linny, however, acting – be it as prostitute or wife –

⁶⁶ Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge

functions only as a form of survival, as the most basic means of physical protection.

Not unlike the limited power Linny achieves by stealing from her clients as a young girl, the control she believes she has over Somers when agreeing to his sinister marriage proposal is little more than imaginary. Somers may not receive his inheritance and be considered suspicious by society if he does not marry soon, but he does hold a secure and high position in the East India Trade Company in addition to his already accumulated wealth. Linny, on the other hand, will have her newly gained reputation destroyed both in India and in England if she refuses Somers' proposal. Nevertheless, she assumes that once he has exposed her as an ex-prostitute she will still be able to accept Shaker's marriage proposal and live a happy, quiet life, a somewhat disillusioned idea considering that Shaker's existence will also be at risk by the exposure of Linny's immoral past. Linny clings to her imagined power in a situation in which, in fact, her agency is once again limited by the choices available. Describing Somers as less assertive than usual, she recalls how,

seeing his body's involuntary reaction – his breathing, his voice, that touch of his moustache – I felt a small sense of pride, of accomplishment, for I knew then that, no matter how he tried to pretend that my decision meant little to him, my final answer had been the one he'd hoped for. [...] While it might be true that he found a part of me loathsome, as I did in him, there could be no denying that, for all his bluster, I held some power over him. (*LB*, 280)

Overall, Linny's life in India consists of equal illusions and idealisations. Upon her arrival in the country, she finds that the British have created an 'English home away from home' (*LB*, 207) where 'the rigidity of the line between master and servant is more noticeable' than in England and race and nationality largely determine social status. This colonial practice is misplaced and creates an uncanny manifestation of England in the colony, an *unheimlich* and distorted version of an English home in which everything is imitated but nothing homely, in which '[m]usic might be played on a piano that always sounded out-of-tune' (*LB*, 226). Linny is disappointed to find her host, Mrs

Waterton, ‘content to shut out the Indian world and concentrate on the one she knew’ (*LB*, 220), and is keen to ‘experience [...] the real India’ (*LB*, 232),⁶⁷ a notion which throughout the novel remains unquestioned and hence problematic. For Linny, the ‘real’ India appears to be an amalgamation of orientalist images of a strange and dangerous country and its people, and at the same time offers an idealised picture them. We are presented with imagery of India as confusing, diseased and menacing, particularly when Linny first sets sight on the country upon her arrival in Calcutta:

The dock was smothered with human forms; men in the ragged loincloths that I knew, from my reading, were called *dhotis* [...]; beggar children with huge, beseeching eyes; and mangy yellow dogs. Everywhere brown-skinned men, women and children sat, stood and wandered about, some eating, some sleeping. It was a mass of moving, jabbering, stinking humanity. [...] I had never swooned, thinking women who did so were weak. But now I feared that the immensity of sights, sounds and smells, the bright heat that encased my body, might squeeze me senseless. (*LB*, 203)

The high number of child deaths are, to Linny, the result of the ‘the inexplicable yet terrible grasp of India’ (*LB*, 305) and even away from the urban ‘foetid alleys and torturous lanes, the twisting underbelly of Calcutta’ (*LB* 227) she finds herself unable to distinguish the servants of her host’s home and resorts, as if studying animals, to memorising their physical features: ‘As the majority [...] dressed in simple white *dhotis*, shirts and turbans, their feet bare, I found it difficult to distinguish between them. Within a few days, though, I could recognize faces, height and a distinctive manner of walking’ (*LB*, 218).

However, Linny also idealises the country’s inhabitants in sharp contrast to what she perceives as the general – and apparently inherent – deficiencies of the British. When she first observes a Pathan, a man from the ‘North West Frontier, way up beyond Peshawar, on the border with Afghanistan’ (*LB*, 204), he appears to her not only as stereotypically united with his horse (and thus with nature), but he has the appearance of

⁶⁷ This intention and parts of Holeman’s plot clearly adapt E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), but in her engagement with colonialism Holeman lacks the multilayered and complex perspective Forster provides in *A Passage* and any allusions to Forster remain superficial.

a statue, of an idealistic representation of his people:

The man had long black hair oddly similar to his horse's mane. His white teeth shone in his sun-darkened face, and I could even see the ebony glister of his long eyes. Suddenly he leaned forward, dropped his head and appeared to speak into the horse's ear, which pricked forward. Immediately the creature stopped its frantic head-tossing and stood as if mesmerized. They looked as if they had been chiselled from one piece of magnificent stone. (*LB*, 203)

But while Somers and most of his countrymen agree that the natives of the colony are inferior and that, because '[t]heir own world is so tumultuous, so undisciplined, [...] it's a comfort to them to be told what to do, and to know what to expect if they don't obey' (*LB*, 236), Linny is represented as the morally superior Western feminist, both in relation to the expatriate British and in relation to the Indian people. She identifies with her hosts' servants, most notably when Mr. Waterton pays a native by throwing 'a number of coins on to the ground' and Linny remembers how 'only eighteen months ago it had been me on my knees in dirty streets, collecting my pay' (*LB*, 206). She learns Hindi, communicates with the locals and forms a relationship with her *ayah*; in a letter to Shaker, she complains that '[a]lthough I have been treated admirably by every brown person I have met, the English harbour underlying hostility towards the Indians. Towards *them*, Shaker – and it is their own land. The East India Company [...] is like a stern master, forcing the people of India in directions they cannot want to go' (*LB*, 228). Linny's assessment that the natives 'cannot want' this relationship with the colonists implies that she is capable of determining what they *should* want, and it is this assumption of superiority toward the Indian people which characterises her relationship to them.

Even though her relationship with Malti, her *ayah*, appears to be an amicable one and is defined by Linny's good intentions, it does appear that their connection serves more to illustrate Linny's superior morality and generous acknowledgement of equality than to create a bond between the two women. Repeatedly, Linny congratulates herself when describing her relationship to Malti. Disinterested in activities such as shopping,

she proudly writes the following:

I give Malti, my confidante, who seems to adore me for no other reason than that she has been given the task of caring for me, a shopping list, a large basket and chit. She rides off to the Hogg market and collects what is needed for the next few meals, or goes to Taylor's Emporium, with its wide clean aisles of gleaming silverware, sparkling china, crystal, jewellery and all manner of things English. She feels important and happy doing this, and tells me she is the envy of her counterparts, whose *memsahibs* would never entrust them with such decisions. (*LB*, 304)

The British goods and the responsibility bestowed upon Malti must naturally be appreciated by her. Linny forgets how, when Shaker first informed her of the position he secured for her, she challenged his assumption that this was what an ex-prostitute would be happy about: 'Did you think to ask me if I would like a job in a library?' (*LB*, 136).

The balance between feminist critique and an exoticised idealisation of India's people remains an uneven one throughout the narrative. A lasting and loving relationship between a man and woman cannot exist within a Western cultural framework and the institution of marriage, or so it seems when Linny discovers love and sexual pleasure for the first time with Daoud, a Pathan, who shortly after their affair must continue his travels. Yet, while British customs are critiqued throughout the novel, Holeman offers only an idealised and almost utopian image of a Kashmiri settlement of women with whom Linny lives for a short amount of time. The heroine embraces these women's lifestyle and their traditions, but once again the idyll of sisterhood is disrupted when the husbands return to the settlement for a brief period of time and render their wives submissive and less sociable. The critique, here, is neither overt nor convincing, and Holeman leaves intact the exotic image of the female community in which everything is 'so simple' (*LB*, 388); where Linny, for the first time, does not have to be an actress and must literally unmask herself by unclothing in front of the other women. 'Here, in Kashmir, I could be who I was,' she claims, adding the romantic notion that '[she felt herself] opening, unlocking, the rusty hinges giving away with a sound like

the wings of birds as they startle into flight' (*LB*, 402).

It is not surprising, then, that no men exist in Holeman's happy ending, at least not in the conventional or uncompromised sense. Somers dies not of the consequences of malaria but of the poison which Linny carefully and secretly feeds him when his illness takes a turn for the worse. His physician, who had been ordered to confine Linny to a madhouse and take her son away from her, is easily persuaded otherwise by a substantial amount of money, allowing Linny to return to England. There she lives with her son, as the neighbour of Shaker and his wife. In contrast to the threatening British physician in India, Shaker is feminised both by his disabling tremble and by his new profession as a practitioner of homeopathy.

Holeman's novel does explore the oppression and violence of prostitution as a patriarchal practice which arises from and reinforces women's inferior status within society. The liberatory potentials of the trade remain relative at best, and the only solution the novel offers is a society divided by sex, an idealistic and unrealistic image of an all-female community which is able to keep at bay and/or exercise control of the threat of male power. In her attempt to criticise colonial practices, Holeman reverts to illustrations which reinstate Western feminism's assumed moral superiority. Here, we have a 'disquieting [...] incarnation of standpoint theory'⁶⁸ which is also present in some of the author's other work: in *The Moonlit Cage*, the veiled Eastern heroine must be shown her 'true' self by being unveiled and finding her supposedly liberated identity in an 'advanced' Western world. In *The Linnet Bird* Holeman utilises the neo-Victorian prostitute in order to advocate and reinforce her own feminist viewpoint on sex work rather than to explore and represent women's varied experience of prostitution and the potentials it may or may not offer them. By extension, the novel's protagonist, then, functions as the voice of the morally superior Western feminist who acts on behalf of an

⁶⁸ Burstein, 'The Prostitute's Progress'.

Eastern female subject without taking into consideration that subject's right to define and articulate her own needs. Through her heroine, Holeman liberates the victimised (and exceptional rather than common) prostitute from her cruel profession and not only alleviates her own superior status as a writer but also reaffirms the superiority of Western feminist thought and practice by ensuring that 'the subaltern cannot speak' for itself and is rendered 'helpless' without its Western heroines. While thus critiquing the sex trade and its harmful effect on women, Holeman 'pimps' not the prostitute, but the colonies for their sexual appeal.

Selling Sugar: the sexual and textual economies of *The Crimson Petal and the White*

In Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*, sex – and, for that matter, almost everything and everyone in the novel – functions primarily as a commodity which can be exchanged or exploited for material profit and/or personal benefit, not least in the form of his skilled prostitute protagonist, Sugar. Both historically and geographically removed from Holeman's setting, the novel's narrative unfolds in 1870s London against the backdrop of a rising capitalist consumer culture drawn to the enticing facades of new department stores and the alluring messages of large-scale advertising campaigns, Faber's anti-heroine, an aspiring author, ascends from her mother's brothel among the poverty of St. Giles to becoming, first, the mistress of her infatuated client William Rackham and, later, the governess of Rackham's daughter Sophie (a position in which we discover the obligatory 'heart of gold' Burnstein ascribes to neo-Victorian prostitutes).

But while the novel's historical setting may well illustrate a certain 'delight in the new consumer culture of the 1870s', it does also serve a much more elaborate and indeed more critical and contemporary purpose than to demonstrate unquestioningly a

‘more positive sense of the possibilities of the market’,⁶⁹ particularly regarding the sex trade and the positions Faber’s fittingly named fictional product – Sugar – and her fellow prostitutes occupy in it. In light of not only the persistence and extraordinary expansion and diversification of the sexual marketplace since the nineteenth century but considering, moreover, the disappointingly persevering issues surrounding prostitution and women’s (sexual) exploitation outlined in the introduction to this chapter, *The Crimson Petal’s* status as both a comment on and product of the sexual politics and economies of the contemporary literary and feminist landscape is undeniable.

Framing his narrative by likening the relationship between writer and reader to that of prostitute and punter, Faber provides a fictional plethora of sexual transactions and abuses which illustrate a variety of issues pertinent in not only historical but also contemporary feminist debates on prostitution. However, returning to and rewriting the time in history in which today’s vast sex trade and the laws surrounding it originate, Faber’s novel exemplifies the objectification of female sexuality in the sex trade and in the literary market place as much as it explores the oppressive as well as liberatory potentials of prostitution. At the same time as *The Crimson Petal’s* historical narrative successfully illustrates women’s complex positions within the twenty-first century sex trade, its author also renders himself the pimp and his readers the punters of his fictional commodity, his prostitute protagonist.

Faber furnishes each of his prostitute characters with a personal history illustrating their respective entries into the sex trade and reflecting both past and present routes into prostitution which seemingly vary in the degrees of female agency they involve, but which ultimately highlight that the concept of choice remains, as for Holeman’s Linny, a highly limited and relative one. Taking his inspiration mainly from

⁶⁹ Chris Louttit, ‘The Novelistic Afterlife of Henry Mayhew’, *Philological Quarterly*, 85 (2006), pp.315-341 (p.329).

Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) and,⁷⁰ in the following instance, also from W.T. Stead's infamous 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' (1885),⁷¹ Faber presents us with Alice and Claire, two girls who upon their arrival in London fall prey to the ploys of 'white slavery', today better known as human trafficking:

They are brothel girls in the truest and lowest sense: that is, they arrived in London as innocents and were lured into their fallen state by a madam who, resorting to old stratagem, met them at the railway stations and offered them a night's lodgings in the fearsome new metropolis, then robbed them of their money and clothing. Ruined and helpless, they were then installed in the house, along with several other girls similarly duped or else bought from parents or guardians.⁷²

While Alice and Claire's forced entry into the trade illustrates a route into prostitution which became in the later decades of the nineteenth century a popular trope, they also embody the contemporary issues of global trafficking in women and children and the now much more frequent occurrence of a woman or girl being 'abducted against her will [...] and [...] forced into prostitution'.⁷³ For Claire and Alice the sex trade is not a choice, and their participation in it is, instead, the result of crime, of trafficking.

A somewhat different image emerges when we encounter Caroline, a friend and former neighbour of Sugar's in St. Giles. Caroline, originally a 'respectable Yorkshire wife' (*CP*, 25), came to London after her husband's death and worked as a seamstress until her young son fell ill, requiring treatment for which his mother's meagre wages could not pay. Having sought out a doctor for her dying child, Caroline finds the

⁷⁰ For an analysis of instances in which Faber draws on Mayhew, see: Louttit, 'The Novelistic Afterlife of Henry Mayhew', pp.328-333.

⁷¹ Stead's 'Maiden Tribute' appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1885 and provided a detailed account of child trafficking in London, based on Stead's undercover investigation, in which he himself purchased a child-prostitute in order to prove – after Josephine Butler's uncovering of child trafficking in Belgium in the 1870s – that such transactions were possible and, indeed, not at all uncommon in England's metropolitan underworld. Stead's methods were, of course, morally questionable, with the journalist and his readers 'hovering self-righteously about unsavoury places to which they were irresistibly drawn' (Wilson, *The Victorians*, p.475), an uncomfortable paradox to which I shall return at a later stage in relation to Faber.

⁷² Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (London: Canongate, 2002), p.70. Hereafter this text is referred to as *CP* after quotations in the text.

⁷³ Sarah Bromberg, 'Feminist Issues in Prostitution', *Feminist Issues* (1997), Accessed: 10 May 2010, <http://www.feministissues.com>.

physician unwilling to help unless she provides him with payment in an alternative, sexual form. She sells her body for her child's medical care, but the boy dies nevertheless, leaving the young woman, in her view, with no reason to maintain respectable work. For Caroline, prostitution is from then on the more favourable option in comparison to the badly paid and physically challenging hours spent in a factory. Echoing Linny's argument in her debate over the profession with Shaker's mother, Caroline tells Henry, William Rackham's religious brother who attempts to carry out rescue work: 'I've 'ad work in a factory, and I know that to earn two shillings [...] I should 'ave to work many long hours, breakin' my back in stink and danger, with never a minute to rest, and 'ardly no sleep' (*CP*, 325). Caroline's choice to enter and remain in the sex trade is a limited one at best, with prostitution being first the only possible means to care for her child and, later, a physically less strenuous and financially more rewarding option than the work and pay provided by the unequal employment opportunities of a market which even today, despite equality laws, remains inhospitable to the needs of women with children (single or in partnerships).⁷⁴

Resembling much-quoted contemporary statistics on the amount of prostitutes who were raised in care homes or foster families,⁷⁵ experienced (sexual) abuse and used drugs in childhood, at the core of Sugar's entry into prostitution – as with Holeman's Linny – lies her dysfunctional family, more specifically the absence of a maternal figure. Her mother, the brothel keeper Mrs Castaway, forces her into the trade at the age of thirteen; six years later, Sugar still works in the establishment named after and owned by Mrs Castaway, and she painfully recalls the night on which her mother first sold her to a male client:

Six years have passed since the howling night Mrs Castaway (then in much

⁷⁴ See, for example: Mike Brewer and Gillian Paull, 'Newborns and New Schools: Critical Times in Women's Employment', Research Report No.308 (2006), *Department for Work and Pensions*, Accessed: 20 March 2011, <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>.

⁷⁵ See: O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism*, pp.78-84 and pp.95-120; and Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), pp.180-181.

shabbier garb in the candle-flickering gloom of the old house) tiptoed up to Sugar's bed and told her she needn't shiver anymore: a kind gentleman had come to keep her warm. Ever since then, there has been something of the nightmare about Mrs Castaway, and her humanity has grown obscure. Sugar strains to recall a more nourishing, a historical figure called simply 'Mother' who tucked her in at night and never mentioned where money came from. (*CP*, 283)

Although Mrs Castaway is very much present in her daughter's life, and unlike Linny's still alive, from this night on her role as a loving guardian becomes a matter of the past as she turns into a 'historical figure' by becoming Sugar's pimp. The brothel keeper exploits the young girl not simply for her own and her daughter's survival but sells her daughter's body to better her own station in life, to replace her old, 'shabbier garbs'. Sugar is reminded by her mother that 'if we are to have a happy and harmonious house here, I can't treat you any differently from my other girls' (*CP*, 285), marking the beginning of their employer-employee relationship and the termination of their mother-daughter bond. The roles of Mrs Castaway and the nameless abductress of Alice and Claire thus hint, similar to Holeman's novel, at women's complicity in the active organisation and maintenance of the sex trade and, consequently, at first glance appear to subvert the assumption that, 'superficially, prostitution seemed to operate as an arena of male supremacy, where women were bartered and sold as commodities'.⁷⁶

But a closer look at Mrs Castaway reveals glimpses of even this cold-hearted and unlikeable character's exploitation at male hands. Indeed, the brothel keeper's selfish avarice stems not purely from a desire for money but also from malice towards her young daughter's sexual and moral innocence. Sugar, at the age of fifteen, asks her mother why she must still perform the unspeakable acts despite her mother and her being, in Mrs Castaway's words, financially '*quite comfortable*' (*CP*, 800); in response, the brothel keeper makes it explicit that her selling of Sugar's body functions as a means of passing on the oppression and degradation she herself has suffered at male hands through prostitution, an act reminiscent of Ram Munt's need to re-establish a

⁷⁶ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.31.

sense of power by prostituting Linny after he experienced sexual abuse during his time as a sailor. Suggesting a continuous and seemingly inescapable cycle of women's sexual exploitation and oppression, she asks her young charge, 'Why should *my* downfall be *your* rise? Why should *I* burn in Hell while *you* flap around Heaven?' (CP, 801). This catholic fear of sin and guilt also manifests itself in Mrs Castaway's obsession with images of Mary Magdalene, which she procures from around the world and which dominate the brothel's parlour, an ironic hint, perhaps, at the Magdalene Asylums for fallen women first established during the nineteenth century,⁷⁷ but an indication also of her desire to be redeemed and forgiven like the repentant biblical adulteress and prostitute. The novel's illustrations imply, then, that men are chiefly responsible for the inception of the sex trade, and that its maintenance is guaranteed not only by male consumer demands but also by women's internalisation of and complicity in each other's exploitation.

The novel hence acknowledges the diverse reasons for women's routes into the sex trade, from those who are victims of trafficking to those whose economic status allows for few or no other options, and those who have experienced child (sexual) abuse. Just as women's 'entry into prostitution appears to have been circumstantial rather than pre-mediated' in the nineteenth century,⁷⁸ the narrative's representations also reflect the circumstances prevalent in today's sex industry, in which, as Sarah Bromberg points out, one must 'take into account the diversity of reasons of why people enter the profession'.⁷⁹ While the circumstances of Faber's sex workers' routes in prostitution are hence variable, it appears that they all, nevertheless, are predicated upon a 'fundamental relation of domination and subordination' between men and women.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ 'Magdalen Homes', *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, Vol.2, ed. Melissa Hope Ditmore (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2006), pp.268-272.

⁷⁸ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.14.

⁷⁹ Bromberg, 'Feminist Issues in Prostitution'.

⁸⁰ Kathy Miriam, 'Stopping the Traffic in Women: Power, Agency and Abolition in Feminist Debates Over Sex-Trafficking', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 36:1 (2005), pp.1-17 (p.4).

The Crimson Petal offers a more optimistic vision of sex work's emancipatory potentials in its representations of Sugar's career within the trade. While Alice and Claire, after their abduction, never obtain any financial independence and are forced to sell their bodies 'in return for snug new clothes and two meals a day [...] guarded at the back-stair by a spoony-man and at the front by the madam, unable even to guess how much or little they are hired for' (*CP*, 70), Sugar's situation is in many respects rather different and more complex in that it offers material profit as well as a certain degree of independence. As her name indicates, she is first and foremost her mother's commodity, a good to be sold. This becomes perhaps most explicit when William Rackham suggests to purchase Sugar from Mrs Castaway for his sole use. During the negotiations between William and Sugar's mother, it is clear that for the pub in which Sugar solicits clients she is 'an attraction – a draw-card' (*CP*, 166), while to Mrs Castaway she is 'one third of what we're reputed to offer' (*CP*, 164) and, if sold to William, a much demanded good which becomes 'perpetually unavailable' (*CP*, 164).

Nevertheless, Sugar has certain advantages over prostitutes like Alice and Claire, and her old friend Caroline. Early on in the narrative we are made aware that she 'stood out [...] an aloof and serious child amongst a hubbub of crude laughter and conviviality' (*CP*, 34), and that, like Linny, she 'is *able* to read and write [and ...] actually enjoys it' (*CP*, 34). Sugar's literacy, wit, 'freakish memory' (*CP*, 36) and, above all, her willingness to 'submit to anything [...] with a smile of child-like innocence' (*CP*, 35) allow her to choose her clients from among the middle and upper classes, that is, from among those men who are able to pay whichever price she – rather than her mother – decides to fix for her services. Aware of her assets, Sugar is one of the many Victorian prostitutes who, according to Walkowitz, 'negotiated their own prices and [...] were as likely to exploit their clients as to suffer humiliation at male hands',⁸¹ making her also,

⁸¹ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.31.

in contemporary terms, a sex worker who ‘recognises[s] an opportunity to make an extraordinarily high income’.⁸² Considering that she is forced into prostitution by her mother, Sugar is thus neither ‘free of male domination’ nor ‘simply [one of the] passive victims of male sexual abuse’.⁸³

That Faber’s heroine exploits men as much as they take advantage of her is evident in the strategies she employs in her treatment of William Rackham. Able to ascertain the needs of her new client from first laying eyes on him, she is entirely aware of the kind of services she must provide in return for his payment and to secure him as a regular and well-paying customer. Hence, during their first appointment, her observation that William ‘is an infant searching for a warm bed to sleep in’ (*CP*, 174) is not a sentimentality, but a calculated assessment which leads her to the conclusion that ‘if she will but smooth his greasy golden curls off his sweaty brow, he’ll give her anything she asks for in return’ (*CP*, 174). Sugar acts as a caring mother figure as soon as she leads him away from the pub and towards Mrs Castaway’s, ‘gliding two steps ahead of him, her hand trailing behind almost maternally, the gloved fingers wiggling in empty air as if expecting him to seize hold like a child’ (*CP*, 105). When William, too drunk and tired to perform any sexual acts, wakes up in her room the next morning only to discover he has stayed the night and urinated in his sleep, Sugar, calling him a ‘poor baby’ (*CP*, 115), continues her performance and washes her customer with the ease and seemingly unconditional love of a mother who cleans her infant: ‘The sharp stink of stewed piss wafts up, inches from Sugar’s nose, but she doesn’t flinch. For all the effect the stench has on her unblinking gaze, her serene brow, her secret half smile, it might as well be perfume’ (*CP*, 115). Eventually, Sugar becomes a living Oedipal fantasy when, having cleaned up her charge, she only sends William on his way after having satisfied him orally and, upon his initiative, via intercourse. Rackham happily returns again and

⁸² Bromberg, ‘Feminist Issues in Prostitution’.

⁸³ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p.31.

again for her services, a sign that Sugar's performance has skilfully disguised how 'she'd happily have done without getting fucked in the end', despite having made 'as much money as she would have had from three individual men' (*CP*, 124).

Sugar's manipulation of William reaches one of its many peaks when, shortly after he has secured her for his sole use, she persuades him to take her away from the filthy parts of the city by slyly enquiring, during one of their meetings at the brothel: 'And do you have anything to purify the drinking water? You don't want to see me carried off by cholera!' *Bull's-eye*, she thinks, as a shudder passes through him' (*CP*, 248). Indeed, this evocation of the fears of pollution and contagion has the intended effect and William installs her in a flat in Marylebone, a move which represents precisely what Sugar has aimed at and which, hence, must be received in a manner as calculated as the method through which it has been achieved:

'It's as if all my birthdays have come at once.' 'Dear Heaven!' Rackham declares. 'I don't even know when your birthday is!' Sugar smiles as she selects, from the jumble of contending responses in her head, the perfect sentence to send him on his way, *les mots justes* for the closure of this transaction. 'This will be my birthday from now on,' she says. (*CP*, 269)

Undoubtedly, William's renting of her new rooms is, here, not perceived as a romantic gesture, but as a transaction toward which Sugar has worked and to which she has actively contributed. Through her actions, and despite her traumatic childhood, Faber thus forces us to consider an 'economist' approach towards prostitution, that is, to view the sex worker as 'an agent who strategically and instrumentally uses property in her person (e.g. her sexuality) to further her economic self-interest'.⁸⁴

Even Sugar's role as a commodity in the exchange between Mrs Castaway and Rackham appears, at first, more complex than one may expect. Once Mrs Castaway has drawn up the terms and conditions under which she is willing to sell Sugar to Rackham, it is up to her daughter to accept or decline his offer. Considering her limited options,

⁸⁴ Miriam, 'Stopping the Traffic in Women', pp.5-6.

Sugar decides that as long as William provides her with the necessary cash, ‘If he wants her name on a contract, well, why not?’ (CP, 172). For her punter, the purpose of his purchase is to ‘have Sugar entirely to himself’ (CP, 127), that is, to make her the property of one man rather than many. The similarities between this arrangement and the institution of marriage are by no means subtle and, as in Holeman’s novel, performance is key to both the role of wife and prostitute. If, as Angela Carter suggested in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), ‘marriage is legalised prostitution,’ and if, consequently, ‘prostitution is itself a form of group marriage’ then Sugar’s sex work with only one man seems close to traditional wedlock.⁸⁵ This similarity becomes most apparent when William compares the marriage contract drawn up by Lord Unwin, his wife Agnes’ father, with the paperwork he signs for Mrs Castaway: ‘Looking back on it now, the contract for Agnes’s hand was extraordinarily *laissez-faire* – much less demanding of him than this one here’ (CP, 168). On the surface, then, it appears that the prostitute is economically in a more secure and independent situation than the wife, especially since ‘Lord Unwin showed [...] precious little [parental protectiveness] for Agnes’ (CP, 169) and made ‘no mention, either, of [...] how Agnes’s style of life was supposed to be safeguarded’ (CP, 169). Ironically, by formally ensuring that William must pay Sugar ‘whatever makes her happy’ (CP, 168), the malicious Mrs Castaway exercises more parental care for her daughter than Lord Unwin showed for Agnes when he gave her away in marriage.

However, Faber does not render the matter as simple as that. Throughout her position as William’s mistress and as his daughter’s governess, Sugar becomes – in a somewhat wifely fashion – increasingly anxious and paranoid about how to best ensure that William remains happy and does not discard her, especially not in favour of his wife. Agnes is able to spend William’s money however she pleases and perceives this as

⁸⁵ Angela Carter, [1979] *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Little Brown Book Group, 2006), p.67.

a payback for the torture he inflicted on her through intercourse and subsequent pregnancy and childbirth as well as for his financial difficulties and her lack of luxury in the first years of their marriage. William remains attracted to Agnes and her sexual innocence and passivity, so much so that he rapes her after her physician, Dr. Curlew, has drugged her into a deep sleep. Cleaning his sperm from his wife after this act of violation, it is clear that at home William perceives himself as the (sinister) carer for his ill wife, while in Sugar's company he is the one to be cared for. That both women are dispensable becomes evident toward the novel's open ending. William fires Sugar in the belief that she carries his child and arranges to have Agnes incarcerated in a lunatic asylum. Nevertheless, it is Sugar, used to a greater degree of independence than Agnes, who is able to extricate herself and William's daughter from the situation, while Agnes depends on Sugar's welfare and, we can only speculate, dies.

It is these tensions between the novel's illustrations of prostitution as a form of exploitation and commodification on the one hand and its liberal depictions of sex work as a valid and even empowering occupation on the other which enable Faber to interrogate contemporary feminist issues in prostitution. However, the narrative development and resolution of these ambiguities exemplify both Faber's perceived need to paint a diverse picture of the sex trade as well as his own literary exploitations of the image of the female sex worker as an emancipated agent. Throughout the novel, the narrator's liberal view of the prostitute protagonist and her profession runs counter to Sugar's own perceptions, which are largely revealed by snippets of her novel-in-progress, a fictional, semi-pornographic autobiography. Contrary to the notion that Sugar is the fictional embodiment of Carter's vision of a woman who has learned to '[regard] her sexual activity as her capital [...] as though, in fact, the opening of it allowed her access to a capital sum which had been frozen by virginity',⁸⁶ in her own

⁸⁶ Carter, *The Sadian Woman*, p.67.

narrative empowerment is not attained through sexual transactions but, rather, through the brutal slaughtering of the men who demand her services. Addressing men with the words, ‘Vile man, eternal Adam, I indict you’ (CP, 412), Sugar sets out to ‘tell the truth about prostitution’ (CP, 334) through her graphic, fictional revenge plot and lets her heroine pessimistically explain that ‘there is no hope for children in this world [...] if male, they will become filthy swine like you. If female, they will be defiled by filthy swine like you’ (CP, 769). Her novel, Sugar illustrates, will be ‘a tale that fearlessly points the finger at those who are to blame’ (CP, 334).

However, Sugar’s novel and her writing of it function as narrative tools which allows Faber to extinguish both his heroine’s as well as his own radical feminist voice with that of the more liberal narrator. In a piece on the writing of *The Crimson Petal*, Faber confesses that when he first started drafting the novel he was ‘a radical feminist driven by many of the same things as Sugar, my prostitute heroine’.⁸⁷ Explaining how he intended to have Sugar’s life come a cruel end (crushed by the wheels of a cab) in order to emphasise her inexistent prospects of a life outside of prostitution, he goes on to admit that the novel, in this pessimistic first draft, ‘nagged at my conscience from its drawer’.⁸⁸ Faber’s conscience and writing processes hence become reflected in Sugar’s conception of and attitude toward her novel as radical feminist anger subsides and is replaced by the optimistic realisation that her situation has, at least materially, changed for the better since her early days in St. Giles.

Attempting to complete her novel not from the grim room in which her mother first forced her into prostitution, but from the ‘her sunlit study in Priory Close’ (CP, 334), Sugar begins to perceive it as a pressure rather than an encouragement that ‘all the fallen women of the world are relying on her to tell the truth’ (CP, 334) because this

⁸⁷ Michel Faber, ‘Victorian e-values’, *Guardian* (1 June 2002), Accessed: 2 February 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/fiction1>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

‘truth’, for her, is no longer reality. She admits that her writing somehow fails to illustrate ‘the story of her own life’ (*CP*, 228) because it represents only its darkest period, ‘her early life in Church Lane’ (*CP*, 228). That Sugar deliberately omits any positive experiences becomes clear when she thinks about the content of her book:

Is there any good fortune in this story? None! Good fortune, of the William Rackham kind, would spoil everything. The heroine must see only poverty and degradation; she must never move from Church Lane to Silver Street, and no man must ever offer her anything she wants – most especially, rescue into an easier life. Otherwise this novel, conceived as a cry of unappeasable anger, risks becoming one of those ‘Reader, I married him’ romances she so detests. (*CP*, 228-9)

Sugar refuses to accept that her life has – that whatever limited extent – improved and forgets that her former friends and fellow sex workers are either dead of disease or, in the case of Caroline, in arguably worse situations than her. Insisting that ‘her childhood [was] every bit as hopeless as the childhood of anyone toiling for Rackham Perfumeries’ (*CP*, 411), but aware that ‘her lot is better than theirs *now*’ (*CP*, 411), Sugar remains adamant that she is still ‘their voice’ (*CP*, 411).

When her inability to continue the original plot of her novel finally forces Sugar to confront and acknowledge the changes which have occurred in her life, she feels that ‘permeating almost every line, souring every remark, tainting every conviction [in her story], is prejudice and ignorance’ (*CP*, 412). Sugar’s fiction, rather than ‘telling the truth about prostitution’, is represented as contributing toward an ‘iconography of female victimisation’ because it portrays her work as a universal experience of women’s exploitation as which,⁸⁹ due to the economically and morally complex issues involved in prostitution, it cannot function. Sugar’s subsequent exclamation, ‘I’m false! False! False to the bone!’ (*CP*, 485), echoes, perhaps, Faber’s own thoughts, although it remains unclear whether this applies to Sugar being crushed by a cartwheel instead of eventually escaping into a future unknown to the reader, or his decision to overwrite his

⁸⁹ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), p.245.

own and his heroine's radical outcry against women's sexual exploitation. Optimistically speaking, these narrative developments perhaps signal a critique of feminist theories which victimise sex workers regardless of the experiences and lived realities of women involved in the trade. If, as O'Neill suggests, feminists must create knowledge 'for' and research 'with' rather than 'on' the sex industry and those involved in it, then Sugar's question about the actual effects and benefits of her textual, violent revenge is an apt one: 'All these straw men meeting grisly ends: what flesh-and-blood woman is helped by it?' (*CP*, 412).

But while Faber's illustrations of female sex work on one level clearly reflect the diversity and complexity of the issues which pertain to contemporary feminist thought on prostitution and on the wider sex industry, on another plane they also exemplify his literary and economic exploitation of Sugar. If we recall once more clients' reviews of Victorian sex worker Jane Fowler in *Hints to Men about Town* and of Demi on the website *PunterNet*: both women's apparent enjoyment of their work or, rather, their ability to provide the 'true girlfriend experience' is key to their success in the sex trade. Equally, Sugar's professional achievements – so *More Sprees in London*, Faber's fictional equivalent to *Hint to Men about Town*, tells us – depends on her ability to feign pleasure in her punters' most unimaginable demands, while it is Alice and Claire's incapability to match such enthusiasm which causes William Rackham to leave their establishment in frustration. It is the literary equivalent of the 'girlfriend experience' so praised among *PunterNet* contributors which Faber sells us in the form of his prostitute protagonist. Just as Sugar must appear to delight in her work in order to satisfy her clients, Faber must provide his readers, eventually, with a strategic and empowered business woman rather than the unattractive image of a vengeful, angry and exploited victim.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ It is also interesting to note here that Sugar never faces the unattractive prospect of a forceful

The Crimson Petal's illustrations of the act of writing as an act of prostitution through its 'implicit association of contemporary readers with the customers for Sugar's sexual favours' do make its author a fitting twenty-first century counterpart of W.T. Stead.⁹¹ Faber makes clear that his reader becomes a neo-Victorian punter and he a neo-Victorian pimp the moment we consider purchasing his book, and, with it, his fictional and sexual product, Sugar: 'And yet you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let's not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name, or at least who you a good time' (*CP*, 3). If Stead, with his shocking illustrations of Victorian sex trafficking in the *Maiden Tribute*, 'professes to deplore what [his work] describes' while at the same time 'offer[ing] the reader the pornographic thrill to read all about it',⁹² then Faber takes his own ambiguous feminist place in the complex sexual marketplace he sets out to explore, while at the same time challenging our readerly desires.

Conclusion

Both Holeman and Faber remind us of the continuing issues in feminist rhetoric and politics surrounding prostitution. Much like Faulks' *Human Traces* (discussed in Chapter Two) replicates the medical discourses and practices it critiques, Holeman involuntarily reinforces rather than challenges the continuing perception of Western feminisms as superior to its third-world counterparts and, unlike Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (analysed in Chapter Three), *A Linnet Bird* does not criticise or interrogate the (post)colonial power structures to which it subscribes. If, as Marie-Luise Kohlke notes, neo-Victorian fiction's sexualisation of the past constitutes the twenty-

medical examination under the Contagious Diseases Acts, an experience which – albeit to further conflate the roles of prostitute and wife – is instead displaced onto Agnes, the novel's madwoman. While this certainly supports some of Faber's explorations of the gendered economies of sex within and outside of prostitution, it nevertheless also makes Sugar a more attractive character.

⁹¹ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.13.

⁹² Wilson, *The Victorians*, p.475.

first century equivalent of nineteenth-century Orientalism,⁹³ then Holeman's novel is not only a prime example of the neo-Victorian sexsation in its exoticisation of the past but it is also a replica of Orientalism in its exoticisation of the East. Faber also undoubtedly (but unashamedly) contributes to and profits from neo-Victorian fiction's sexsational appeal. *The Crimson Petal* highlights the ambiguities and problematics which lie at the heart of contemporary feminist approaches toward prostitution, and, much like third-wave feminists, it acknowledges and critically explores its own contribution to the material culture which houses these complex exploitative economies. Yet, what becomes clear despite the different levels of literary sophistication evident in these two neo-Victorian novels is that at the heart of the genre's repeated returns to the figure of the (neo-) Victorian prostitute lies more than simply the desire to pimp her for her commercial appeal. Rather, neo-Victorian fiction's representations of the sex trade illustrate its on-going relevance as a feminist issue and, therefore, the continuing need to interrogate the sexual economies and politics which shape women's entries into and experiences in prostitution, be they liberatory or oppressive, profitable or exploitative.

⁹³ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth-Century Erotic', *Probing the Problematics: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008), pp.345-356.

CHAPTER FIVE

Writing women's lives: neo-Victorian fiction as feminist biography

The previous parts of this thesis have explored the complexities of and relationships between matrilineal narratives, sex/uality and gender as aspects of female identities and their constructions. This final themed chapter will take a step back and widen its analytical perspective in order to consider the textual constellations in which these interrelated components are arranged to form and illustrate women's lives in neo-Victorian biographical fiction. By tracing the gendered developments and problematics of life writing and analysing the ways in which the literary recoveries of Catherine Dickens (1815-1879) and painter Gwen John (1876-1939) in particular negotiate the representations of various, shifting and often contradictory aspects of female identities, I investigate the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction can function as feminist biography, that is, as biography which utilises as well as critically engages with the potentials and challenges that postmodernist and third-wave theories surrounding history, gender and identity pose to the genre of life writing and its practices. Neo-Victorian biographical fiction, I argue, can serve not only as a feminist means of undermining traditional perceptions of what constitutes biography, identity, and a person's life but also as a mode of questioning our definitions and constructions of historical periods and their societies and cultures.

Gender and biography: constructing the female subject

Aligned with the realist narratives prominent during much of the nineteenth century, Victorian biography focused predominantly on communicating a chronologically arranged and carefully selected collection of factual and formal particulars concerning its subjects' lives. According to Mary Evans, the 'paucity of the information provided

was matched only by the limited number of works published within the genre'.⁹⁴ The range of figures Victorian biographers deemed worthy of attention was equally restricted, focused as it was, on white, dead, middle or upper-class men whose lives were portrayed in line with what social norms judged as acceptable. While accounts written by their widows have since been classified as 'hagiographies: written lives stripped of the unattractive and unacceptable behaviours and characteristics of their famous dead husbands',⁹⁵ male authors have also been guilty of the glorification of their subjects through the omission of certain details from their publications. One of the most famous examples, here, is perhaps John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*, the first Dickens biography, begun when he was still alive and published only two years after his death in 1870. Dickens' marriage to and infamously public separation from Catherine Hogarth – to whose own biographies I shall turn shortly – were intentionally marginalized by Forster, who, as Elisabeth Glitter points out, 'positioned himself as the ultra-protective gatekeeper of Dickens's reputation',⁹⁶ a difficult stance to maintain considering he was both a biographer who had to maintain a certain level of integrity and Dickens' close friend.⁹⁷ Like Forster's work, Victorian biographies more generally focused on the construction and reinforcement of acceptable, coherent, public identities.

During the first half of the twentieth century, however, modernism began to challenge established biographical practices. Lytton Strachey's famous portrayals of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Thomas Arnold and General Gordon in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) not only defied the Victorian maintenance and celebration of respectable public lives but functioned, in David Harvey's words, as their 'creative

⁹⁴ Mary Evans, *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.17.

⁹⁵ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.181.

⁹⁶ Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Rhetoric of Reticence in John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*'. *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, 25 (1996), pp.127-139 (pp.127-130).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

destruction'.⁹⁸ In his use of psychoanalytic theory as a means of uncovering so far untouched layers of a person's identity, Strachey possessed 'a supremely effective weapon with which to attempt to reveal the reality behind public facades',⁹⁹ an aim which subverted Victorian biographical practices and began what would throughout the century become a popular and ever increasing readerly desire for revelatory life writing. In the 1920s and 30s, modernist writers of fiction equally experimented with (auto)biographical subjects, representing human experience as inherently subjective and fragmentary.¹⁰⁰ Among several other prominent authors, writers such as Gertrude Stein questioned how we experience life and what exactly constitutes a person's biography. Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) is not what its title proclaims – at least not in the conventional sense. Rather, the novel is narrated by a fictionalised Alice B. Toklas (Stein's real-life partner) and, as readers, we experience, from Alice's view, her circle of friends, her role within that circle and the various relationships between the persons it contains. Focusing partly on famous male artists such as Henry Matisse, Stein also includes traditionally marginalised characters in her narrative, such as her housemaid Helene. Out of these numerous illustrations, a textual portrait of Alice B. Toklas emerges, comprised of various smaller, interlinked pieces.¹⁰¹ With narrative strategies and techniques such as Stein's, literary modernism thus pre-empted questions and issues which came to preoccupy postmodernist and feminist theories, as well as feminist biographers, in the second half of the century: subjectivity and the nature of time, history and identity.

The emergence of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s saw a continuation and further complication of the concepts which modernists had begun to interrogate and

⁹⁸ David Harvey, *The Condition of Post-Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.19.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.17.

¹⁰¹ For critical discussions of Stein's writing as a form of literary cubism see: Marianne DeKoven, 'Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism', *Contemporary Literature*, 22:1 (1981), pp.81-95; and Marilyn Gaddis Rose, 'Gertrude Stein and the Cubist Narrative', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22 (1976), pp.543-555.

which lie at the very heart of life writing. Critics' by now famous exposures first of the socially and culturally conditioned and hence selective nature of the narrative which had come to bear the title 'history' and later of identity as constantly performed, constructed and shifting meant that biographers could, in theory, no longer be expected (or expect) to convey a consistent, truthful and complete picture of their subject. The postmodern destabilisation of categories such as history, truth and the self consequently posed a substantial challenge to the validity of the life writer's work and, as Sharon O'Brien highlights, threatened to problematize the very existence of life writing as a genre: 'If the self is considered decentred, multiple, or unknowable, how can any genre purport to give us the "presence," "essence," or meaning of a self?'¹⁰²

At the same time as postmodern theorists raised these issues, second-wave feminists also sought to deconstruct existing concepts of history and identity in order to create a new, female historical narrative which included and valued women as important makers of and contributors to history, continuing the work Virginia Woolf had so famously begun with *A Room of One's Own* (1929). While on the surface postmodernism's desire to challenge grand narratives would suggest an easy alliance with feminism, the relationship between postmodern and feminist theory has been fruitful as well as problematic and as such has fundamentally shaped third-wave feminism. The concerns debated and shared by feminist and postmodernist critics are most apparent in feminist biography, a genre which was first theorised during the mid-1970s and which has continued to be a subject of debate among feminist scholars and writers through to the present day.¹⁰³

Introductions to previous chapters of this thesis have outlined clearly visible shifts between the second and third waves in their treatments of certain feminist issues, but

¹⁰² Sharon O'Brien, 'Feminist Theory and Literary Biography', *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. by William H. Epstein (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991), pp.123-133 (p.125).

¹⁰³ For one of the first essays on feminist biography as a genre, see: Peggy Rosenthal, 'Feminism and Life in Feminist Biography', *College English*, 36:2 (October 1974), pp.180-184.

feminist biography is not marked by such a palpable transition. From its very inception during the height of the second-wave movement, feminist life writing has engaged with postmodern theories of history and identity and, through this, addressed issues whose negotiation had, by the turn of the new millennium, become the very foundation of third-wave feminism as well as of the theory and practice of feminist biography. For feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, biographical narratives served a particularly crucial role in the re-inscription of women into a history from which, traditionally, they had been excluded. Focusing first almost exclusively on the lives of what they considered notable feminist figures (such as leading names in the women's suffrage movement earlier in the century or well-known women authors), feminist biographers soon also turned their attentions to 'the daily lives of anonymous women', motivated by 'a strong concern with the specificity of the experiences of women as marginalised subjects of historical discourse'.¹⁰⁴ This reclamation of the past through feminist biography functioned, then as much as now, as one of the most fundamental purposes of the genre: to render women subjects rather than objects of history and to challenge the discourses and perspectives which have hitherto determined their inferior existence in history.

When writing feminist biography, Kathleen Barry argues,

the first demand upon the researcher is to reveal the subject as a subject. [...] In women's biography, this most often means retrieving lost subjectivity, subjectivity lost because it has been historically suppressed and subjectivity lost because women's actions have been determined and essentialized to their sexual and/or reproductive functions.¹⁰⁵

However, this undertaking would be rendered futile if feminist biography was to simply replicate the forms and structures of traditional life writing which for so long had excluded women and reinforced the very discourses which rendered them historically insignificant. As early as 1974, Peggy Rosenthal critiqued biographies published by the

¹⁰⁴ Susanna Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2005), p.42.

¹⁰⁵ Kathleen Barry, 'The New Historical Syntheses: Women's Biography', *Journal of Women's History*, 1:3 (Winter 1990), pp.75-105 (p.76).

Feminist Press (in this case, biographies written by feminists about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Constance de Markievicz), arguing that their authors failed in their attempts to ‘sustain a double view, looking both at the particular life of the subject named in the title and at the lives of women in general’,¹⁰⁶ without losing sight of their subjects or generalising about women of the period in question. Consequently, while utilising postmodern theory and its proclamation of the subjectivity of history as a basis for their critique of traditional modes of life writing, feminist biographers and scholars were soon forced to reflect also upon the problems postmodernism presents to the genre of feminist biography.

If, as Susanna Scarparo argues, ‘what distinguishes feminist biography [...] is the focus on the self as gendered’ then the genre’s validity is inevitably endangered by an alliance between feminism and postmodernism. Although the two share a scepticism ‘about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture’,¹⁰⁷ feminism relies on the assumption that women constitute an essentially different group whose interests warrant particular attention because of their sexual difference and gender. As Sue Thornham points out, feminism ‘and its political claims are made on behalf of a social group, women, who are seen to have an underlying community of interest, and of an embodied female subject whose identity and experiences [...] are necessarily different from those of men’.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, even if feminism ‘embrace[s] differences between women and accept[s] a position of partial knowledge(s)’,¹⁰⁹ gender and sexual difference still remain its defining *raison d’être*. In this context, then, a feminist alliance with postmodernism may mean that feminism is facing its own

¹⁰⁶ Rosenthal, ‘Feminism and Life in Feminist Biography’, p.180.

¹⁰⁷ Jane Flax, ‘Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12:4 (1987), pp.621-643 (p.624).

¹⁰⁸ Sue Thornham, ‘Postmodernism and Feminism’, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 2nd edition, ed. by Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.24-34 (p.27).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

invalidity and must acknowledge its privileging of women as a ‘metanarrative of emancipation’ in demise which itself ‘should be deconstructed and opposed in the name of difference’.¹¹⁰ Postmodernism’s ‘rejection of all universal theories and ideas’ is thus a stance which both validates and annihilates any form of feminist theory and practice, including a feminist rewriting of history and a genre which argues for the need to record gendered narratives of women’s lives: ‘A postmodernist feminism, in which sexual difference is no longer seen as a fundamental organizing category, but is replaced by the concept of multiple and shifting differences threatens to make a feminist politics impossible’.¹¹¹

Craig Owens takes this theoretical clash between feminism and postmodernism one significant step further by arguing that the relative absence of female and feminist voices in postmodernism suggests the postmodern project ‘may be another masculine invention to exclude women’.¹¹² Postmodernism may, potentially, have become what it so fervently sets out to deconstruct and challenge: a grand narrative. Feminist critics Kathleen Barry and Liz Stanley are equally apprehensive about postmodernist theory and its impact on feminism, particularly in the context of feminist life writing. Barry contends it is ‘highly suspicious [...] that the emphasis has been placed on decentering the subject just at the time when *women’s* history has made significant gains by centering on women as the subject of its study’.¹¹³ Stanley, equally cautious, points out the irony intrinsic in theories by critics such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, whose famous calls for anti-essentialism and the death of the author are very much associated and indeed rely upon their status as ‘authoritative authors, French intellectuals’; ‘a rich irony,’ Stanley illustrates, ‘for there is no de-centering of the

¹¹⁰ Thornham, ‘Postmodernism and Feminism’, p.26.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.28.

¹¹² Craig Owens, ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism’, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1986), pp.57-82 (p.70).

¹¹³ Barry, ‘The New Historical Syntheses’, p.93.

authorial subject here'.¹¹⁴ These theories, then, serve their creators in that they automatically invalidate any question of the authors' identities and the impact these may have on the very theories which proclaim their metaphorical deaths. Consequently, to remark that these supposedly dead authors are first-world, 'white male authorities, patricians' and 'self-styled theorists' who 'themselves are apparently not there in their texts', and to 'protest [hence] at exclusion' inevitably leads to being treated as 'primitive' and as 'a naive clinging to the wreckage of bourgeois humanist referential essentialism'.¹¹⁵ The death of the author is, then, 'a very convenient death' for those whose authority, and indeed authorship, it helps to maintain. At a time when several minority movements gathered significant momentum, this 'suicide' – in Stanley's terms – was 'no suicide at all. This "suicide" is alive and well and still calling the theoretical shots' through its self-proclaimed death. Overall, the postmodernist de-centering of the subject, Barry suggests, may eventually render 'the study of women again [...] ahistorical',¹¹⁶ by denying women their existence as subjects, rather than objects, of history.

Considering feminism's problematic relationship with postmodernism as well as with traditional biography, the challenge posed to feminist biographers is three-fold. Firstly, it must reject and subvert the practices of traditional modes of life writing which 'feminist readers connect with patriarchal as well as Western humanist definitions of the self'.¹¹⁷ At the same time, in doing so, it must negotiate – rather than simply reject – the potentials and problematics of postmodernist theory in order to maintain the validity of biography as a genre and the legitimacy of a gendered approach to that genre. At the turn of the new millennium, these challenges have resulted in new and fruitful feminist biographical forms and strategies which have been increasingly theorised and practiced

¹¹⁴ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.16.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Barry, 'The New Historical Syntheses', p.93.

¹¹⁷ O'Brien, 'Feminist Theory and Literary Biography', p.126.

since the 1990s and which continue to undermine ‘the notion of the unified self without discarding a focus on gender’, hence ‘preserving the benefits that biography can offer to feminism as well as to the narration of women’s lives’.¹¹⁸

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of feminist biography as critics define it today is its acknowledgment of the impossibility to recover the past (be it personal or historical, recent or distant), to accurately reconstruct an individual’s experience of it, and to create a textual image which represents the so-called ‘real’ person, the essence of the biographical subject or of a particular group or network. While traditional biography ‘often tends to endorse [...] the view that the “real” person can be identified and presented to the reading public’, feminist life writers acknowledge that, as Evans explains, this ‘search for the “real” person is doomed to disappointment’ and that ‘the notion of the “reconstruction” of a biographical subject is an intellectual non-starter’.¹¹⁹ This is not only because this ‘real’ person does not actually exist and ‘cannot be contained, let alone be represented, in print’ but also due to our inability to capture and represent the past as it was experienced by the subject who lived it.¹²⁰ The absence of a ‘real’ subject to recover is, then, one of the reasons biographies cannot claim facticity and should be considered, like fiction, as naturally ‘artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product’.¹²¹

Consequently, instead of attempting to ‘dispense of all interpretative frameworks’ so as not to detract from their supposed authority,¹²² feminist biographers frequently demonstrate an awareness of the processes involved in influencing the construction of their subjects. Like fiction, the life narratives feminist biography presents are heavily influenced by their authors and thus by their personal, historical, social and cultural backgrounds. But where postmodernism proclaims the death of the author, feminist

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.130 and p.129.

¹¹⁹ Evans, *Missing Persons*, p.138 and Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.7.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.7.

¹²¹ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.4.

¹²² Ibid. See also: O’Brien, ‘Feminist Theory and Literary Biography’, p.124.

biographers step in the opposite direction not only by being aware of and drawing attention to the influence their identities may have on their texts but also by discussing the research and writing processes involved in their work. ‘Authorial power,’ Stanley reminds us, is involved in any form of life writing, both ‘in relation to *who* is deemed a “fit subject” [... and] *how* their life and work is represented, including what sources are accepted as authoritative and treated as preferable to other contrary sources’.¹²³ Self-reflexivity is therefore as crucial a component of feminist life writing as it is of third-wave feminism and in both contexts postmodernism has challenged feminist critics ‘to think, read, and write in an unprecedented hypercritical and self-reflexive manner, in a way that undermined much of what feminist historical practice [...] had come to rely on as “sound” methodology’.¹²⁴

By emphasising how ‘one’s own inevitable location in the present determines the history of the past one writes’,¹²⁵ feminist biographers also highlight the impact of their own relationship to their biographical subject and its development throughout the research and writing processes. ‘Self-conscious feminist politics’ affects, Scarparo suggests, authors’ ‘relationship[s] with their subjects as well as their interpretative processes’,¹²⁶ and Stanley goes as far as arguing that as a life writer ““doing biography” changes how you think about yourself, and this in turn changes how you understand the subject; and both impact more widely on how the auto/biographer sees and analyses other social persons, events and processes’.¹²⁷ Given the subjective nature of biography and considering feminists’ self-consciousness of that subjectivity, it is not surprising that different writers construct various different lives for one person, depending on the sources they choose, how they decide to interpret and represent them, and what their

¹²³ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.9.

¹²⁴ ‘history, postmodern’, *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.177-178 (p.178).

¹²⁵ Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects*, p.39.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.157.

¹²⁷ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.159.

own relationship to their subject is.

Feminist biography's self-awareness also leads to a potentially greater empowerment and involvement of the reader. By openly discussing the complex processes of writing biography and by acknowledging that there is no one singular true biography of any one subject the genre refutes modern biography's assumption that 'writers can cope with complexity, [while] readers have to be protected from it'.¹²⁸ Postmodernism, Stanley argues, only superficially empowers readers by denying the author's 'dominant authorial presence',¹²⁹ a strategy which deprives readers of the opportunity to 'answer back' and which also does not provide any 'means for how this empowering is to occur, other than that it is'.¹³⁰ Feminist biographers, in contrast, can 'open up the production processes of biography to critical inquiry from readers' by, for example, making available a wide and diverse range of sources to their readers and accounting for 'what facts, opinions and interpretations they find preferable and why'.¹³¹ Taking into consideration the existence of other, differing biographies of their subjects and the inherent partiality of their own works, writers can thus invite their readers to participate actively in the construction of the biographical subject both through their imagination and by providing them with the opportunity to locate the biography 'as one competing version among others'.¹³² Biographical subjects, for feminist writers, are hence always 'subjects in progress',¹³³ constantly constructed and reconstructed by themselves as well as by their readers.

But feminist life writing does not only acknowledge the multiplicity created through its own processes and narratives but also the subjective, diverse, fluid and potentially contradictory nature of its subjects' identities. Rather than attempting to

¹²⁸ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.11.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.251 and p.10.

¹³² *Ibid.* p.10.

¹³³ Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects*, p.42.

uncover the ‘complete’ person traditional life writing so desperately seeks to present in order to ‘offer us a chance to stabilise the uncertainties of existence’,¹³⁴ feminist biography must, in turn, avoid enforcing an artificial sense of commonality between women and creating an impossibly coherent, singular identity for its particular subjects. It must, then, accept multiplicity and difference as inherent when considering women’s experiences in life. Rather than relying on conceptualising this difference in terms of mutually exclusive opposites, however, it becomes, within this context, ‘polymorphous and groundless’, ‘a phenomenon that is constantly constructed, reconstructed, performed, and deconstructed’.¹³⁵ At the same time, the genre’s acknowledgement of the individual subject’s changeable and complex – rather than fixed and singular – identities can lead to productive reassessments and deconstructions of women’s roles. As Stanley suggests, feminist biography ‘can show us as quite no other kind of writing can that “power” and “powerlessness” are complex matters, most certainly not two poles of a dichotomy but often co-existent in the same piece of behaviour done by the same person at exactly the same moment in time’.¹³⁶ Feminist biography, then, builds on the multiplicity of women’s experiences based on their respective circumstances (including for example ‘time, place, gender, community, education, religious and political conviction, sexual preference, race and ethnicity [and] class’),¹³⁷ while also accepting the multiplicity and complexity of its individual subjects. In doing so, it ‘[shows] the importance of, *and* the indomitable uniqueness of people who share social structural similarities’.¹³⁸

In order to break out of ‘the prison created by the need for the coherent self’ and to challenge the notions on which this need is based,¹³⁹ feminist life writing must,

¹³⁴ Evans, *Missing Persons*, p.1 and p.131.

¹³⁵ ‘history, postmodern’, p.177.

¹³⁶ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.165.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.243.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Evans, *Missing Persons*, p.23.

furthermore, push the artificial boundaries traditional biography has imposed on the self and on the narratives which illustrate that self. This approach includes, first of all, a subversion of the traditional physical and psychological limits of biographical enquiry. Instead of considering its subjects in isolation and ‘[training] a spotlight on them and them alone’,¹⁴⁰ feminist biography, like third-wave feminism, considers identities as ‘ways in which people come to understand who they are in relationship to others and the social world’.¹⁴¹ ‘No person,’ Stanley contends, ‘is an island complete of itself’, and writers of feminist biography must, consequently, ‘[reject] a narrow version of “self” and [argue] for its social construction within a network of others’, a construction which can demonstrate how much subjects ‘share with their peers and also that *everyone* is in some sense unique’.¹⁴² Considering the biographical subject within their social networks can, however, not only give us a more complex sense of the subject themselves but it can also paint a picture of the historical contexts in which they existed. As Barry puts it, biography ‘reveals society and history if we follow the subject into her interactions with others, through the networks and constellations from which she moves into and through society, through political and economic structures, from the past toward the future with the history which brought her to these present interactions’.¹⁴³

A second limitation which feminist life writing attempts to lift is the notion that a biographical story must begin with birth or childhood and conclude in death. Receptions and representations of a subject and their work beyond their physical lifetime undoubtedly create a presence which may well be considered part of a biographical narrative, continuing the constant construction and reconstruction of the subject and its identities. Consequently, Sharon O’Brien suggests, ‘we might want to ask whether struggles over possession of papers and manuscripts as well as representation and

¹⁴⁰ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.9

¹⁴¹ ‘identity’, *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, Vol.1, ed. by Leslie Heywood (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp.181-183 (p181).

¹⁴² Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.10, p.14 and p.250.

¹⁴³ Barry, ‘The New Historical Syntheses’, p.101.

reputation constitute part of the “life story” stretching well beyond the writer’s death’.¹⁴⁴ While these start and end points require reconsideration, we must also negotiate afresh the order in which the developments between them are presented by challenging and destabilising accepted narrative structures which enforce an artificial chronology upon the life and identities of a biographical subject.

If, overall, feminist critics and life writers challenge us to class biography as an artificial product, ‘a mythical construct of our society and our social needs’,¹⁴⁵ and, therefore, as a form of fiction rather than non-fiction, the suitability of neo-Victorian fiction as a genre for feminist biographical practice is perhaps not surprising. Neo-Victorian fiction, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is not simply a nostalgic revisiting or critical reassessing of the past but a clear and cogent reflection of the society and culture in which it is conceived. Likewise, Evans observes that the biographies of historical women – in the shape of fiction or non-fiction – serve as a reclamation of the past which is,

ideally, not just a voyage back into the history of a particular group, but equally a reclamation of the present. Whatever we may wish to say about the past, it cannot be relived, whereas the reinterpretation of history, the recognition of marginal, disenfranchised and powerless groups can serve to empower in the present.¹⁴⁶

If biography cannot ‘sever its links with narrative fiction’ then the utilisation of the neo-Victorian genre and its overtly fictional nature can support rather than detract from the aims and effectiveness of feminist life writing.¹⁴⁷ As Stanley emphasises, admitting to the artificial nature of biography and employing the self-conscious methods of feminist life writing ‘does not mean that such writings have no points of connection with the material realities of everyday life’; rather, it highlights the intricacies of the connection between literary representation and life as an individual lives and perceives it.¹⁴⁸ Neo-

¹⁴⁴ O’Brien, ‘Feminist Theory and Literary Biography’, p.131.

¹⁴⁵ Evans, *Missing Persons*, p.1.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.9-10.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁴⁸ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.243.

Victorian fiction, through its revisiting of the historical past and its fictional nature, can facilitate the negotiation of realism and a postmodern rejection of it, neither of which, according to Stanley, 'will do' in the case of feminist biography and for the representation of women's lives.¹⁴⁹

However, neo-Victorian fiction also shares common features with mainstream biography, most notably in its obsession with the revelation of sexual detail. Evans illustrates that since the early twentieth century and the publication of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), mainstream biography has become more and more revelatory, particularly regarding the details of its subjects' sex lives.¹⁵⁰ The 1960s witnessed an increasing (and more public) concern with matters of sex/uality and it was again Lytton Strachey who marked a significant development in the history of life writing, albeit this time as the subject rather than writer of biography.¹⁵¹ Michael Holroyd's 1967 biography of Strachey was the first to illustrate explicitly in meticulous detail the (homo)sexual practices of the Bloomsbury group. Holroyd's work, as Evans puts it, thus 'shift[ed] the boundaries of revelation' within the genre of biography by revealing aspects of the biographical subject's identity which had previously remained private and hidden from public view.¹⁵² Modern biography, to this day, has become defined by this idea of complete revelation, by the desire of the author to expose and by the reader to know more about the biographical subject, including a familiarity with their most intimate psychological and, most importantly, sexual details. Evans critiques modern biography because its revelatory tendencies mean 'we are no longer left alone with our fantasies, our conjectures and guesses about individual people; the

¹⁴⁹ Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p.243.

¹⁵⁰ Strachey's famous portrayals of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Thomas Arnold and General Gordon not only defied the Victorian maintenance and celebration of respectable public lives but functioned, in David Harvey's words, as their 'creative destruction'. In his use of psychoanalytic theory as a means of uncovering so far untouched layers of a person's identity, Strachey possessed 'a supremely effective weapon with which to attempt to reveal the reality behind public facades'. See: David Harvey, *The Condition of Post-Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.19.

¹⁵¹ Evans, *Missing Persons*, p.3.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

“colouring in” is done for us’.¹⁵³ However, as an analysis of the fictionalised biographies of Catherine Hogarth (Charles Dickens’ wife) and Welsh painter Gwen John illustrates, neo-Victorian biographical fiction, like ‘auto/biography, provides us with the voyeuristic pleasures of experience’,¹⁵⁴ while also encouraging us to contribute to the re-imagining of its biographical subjects and, by extension, ‘to question and further develop feminist, as well as conventional, assumptions regarding the writing of history and biography’.¹⁵⁵

Subverting the Dickensian gaze: the feminist lives of Catherine Dickens

While some works of neo-Victorian biographical fiction give voice to previously silenced or ignored figures such as Saartjie Baartman (the ‘Hottentot Venus’) or Elizabeth Wilson (Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s lady’s maid), others rewrite the life stories of better known figures such as Isabella Beecher Hooker and Harriet Beecher Stowe or Constance Fenimore Woolson. The woman whose literary recovery lies at the heart of Hebe Elmsa’s *Unwanted Wife: A Defence of Mrs. Charles Dickens* (1963) and Gaynor Arnold’s *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), however, has long remained famous and anonymous at the same time. Mrs. Charles Dickens is well known as the wife of the great Victorian author; yet the person hidden behind this marital name, Catherine Hogarth, has only recently come to light when increased scholarly interest in her identity and character motivated first a study of her book of recipes and,¹⁵⁶ most recently, Arnold’s novel.

Hogarth was born in Scotland in 1815 and moved to England together with her family in 1834. In the same year, she first met Charles Dickens, who had secured her

¹⁵³ Evans, *Missing Persons*, p.6.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.143.

¹⁵⁵ Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects*, p.161.

¹⁵⁶ See: Susan M. Rossi-Wilcox, Rossi-Wilcox, Susan M. *Dinner for Dickens: The Culinary History of Mrs Charles Dickens’s Menu Books* (Blackawton: Prospect Books, 2005). Rossi-Wilcox’s study investigates Hogarth’s book of recipes and uses it as an illuminating framework through which we gain new perspectives on Hogarth’s life, her domestic abilities and her relationship to Dickens.

father as one of his early benefactors. She and Charles became engaged in 1835 and married in April 1836. Not long after, their first child was conceived and from then on Hogarth spent most of her married life pregnant. Between 1837 and 1852 she bore her famous husband ten children and suffered several miscarriages. Hogarth's sister Georgina joined the Dickens household in 1842 as companion and helper to her elder sister, who by then had four children in her care. Hogarth's book of recipes, *What Shall We Have for Dinner? Satisfactorily Answered by Numerous Bills of Fare for from Two to Eighteen Persons*,¹⁵⁷ was first published in 1851 under the pseudonym Lady Maria Clutterbuck and subsequently went through five (known) editions.

By 1858, Charles had convinced himself not only that he and Catherine were no longer suited for each other but also claimed that he had never really loved her in the first instance (despite letters from their courtship which give quite a different impression). To Catherine's and her parents' surprise and anger, Georgina sided with Charles after the couple's separation and remained at Tavistock House, causing the rumour of an incestuous relationship between Dickens and his sister-in-law, something which Charles tried to silence publicly through a statement printed in various newspapers and magazines. Meanwhile, eldest son Charley, then twenty-one, continued living with his mother at the modest house for which Catherine had settled in addition to one servant and an annual allowance. As has by now become popular through, amongst other accounts, Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (1990) and Channel 4's series *Dickens' Secret Lover* (2008), Charles was at the time having an affair with the young actress Ellen Ternan, who is thought to have been the major reason for his leaving his wife. Catherine, who was eventually reconciled with Georgina, died of cancer in 1879 and left some of the letters she had

¹⁵⁷ Lady Maria Clutterbuck, *What Shall We Have for Dinner? Satisfactorily Answered by Numerous Bills of Fare for from Two to Eighteen Persons* (London: Bredbury and Evans, 1851), Accessed: 1 May 2009, <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=dT4CAAAAQAAJ&dq=clutterbuck%2C%20dinner&pg=PP7#v=onepage&q&f=false>. The book was reprinted by Kessinger Publishing in 2008 and a transcript of the 1852 edition and 1854 appendix is provided in: Rossi-Wilcox, *Dinner for Dickens*, pp.20-74.

received from her husband in the happier years of their marriage to the British Museum to ensure ‘that the world may know he loved me once’,¹⁵⁸ a phrase now frequently quoted by scholars. Despite the title of Tomalin’s study of Dickens’ mistress, there was certainly more than one woman rendered invisible by the Dickensian shadow. While new light is being shed on Ellen and Catherine through recent and forthcoming publications,¹⁵⁹ Georgina’s life and character, for example, still remain mostly in darkness.¹⁶⁰

Although this thesis focuses exclusively on neo-Victorian fiction, it is worth considering Elsna’s non-fictional *Unwanted Wife*, the first ever biography of Hogarth, which is feminist in its approach but, unlike Arnold’s novel, does not employ the strategies which would become so central to feminist theory and feminist life writing only years after its publication. From as early as the proclamation of its title on the front cover, Elsna’s text raises numerous questions for a twenty-first century feminist reader. Her intention, so the title tells us, is to write ‘a defence’ of Hogarth, an ambition which – given that up until the later decades of the twentieth century most Dickens scholars had believed the author’s illustrations of his wife as a dull and incompetent wife, mother and housekeeper – seems a justified aim. However, the question arises why an author with the feminist intention of defending Hogarth would rob her subject of her rightful name by referring to her as ‘Mrs. Charles Dickens’ in her subtitle. By reducing Catherine’s identity to her status as her husband’s wife – his property – Elsna’s title reinforces the invisibility of the woman which the text supposedly sets out to defend. Of course the omission of Catherine’s name may, instead, be a way of indicating from the very beginning that, as Charles Dickens’ wife, she was no person in her own right.

¹⁵⁸ Catherine Dickens, cited in Rossi-Wilcox, *Dinner for Dickens*, p.305.

¹⁵⁹ See: Rossi-Wilcox, *Dinner for Dickens*; and Lillian Nayder, *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁰ The only biography of Georgina Hogarth, now over fifty years old, is Arthur A. Adrian’s *Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Alternatively, it may be a means of emphasising that ‘Mrs. Charles Dickens’ was a role fulfilled by more than one woman: Mary, the sister-in-law whom Dickens idealised and who died in his arms; Georgina, the sister-in-law who ran his household after Catherine had been forced to leave; and his mistress, Ellen Ternan, who was at his side when he died. Or is the choice of ‘Mrs. Charles Dickens’ simply a marketing strategy built on the consciousness that few potential readers may recognise Catherine Hogarth or even Catherine Dickens as the wife of the famous Victorian author?

If the title of Elsna’s work is thus – from a feminist viewpoint – confusing, structure and content do not add much (positive) clarification. It is Georgina joining the Dickens household which introduces the narrative and it is her rather than Hogarth’s death which concludes it. As in the title, Catherine remains unnamed on the opening page, something not too unusual if Elsna were not focusing, instead, on Georgina and once again making Catherine nothing more than Dickens’ wife: ‘In the year 1842 a little girl of fourteen [...] left her parents’ home to become the companion of her elder, married sister, and to act as nursery governess to that sister’s young children. Her name was Georgina Hogarth, and her twenty-six-year-old sister was the wife of Charles Dickens’.¹⁶¹ The figures which, to the author, seem worth naming, here, are clearly Georgina and Charles.

Unwanted Wife focuses on Catherine’s life from her courtship and engagement onwards. Her relationship to Charles is portrayed as an entirely unhappy one from start to finish. ‘More than once,’ Elsna imagines, ‘Catherine must have considered breaking off the engagement, for Charles made little or no attempt to please or understand her. To address a beautiful, nineteen-year-old girl as “Dearest Pig” was scarcely complimentary’ (*UW*, 18). Elsna’s descriptions of Charles as a husband grow increasingly condemnatory

¹⁶¹ Hebe Elsna, *Unwanted Wife: A Defence of Mrs. Charles Dickens* (London: Jarrolds Publisher, 1963), p.13. Hereafter this text is referred to as *UW* after quotations in the text.

throughout the text. Commenting on the couple's frequent travels during Catherine's pregnancies, the author illustrates how 'before Charles lost all interest in her [Catherine] he dragged her hither and thither at his will, often under most uncomfortable conditions' (*UW*, 114). Her final verdict on their relationship and marriage goes even further: 'In truth, this gentle, religious, loving woman, who bore no malice against the husband who treated her so callously, has been as badly served by posterity as she was by the genius with the sadistic impulses whom she had the great misfortune to marry' (*UW*, 115).

During and after the separation, Elzna portrays Catherine as a woman who, ironically because of her status as victim, was empowered to some extent, but who selflessly ignored her advantageous position for Charles' good. We are reminded that Catherine could have made her husband 'appear as the unpopular figure in a matrimonial *cause célèbre*, to be cut by his friends, denigrated in the eyes of the world, perhaps asked to resign from his clubs,' knowing that these 'would be blows from which he would never recover' (*UW*, 115). His wife, however, 'finally and quietly [...] decided that this must not be, for the sacrifice she would be called upon to make would be small in comparison' (*UW*, 115). This martyr-like representation of Catherine, who sacrifices her reputation for the well-being of Charles and the children, culminates in Elzna's opinion on Catherine's character and in her illustration of her reconciliation with Georgina. Charles had published a letter and a statement in which he openly accused Catherine of being a bad mother and wife and biographers have often considered Catherine as a weak personality for settling for an allowance and a house without fighting for her standing and the custody of her children. Elzna, however, argues that Catherine's behaviour and decisions were quite the opposite: to her, they illustrate a strength of character achieved through 'her deep sense of religion, [...] her dignity, her self-respect and the compassion which reached out to her intransigent husband' (*UW*, 109) – in short, her infinite selflessness as mother and wife and her resemblance (if not

in Charles' eyes) to the perfect Victorian middle-class woman.

Catherine's role in the text as the angelic victim of the cruel Charles is reinforced by Elzna's portrayal of Georgina – who has often been made at least partly responsible for the break-up of the marriage – as a young, calculated villainess. Initially, Elzna considers Georgina's course in life as resulting from parental neglect and Charles' manipulative influence. Having witnessed Dickens' dubious obsession with Mary, Catherine's mother should, so Elzna argues, have prevented Georgina from following in her sister's steps: 'From the moment that Charles professed to see "a second Mary" in the little Georgy, maternal apprehension should surely have been aroused and Georgy forthwith removed from Devonshire Terrace' (*UW*, 23). Initially, Georgina also seems blameless when it comes to her relationship to the great writer. 'The child,' Elzna explains, 'was [...] inevitably exposed to all the fascination and flattery of the brilliant Charles, who [...] did seduce her loyalty, and so filled her thoughts and captured her spirit that any idea of marriage and a home of her own was swept from her mind' (*UW*, 23).

Not long after, however, the narrative transforms Georgina into a scheming young woman, both in her behaviour towards Charles and towards Catherine. We read of how 'the seventeen-year-old came to certain decisions. From her point of view the most important thing in the world was to make herself so essential to Charles that he could not contemplate life without her' (*UW*, 25). Henceforth, Georgina – 'the cat who walked alone' (*UW*, 27) – supposedly utilised 'uncritical adoration' and 'a constant, never-failing interest in his work' (*UW*, 25-6) in order to secure Charles' trust. Elzna is determined that 'Georgina loved only Georgina. There was Charles, and she wrapped herself around him, but does the ivy necessarily love the wall to which it clings for support?' (*UW*, 27). Realising that Catherine becomes more and more irritating rather than dearer to Charles, Georgina, the schemer, is unable to understand how her sister can

be ignorant of the means her legal and emotional relationship to Charles provide her to fix the marriage: ‘She [Catherine], as Charles’s wife, held so many good cards but seemed to be completely unaware of it’ (*UW*, 104).

Georgina’s role as exploitative sister reaches a climax when Elzna describes the day Catherine leaves the family home (then Tavistock House), unknown to her, for the last time. After a severe argument between Charles and Catherine, her parents came to console their daughter, while her furious husband left the house telling only Georgina that he would not return until his wife and her family had been forever removed from his home. Unaware of this, Catherine and her parents decided to go on a short holiday, which was, ironically, supposed to make Charles believe that Catherine had left him forever and hence bring him to his senses and beg her forgiveness for his transgressions. Georgina, who ‘had visioned power, and [...] now worked for her own ends’ (*UW*, 26) knew that their departure was exactly what Charles wanted, but made no attempt to prevent her sister from leaving. Elzna, pitying Catherine and her parents, notes that ‘it was, poor souls, beyond their comprehension that Catherine was now not of the slightest value to him [Charles]’ (*UW*, 109). Later, Georgina thus becomes ‘the traitor who with the one word “Stay” could have prevented her [sister’s] departure’ (*UW*, 109). This scene and the subsequent silence between the sisters until Catherine fell fatally ill serves, once again, only to dramatize and emphasize Catherine’s saintly character. Not long before her death, Catherine tells Georgina that she saw ‘no occasion’ (*UW*, 225) for her sister’s remorse, as ‘circumstances had been against them all’ (*UW*, 225).

Consequently, the younger sister’s villainous role in *Unwanted Wife* does not only reinforce Catherine’s status as helpless and ignorant victim (of both Charles and Georgina) but it also absorbs her sister’s part as the supposed protagonist of the text. Elzna’s choice of title, then, seems indicative of her treatment of Hogarth. *Unwanted Wife* is indeed a defence of a woman who fell prey to her husband and sister-in-law, a

victim who has remained silent and, hence, must be heard. However, the voice Elsna gives Hogarth is at best a pitiful and reductive one and, in fact, hardly a voice at all. Like the marital name used in her title, Elsna actively undermines Catherine as a woman and as an autonomous being by silencing her through a focus on Georgina and, if representing Catherine at all, making her a characterless martyr to femininity, a symbolic victim of patriarchy. But despite textually re-inscribing the oppression she seeks to highlight, Elsna's portrayal of Catherine manages to illustrate the shortcomings of previous representations of Catherine by biographers who adopted Charles' view of her and hence illustrated Catherine as the incompetent wife who was not a victim, but who instead made her husband the victim of her supposed shortcomings in the feminine roles assigned to her. Not dissimilar to Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces*, discussed in Chapter Two, *Unwanted Wife*, then, illustrates the processes involved in the silencing of a woman's life, while at the same time contributing to them.

The first obvious difference in Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* is that Arnold's work is a novel, a proclaimed work of fiction, which reinvents Catherine's voice through the first-person narrative of Dorothea (Dodo) Gibson, wife of famous and eccentric writer Alfred Gibson. Whereas Elsna claims a certain amount of truthfulness through her traditional biographical narrative, Arnold has no such pretensions and admits, in her afterword, that although the text is a thinly veiled biography of Catherine Dickens, it takes many creative liberties. Unlike *Unwanted Wife*, *Girl in a Blue Dress* leaves no doubt as to whose narrative this is and, in contrast to both Elsna and Rossi-Wilcox, the fictional Catherine's life does not begin with her engagement to the famous writer but, rather symbolically, with his death: 'My husband's funeral,' Dorothea Gibson begins her narrative, 'is today'.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Gaynor Arnold, *Girl in a Blue Dress* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2008), p.1. Hereafter this text is referred to as *BD* after quotations in the text.

Whereas Elzna writes Catherine as the angelical woman Dickens advocates in so many of his novels (but whom he obviously did not see in his own wife), Arnold, in turn, uses some of Dickens' fictional characters and conflates them with members of the Dickens family. Most significant for my discussion is, of course, Arnold's choice to name her fictional Catherine Dorothea (or, more frequently, Dodo). While the phonetic resemblance to Dora of Dickens' *David Copperfield* may be a vague one, the characteristics and life of David's first wife can easily be mapped onto Dickens' later opinions of Catherine and they also shape Arnold's treatment of Dodo in *Girl in a Blue Dress*. Dickens' Dora suffers a (fatal) miscarriage and, by the time Charles had started writing *David Copperfield*, Catherine had already lost more than one child during pregnancy. Unlike Elzna, Arnold portrays an extremely passionate and loving courtship between Alfred and Dodo, modelling it on David's dandyish pursuit of Dora. Dodo recalls how Alfred fell in love with her for her beauty and tells us that her looks were 'why he first loved me, after all. *You are so beautiful, Dodo, I'm the luckiest man in the world!*' (*BD*, 65). 'During our engagement,' she continues, 'there was nothing he wouldn't do for me. He made me laugh when I was with him, and when we were apart, his letters made me cry with pleasure' (*BD*, 65). The only obstacle during their engagement is Arnold's invented disapproval of Dodo's father, who is soon pacified by the arrangements of a prolonged engagement.

As Catherine Waters observes, the flaw of *David Copperfield's* Dora is her 'failure to comprehend domestic economy,' making her 'an inappropriate partner for the hero of middle-class self-making'.¹⁶³ This 'failure' is adopted in Arnold's novel, but prompts an affectionate and patient response from Alfred. When he asks Dodo, 'Let us imagine we were married, Dodo. How should you propose to spend the princely sum [of fifteen shillings a week]?' (*BD*, 65), she admits to the reader that she 'never had any

¹⁶³ Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.168.

reasons to make proposals about money, and [...] could not imagine how to do it' (*BD*, 65). Embarrassed by Alfred's exposing of her incompetence, she tells us: 'I had always thought myself practical, someone with housewifely skills in darning and sewing and mending, in arranging flowers, and decorating a screen. But I realized suddenly that I knew nothing of importance' (*BD*, 66). What Arnold emphasizes here through her appropriation of Dickens' Dora is that even if Catherine had been a bad housekeeper, it would have been most likely due to her upbringing and the impracticality of the typical accomplishments ladies of the time were expected to possess. Having helped Dodo to arrive at some of the more simple conclusions regarding the running of a house, Alfred good-naturedly comments, 'Excellent. At the advanced age of twenty, Miss Dodo learns to keep house!' (*BD*, 66).

Sexuality is a topic which Elzna omits, representing Catherine's numerous pregnancies as if they were the results of acts which occurred on account of Charles' rather than Catherine's affections. Arnold, however, utilizes the fictional nature of her work in order to imaginatively fill in some of the gaps which historical documentation has left. Throughout Dodo's accounts we are given the impression that she physically desired Alfred as much as he desired her. In the course of relating the period of their engagement, she mentions the intimate nature of some of Alfred's letters: 'Sometimes I'd read passages to Alice and Sissy [Mary and Georgina], although there were other passages I kept to myself – passages that made me blush; that made me long for the day when we'd be married' (*BD*, 65). Later, she explains that sex was an enjoyable past-time to her, but also one of the only ways of being truly intimate with an author who considered himself as a public possession: 'Many women complain of the demands of the bedchamber, but bedtime was for me only part of the day when I felt my husband was truly mine; when he did not belong to his friends, his readers or the entire population of England. And although I had to admit he became less ardent as our

marriage progressed, he was always as kind to me as on our wedding night – the night when I'd truly felt myself to be the happiest woman on earth' (*BD*, 220). While sex and sexuality have by now certainly become compulsory components in neo-Victorian fiction, it is also an aspect which adds to the likeability of Dodo for contemporary women, to whom sexuality, arguably, has become a defining aspect of identity.

Because of Dodo's passion for her husband, motherhood is also a problematized topic, rendering the Catherine stand-in more contemporary and less of a perfect Victorian wife. During her first pregnancies, Dodo is not, as Catherine in *Unwanted Wife*, an idealized mother figure. Instead, having become pregnant immediately after her wedding, she is torn between happiness and doubt, wondering whether it is not too early for her and Alfred to go from being a loving couple to being parents. When pregnant for the second time, Dodo hopes to find advice and sympathy in Alfred's sister and explains:

Alfred may love children [...] but he doesn't have to carry them inside him for nine months and nurse them for goodness knows how long afterwards! I know it is our women's lot – but I feel so *very despondent* when I'm carrying, and no doubt I shall be looking excessively fat before the month is out. Is it so selfish to want a breathing space? A chance for Alfred and me to be sweethearts again? (*BD*, 133)

When it comes the novel's treatment of Georgina (or, as she is called in Arnold's text, Sissy), we do not quite find the selfish villainess with which we were presented in *Unwanted Wife*. Although Arnold portrays Sissy as highly influential, Dodo is anything but ignorant of her sister's dominance in the household or her own status within it. She remembers complaining to Alfred, 'I am no longer mistress in my own home [...] Sissy keeps all the keys in her possession, and today I can't even arrange the flowers in the drawing room because she has done them already' (*BD*, 203). The reference to Sissy as the keeper of the keys is reminiscent of the symbolic value keys hold in fictional Dickensian households such as that in *Bleak House*. Esther Summerson, who is entrusted with all the keys to the Jarndyce residence, is at the same time also the keeper

of everyone's secrets, the trustworthy confidante. It is, thus, not only the keys which have changed possession from Dodo to Sissy, but also Alfred's trust and Dodo's role as the head of domestic affairs. While she is aware that due to her many pregnancies and ill health she 'quickly came to live up to' the description 'poor Dodo' (*BD*, 202), she also acknowledges that, to some extent, she was not given the chance to be anything more: 'As soon as she [Sissy] learnt that Fanny was expected,' Dodo observes, 'Sissy began to treat me as an invalid' (*BD*, 202). Nevertheless, Arnold does not simplify Georgina's role the way Elzna does and presents us with the other side of the story. The sisters' meeting and reconciliation after Alfred's death is, however, neither a quick nor an easy one. One of the most significant points of discussion for the sisters is, for example, the problematic question of who has the right to being called his widow – the woman who took care of his household for the ten years preceding his death, his lawful (if separated) wife who had not seen him in over a decade by the time died, or his mistress, who was at his bedside when he passed away. Whereas to Dodo Alfred had been virtually dead since their separation, for Sissy, she notes, 'it is all so fresh and raw,' so much so that her sister claims, 'I feel exactly like a widow' (*BD*, 239).

Wilhelmina Ricketts, Alfred's mistress, is also given a voice and Dodo's meeting with her forms the dramatic finale of the novel. As she grows bolder through her reflections after Alfred's death, Dodo eventually decides to visit Miss Ricketts in the house in which Alfred installed his lover and her mother. Throughout the scene we are, again, provided with an image of a tormented and torn Dodo, condemning Wilhelmina and Alfred on the one hand, but blaming herself – her lack of intellect and her declining looks – for her husband's unfaithfulness. When mistress and wife finally meet, we hear from the former about the difficulty of her position, of the fact that she was not simply the well-kept mistress but, instead, had to sacrifice her propriety as well as her active lifestyle as an actress for the reclusiveness of a quiet cottage.

In a discussion between Rossi-Wilcox and John Sutherland on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, Sutherland remarked on how, by now, the actually invisible women in the Dickens history were 'the servant girls', none of whom could be named even after Rossi-Wilcox's thorough research.¹⁶⁴ Once again, where archives fail us, Arnold supplements fact with fiction and even lends Dodo's maids a voice to express their opinions on the marriage break-up and the influence it had on them during and after the separation. Dodo's servant Wilson is a comically grumpy but also exceptionally frank character, giving her mistress loyal service in the difficult years after her separation. Bessie, a maid previously employed at Tavistock House when Alfred's wife was still its mistress, comes to visit Dodo and we witness a clash of ranks between the new and the old servant. Their characters are by no means explored in depth, but, nevertheless, Arnold handles their voices carefully enough to warrant the statement that no female voice is lost in *Girl in a Blue Dress*. The novel is not only a revision of Catherine but also of many more parties – including Catherine's children – whose identities have largely been lost in Dickens' shadow.

Reviews of Arnold's novel have, not surprisingly, been varied and include praise for her original and credible representation of Charles and Catherine Dickens, to critique for her openly feminist take on their life stories. One reviewer finds a particular flaw in Arnold's 'clunking attempts to shoehorn a distinctly 20th-century feminist perspective' onto Catherine's marriage and separation. To critique *Girl in a Blue Dress* for assuming a contemporary feminist view is to imply that it is possible to discard one's historical, political and personal background when (re-)writing a life story. Such criticism confirms, then, 'that [at the start of the twenty-first century] what counts as the biographical self in the western marketplace by and large remains wedded to quite

¹⁶⁴ 'Dinner for Dickens', *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4 (6 September 2005), Accessed: 27 July 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/2005_36_tue_03.shtml

conventional narrative forms',¹⁶⁵ that is, to the assumption that a biographer's narrative of a subject is transparent and wholly uninfluenced by critical, historical, personal or political frameworks.

Arnold's ending makes clear that this is neither her aim nor a possibility. Reminiscent of the ghosts visiting Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Alfred appears to Dodo in a dream and asks her to continue the novel he left unfinished after his death. Having reminded him that he once accused her of having 'no imagination' (*BD*, 414), Dodo receives the following reply: 'Oh, you don't believe everything I say, do you? I'm a story-teller. We are, as a species, notoriously unreliable' (*BD*, 414). Eventually, she resolves, 'Stay home I shall, but I do not plan to go back to my old, idle ways. I almost feel I have Alfred's blood running through my veins. I go to the little desk, and pull a sheaf of paper towards me. I take up my pen. I hold it high up so I don't dirty my fingers. I dip it in the ink. And I start to write' (*BD*, 438). The narrative makes clear that Dodo intends to finish her husband's work and, like Arnold, she will make Dickens' text her own, using the existing material in order to create her own narrative, to find her own voice. Arnold's allusion to *David Copperfield's* Dora allow her to illustrate how Catherine has been trapped in the character her husband, the 'notoriously unreliable' story-teller, assigned to her through his fiction and his public statements, a character which biographers later often co-opted as an unquestionable truth rather than a partial product of Dickens' imagination. Consequently, Alfred Gibson's death enables Dodo to recreate herself beyond this period-transcending existence as a supposedly weak and unintelligent woman. Arnold does not end her story of Catherine with her subject's death, but, instead, the novel finishes with an optimistic hint towards Dodo's future life of activity and initiative.

Arnold, then, subverts Dickens' Dora in order to liberate and rewrite Catherine as

¹⁶⁵ Marilyn Booth and Antoinette Burton. 'Editor's Note', *Journal of Women's History*, 21:3 (Fall 2009), pp.7-12 (p.7).

a woman, lending her subject a voice which despite but also because of its fictional nature does not, like Elzsa's, overwrite the woman it attempts to represent. Arnold refuses to provide us with a traditionally coherent picture of Catherine and, instead, emphasizes her narrator's often contradictory and changing emotions, Dodo's constant struggle between self-pity and confidence, regret and optimism. Indeed, Dodo's dilemmas regarding sexuality and motherhood as well as her conflicting feelings towards Alfred reflect the kind of contradiction which has become characteristic of many women's lives today and which has arisen, largely, because of the supposedly liberating choices they have been given as a result of the feminist movement. Arnold's novel thus moves towards 'the possibility that the female subject may occupy many 'subject positions', positions that vary according to 'class, race, sexual preference, family status, and age' and are not mutually exclusive.¹⁶⁶ There is, then, not only diversity and contradiction within the lives of different women but potentially also within each woman, and both of these notions are realised in *Girl in a Blue Dress*. In Dorothea Gibson, Arnold revives Catherine Dickens and renders a historical life relevant for contemporary female readers by using it as a means to articulate the conflicts which arise out of women's diverse backgrounds and the many co-existing roles they inhabit in their lives as (single) mothers, wives, housewives, sexually desiring and desired beings and/or successful career persons. Arnold's fragmented and contradictory depictions of Catherine, as well as her emphasis on the other female voices silenced during Dickens' life and in his biographies, contribute to 'the [third-wave] development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity'.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ O'Brien, 'Feminist Theory and Literary Biography', p.130.

¹⁶⁷ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, 'Introduction', *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.1-24 (p.3).

Arnold presents us with a picture of who Catherine Hogarth may have been, while also reflecting the significance her life holds for contemporary feminists and pointing towards the future contributions yet to be made to this picture. *Girl in a Blue Dress* successfully uncovers the processes involved in the neglect and misrepresentation of Catherine as a biographical subject, reinforcing that ‘critical feminist biography entails analysis of purposeful forgetting as much as it does the rematerializing of the biographical subject’.¹⁶⁸ Yet, the novel’s ending also indicates that she remains inevitably defined as his wife/ widow. We do not know the liberties she plans to take with his book, or if she will even attempt to finish it, or if in picking up the pen at the end of the novel she commences the book we are reading (as in Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage*, for example). Any portrait of Catherine remains therefore inescapably haunted by Dickens’ ghost.

Gendering art, space and identity: *Keeping the World Away*

Forster’s *Keeping the World Away*, like Arnold’s novel, concerns itself with the life of a woman who, until the 1960s, had often remained in the shadow of the famous men who surrounded her. Continuing her interest in the life stories of historical women,¹⁶⁹ Forster takes as her starting point the childhood and early career of Welsh painter Gwen John, whose work had largely been neglected in favour of that of her brother Augustus, and who had once been primarily known as the mistress of famous sculptor Auguste Rodin. It was during the onset of the Women’s Liberation Movement that feminists began to acknowledge the significance of John’s portraits and of her intense studies of female nudes. Since then, her work has been exhibited in the *Tate Britain* and the Welsh

¹⁶⁸ Booth and Burton, ‘Editor’s Note’, p.9.

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, her earlier works *Lady’s Maid* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) and *Good Wives? Mary, Fanny, Jenny and Me* (2002). The former is a fictionalised account of Elizabeth Wilson’s experiences as a lady’s maid to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, while the latter compares Forster’s own experiences as a woman and wife to the lives of Mary Livingstone, Fanny Stevenson and Jennie Lee.

National Museum and Gallery,¹⁷⁰ and her life has inspired numerous biographies which render her more than the one-time mistress of Rodin and the sister of Augustus (whose work is now, ironically, often overlooked and his talent frequently considered inferior to his sister's).¹⁷¹

Forster's fictionalised account of Gwen John spans the years of her childhood, spent in Haverfordwest and later in Tenby, her education at London's Slade School of Art, and her years in Paris as a model and as Rodin's mistress. However, it is here that the novel breaks with biographical tradition as we subsequently follow not the painter's life but, instead, the journey of one of her paintings. Forster's fictional version of John's *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* (1907-1909) traces its conception by John and, later, its perception by other women throughout the twentieth century. In contrast to Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women*, discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, *Keeping the World Away* does not connect women's stories through familial, genealogical ties; rather the stories of Forster's women are connected through John's painting, the space it portrays and their respective relationships to the painting and that space. Rather than framing her subject by her birth and death, Forster challenges the boundaries of biography by exploring John's life through the life of her painting, the ways it is perceived by women who behold it after Gwen, and through the lives of those women. Female identities are constructed and represented, then, through and around gendered spaces, their artistic representations and women's relationships to both.

Forster's novel is divided into four parts, each one dedicated to a different woman

¹⁷⁰ See: 'Gwen John and Augustus John', *Tate Britain*, 29 September 2004 – 9 January 2005, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/john/>.

¹⁷¹ Augustus' prediction that 'in 50 years' time I will be known as the brother of Gwen John' is much quoted by biographers of the siblings. For works on the life and art of Gwen John see: David Fraser Jenkins and Chris Stephens, *Gwen John and Augustus John* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2004); Alicia Foster, *Gwen John* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999); Cecily Langdale, *Gwen John* (New Haven: Yale University Press); Cecily Langdale and David Fraser Jenkins, *Gwen John: An Interior Life* (1986); and Mary Taubman, *Gwen John: The Artist and Her Work* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Candida Cave's play 'Still Lives', performed at the *Tate Britain* in 2004, explores the relationships between Gwen, her brother's wife Ida, and her brother's mistress Dorelia, who eventually came to live with Augustus, his wife and their children.

who acquires the painting. Part one moves from Gwen's childhood and adolescence to her time in Paris where, after her separation from Rodin, she completes the painting and passes it on to her friend Ursula, who in turn loses it on her journey back to England. In 1908 we meet Charlotte – to whom part two of the novel is dedicated – a young girl from an aristocratic British family with a close relationship to her liberally minded father, Sir Edward, a collector of art. Charlotte comes into the possession of Gwen's painting because Sir Edward accidentally picks up Ursula's case from Lost Property at Victoria Station, and it is from hereon that the identity of its painter becomes unknown to its beholders. While Charlotte and her father are on a tour of Europe and her mother is looking after her pregnant eldest daughter, the painting is stolen from their house in a burglary. We then encounter it again when, after World War I, Alan, a war veteran, purchases it for his partner Stella, an amateur painter who leaves him not long after and sells it to a local potter and his wife, Ginny.

In part four, we meet Lucasta, Ginny's daughter, during World War II and the years immediately following it. Working as a portrait painter after the war, Lucasta decides to give the painting to her lover Paul, a married man, as a parting present when she ends their affair, hoping the image will help him understand her motives for leaving him. After Paul's death in the 1980s, the painting falls into the hands of his widow, Aisla, who had known both about his affair with Lucasta and his subsequent transgressions with other women. When Aisla sells their house to Claudette Verlon, Claudette recognises the painting as the (now very valuable) work of Gwen John. Aisla dies in an accident in Florence and, subsequently, one of her sons sells the painting to Claudette. The final part of the novel is not so much concerned with Claudette as with Aisla's granddaughter Gillian, an art student in present-day London. Gillian, who knows of the painting's existence because its sale has caused a lasting dispute between her father and her uncle, makes it her mission to locate the piece and, through this,

meets Claudette, who eventually decides to include Gillian in her will as the heir to the painting.

It is Gillian's perception of the painting which frames Forster's novel and which introduces us to its central concerns. Already in the preface we are reminded of the instability of meaning and identity when Gillian reflects on the relevance of an artist's biography and intention to their work. The information she received in advance of a visit to a London gallery, she tells us,

seemed irrelevant. Did she need to know where the artist was born, or trained? All that mattered now, surely, were the paintings themselves and what she could see in them. The artist's intention didn't matter, did it? If a painting didn't speak for itself, what use was it? She was convinced that art should be looked at in a *pure* way, uninfluenced by any knowledge of the artist or the circumstances in which it had been painted.¹⁷²

However, Gillian's conviction is soon shaken when, looking at one of Gwen John's works, she finds herself wondering about 'the lives of the actual paintings, especially one of hers. I was wondering where it had been, who had owned it, who had looked at it. And other things – I mean, what effect did it have on the people who have looked it? What has it meant to them, *how* have they looked at it, did they feel the same as I did, did they see what I saw' (*KtWA*, xi). There is never, Gillian's thoughts suggest, a 'pure' way of considering art, of creating meaning, and Forster, one can assume, is as suspicious of the death of the author as Liz Stanley and Kathleen Barry. Rather than discarding biographical information as an interpretive framework, we are forced to consider, instead, whether the various interpretations of Gwen John's paintings and the new narratives they create do not somehow form a part of the artist's own biography, whether the existence of her painting in other people's lives is not an extension of her own life narrative. Forster rejects the possibility of 'pure' reading, of objectively making sense or interpreting. As we come to discover through the novel, these acts are

¹⁷² Margaret Forster, *Keeping the World Away* (London: Vintage, 2006), p.x. Hereafter this text is referred to as *KtWA* after quotations in the text.

always subjective and, more often than not, gendered.

Nevertheless, there is no question that the figure of the author, or in this case of the artist, is itself always a construction, artificially created not only by the beholder of their work, but also by the artist themselves. When we are first introduced to Gwen and to the processes involved in the production of her art, it is significant that we witness her creation of a self-portrait. Representing herself on canvas means, for Gwen, that she must see herself as ‘a person who was not familiar but a stranger and then she could begin to draw’ (*KtWA*, 17). The artist’s vision of herself is, then, not a revelation of the true or ‘real’ Gwen John, but only yet another construction, a representation of how the artist views herself, or, as we soon discover, of how she would like to be perceived. In later attempts at self-portraits, Gwen presents herself ‘full-face and, increasingly, one hand on her hip’, hoping ‘it suggested that she was in control and able to face herself without shame’, while also knowing ‘it was a lie, but she wanted it to be a successful lie, one that would not be questioned’ (*KtWA*, 35).

John has been described by her biographers as an introvert and recluse who harboured hidden passion and energy below the surface, and Forster re-imagines the artist’s negotiation of and struggle with these competing aspects of herself as a painful repression of her feelings. By presenting a certain image of herself through her self-portraits as well as through her behaviour in public, Gwen not only constructs her own identity but also obsessively attempts to obscure the characteristics which she knows are, at turn of the century, considered inappropriate in a woman. Convinced by her own performance, she believes that

no one would doubt her own seriousness [as an artist]. Everything about her spoke of it – her dark, restrained clothing, her solemn expression, her aloof, detached demeanour. But there again they would be wrong. Her mind raced with millions of violent and spectacular thoughts and ideas, and in the centre of herself she stored a passion which might terrify people if they suspected it. It lay coiled inside, powerful, making the occasional twist and thrust through her veins to remind her that it was there, waiting, but still dormant. (*KtWA*, 30)

Equally, after a romantic disappointment, Gwen is pleased that one of her latest self-portraits does not exhibit her emotional pain and, instead, helps her to believe she is what she would like to be: ‘calm and collected, aware of her own strength, a little superior and extremely serious. This was to be a portrait of a woman who was no adornment of the fair sex but a member of a new generation that intended its work to be important [...] Sometimes, she felt she was a mere shadow of a person. Her portrait reassured her that she was not’ (*KtWA*, 45). Her construction and performance of her identity, then, reflect as well as create and reinforce Gwen’s sense of self.

It is Gwen’s relationship to her living space which renders the conflict between the person she knows she is and the person she desires to be most obvious. The significance of the relationship between identity and space becomes clear early on in the novel, when Gwen feels as though ‘she was in a room with Jane Eyre, oppressed by the mahogany and stifled by the red drapes. She fought for breath and there was a hissing in her head. It was the room of her nightmares’ (*KtWA*, 19). Although unlike Jane Eyre Gwen is never confined to any of her rooms by external force, her living space acquires – at her own hand – the same purpose as that of Brontë’s famous red room: the restraint of passion and emotion.

During her intense sexual relationship with Rodin, who installs her in a new set of rooms, Gwen begins to turn her living space into a representation of the person Rodin wishes her to be. Describing herself as ‘willing and hungry’ (*KtWA*, 61), ‘inwardly [...] volcanic, as though burning lava filled her and would explode with the force of what was beneath it, her overwhelming passion for him’, Gwen knows that ‘her *maitre*’ (*KtWA*, 68), because of her passion, ‘liked her “anonymously”, as a body, as a woman, but she appeared not to be able to supply what he wanted emotionally and intellectually’ (*KtWA*, 69), that is, versions of Richardson’s heroines in *Pamela* and *Clarissa* – novels which he gives his mistress to read. Rodin, Gwen reflects, seems to ‘marvel at her

passion and even to be nervous of it' (*KtWA*, 65). The room he rents for her is on the tellingly named Rue St. Placide, where, he tells her, 'she must be composed and calm and let his own tranquillity enter her soul. Only then [...] would she do good work' (*KtWA*, 65). 'The cleanliness and order of her new surroundings' (*KtWA*, 65) is intended to achieve this state of mind, but Gwen is aware that by creating a room to Rodin's taste, she is deceiving both herself and him. The room, like her self-portraits and her behaviour in public, is created by her as much as it creates her, representing both what she would like to be and what she is not. It was 'a clever exercise in deception' (*KtWA*, 64), something to admire, but

it was not her, this room. It was an image of how her lover wished her to be, and how she had tried to be. All the violent tumult in her was supposedly stilled here. But the struggle went on, and no one, not even Rodin, knew how she was losing the battle. Sometimes, she was afraid of the power of the room she had created. She loved it, but it could make her want to scream and wreck it, hurl the chair out of the window, tear the curtains to pieces, smash the flower pots, and then say to Rodin, Look, behold, *this* is me. But she never did. She went on straining to match herself to the room and make herself a true reflection of it. Gradually, this led her to paint it, the room on the courtyard, the room as he would have her be. The lie. (*KtWA*, 64)

In order to paint this room and to represent the woman Rodin wants her to be, but whom she cannot be, Gwen feels she must 'empty [the room] of herself' (*KtWA*, 65). It is this painting – Forster's fictional counterpart of John's *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* (1907-1909) – and the space it portrays through which we come to know the women on whom the rest of the novel focuses, and through whom, in turn, we also learn more of Gwen despite the fact that she intended the picture to be empty of herself. When the first version of the painting is finished, a version 'painted with such joy' (*KtWA*, 82) and hope, Gwen decides to part with it and 'complete [the next] in a different mood, and then hide [it]' (*KtWA*, 82). It is only after having painted the room with the awareness that it is a misrepresentation of her identity that Gwen can 'be done with trying to make herself into what her lover wanted' (*KtWA*, 82). We part with Gwen as she passes on the first painting to her friend Ursula, but, because of the painting, we

never leave her entirely.

Gwen cautions her friend not to ‘look at it now’ and, instead, to wait and ‘look at it when you are home, alone, in your own room’ (*KtWA*, 84), anticipating how each woman’s relationship to her own space will shape her relationship to the painting and the space portrayed within it. Perspective and context become crucial to the ways in which other women perceive the picture as well as its painter. Each woman who owns the painting literally and metaphorically reframes it. Ursula, upon leaving Paris for her parents’ home, notices that ‘the frame was old and cracked and did not fit the canvas exactly’ (*KtWA*, 85), and becomes the first to remove the frame that Gwen had chosen for her work. Shortly after, Charlotte’s father ‘had thought the painting should be properly framed and had chosen a frame himself’, but Charlotte, who falls in love with the piece at first sight, ‘was not sure that his choice was right [...] A gilt frame contradicted everything the painting was about and she could not understand why her father, of all people, did not see this’ (*KtWA*, 113). Stella echoes Charlotte’s concerns and remarks that ‘Whoever framed it didn’t paint it, I bet [...] The frame is wrong, [...] all wrong’ (*KtWA*, 164). Eventually, Gillian admits that

the choice of frame was tricky [...] At first, she’d thought a simple, plain, narrow wooden frame would suit it best, but the simplicity of the frame somehow worked against the subtlety of the painting. She tried a broader frame, still of plain wood, with the same result, then decided on a darker wood. This worked better, though it was not perfect. (*KtWA*, 314)

With these acts of framing come different acts of interpretation, influenced by personal as well as historical contexts. Ursula’s perspective on the painting differs greatly from Gwen’s intentions. Ursula, knowing of Gwen’s unrequited love for Rodin, is not deceived by the room’s seeming tranquillity, but instead feels that it expresses, rather than conceals, her friend’s emotions:

It was [...] a life *inside* which has been brought outside. The empty chair, the parasol leaning against it, the table bare except for the flowers – they were all disguises [...] The corner of the room was soon invaded by the real Gwen, the

distraught Gwen longing for her *maitre* who no longer deigned to visit her. He would not be fooled. Indeed, Ursula found herself thinking, in all probability he had never been fooled. Gwen had intrigued him, and he had undoubtedly felt passion for her, but he had always been wary of being consumed by her, and when that became too great a danger he had extricated himself. Ursula felt such pain for her friend. She walked around the room, cradling the painting in her arms, and there were tears in her eyes. (*KtWA*, 85)

Charlotte, who does not know who painted the picture, is ‘proud of being susceptible to surroundings’ (*KtWA*, 114) and desires to become a painter herself. She begins to ‘live in the painting, narrowing her eyes and hypnotising herself’, responding as Gwen John would have wanted her to, feeling that the painter must be ‘a successful artist because this room of hers was no garret’ and that they must be ‘quite alone, and content’ (*KtWA*, 113). The painting also promises, Charlotte believes, that ‘someone would come into her life and change it’ (*KtWA*, 113), just as Gwen had hoped for Rodin’s return to her. Charlotte soon discovers that her talents do not live up to her desires or expectations, which had been heightened by the painting and romantic artist’s life Charlotte saw in it. Like Gwen, Charlotte is disappointed and realises that the painting made her believe she was someone she is not but rather than being sad, she explains to her mother that she can still ‘be moved by art, she could admire and value what artist produced. She cared about great art passionately, but she was not an artist’ (*KtWA*, 143); ‘a painting deluded me’, she reflects, ‘into thinking I was something I clearly am not. That’s all’ (*KtWA*, 149).

After a burglary at the Falconers’ house, Alan purchases the painting for his partner Stella. Ginny, who takes possession of the painting after Stella’s departure, is struck by the fragility of the tranquil scene. ‘The apparent serenity, the prettiness, of the painting did not fool her for a moment’, she claims, and, echoing Ursula’s impression of the piece but without any knowledge of the artist’s identity, Ginny notes how ‘it looked peaceful, innocuous, but she thought the hand that painted it might have trembled. Effort was there, an absolute determination to remain calm. Someone’s breath was

being held. And the sense of waiting, the anticipation of someone's arrival, was painful' (*KtWA*, 201). Ginny also questions to what extent her relationship to and perception of the painting are influenced by the way she came to own it: 'She thought perhaps that the sense of mystery about it might be due merely to how it had come to her. This man who was reputed to have found it on a junk stall in London, what was he like? And Stella herself, fleeing from him, but why? All these questions attached to the painting, giving it a significance it might not otherwise have had' (*KtWA*, 202). For her, the identity of the painter is irrelevant, as are the picture's value, because 'she loved it. It enriched her life. It made her feel dreamy and content' (*KtWA*, 202).

Ginny's daughter, Lucasta, who inherits the painting from her mother, has at first no particular relationship to the piece, but this changes at the end of World War II, when Lucasta notices how the picture 'now seemed to represent peace and peace was something to be longed for. The state of mind it represented in that attic was enviable, not dreary' (*KtWA*, 216). Later, however, Lucasta's perception of the painting changes once again, and she reflects on the development of her relationship to it over the years, from the years as a girl during which the pictures 'had seemed a peaceful image, the pretty corner of an attic, but also insipid, unexciting, even soporific', to later years when 'she had come to see it as triumphant, catching a mood of something gained after great effort', and finally to her present feeling that 'it was surely a picture of sadness, a gentle wistfulness, the reflection of an aching heart. She couldn't hear its poignancy [...] It was too full of heart-break' (*KtWA*, 249). Aisla comes to own the painting through her husband, who was given it by Lucasta, his mistress, when she broke off their affair. After her husband's death, Aisla decides to keep the picture, even when she is made aware of how her late husband had come to own it. Her relationship to it, like Lucasta's, develops and changes over time. First, she 'could hardly see it at all' and 'wondered if she was getting any nearer to understanding it' (*KtWA*, 269), but she soon grows fond of

it, despite her inability to decide whether ‘this was a happy or a sad picture’ (*KtWA*, 276).

In Forster’s novel, then, each woman’s interpretation of the painting depends on the relationship they have with their own spaces, a relationship which, in turn, reflects individual struggles with their conflicting identities as wives, carers, mothers, artists, lovers and independent women. At the same time, however, each new relationship formed with the painting puts into perspective Gwen’s original connection to the space depicted in the scene as well as her experiences during the period of her life with which Forster presents us. Although this strategy is effective in that it avoids portraying John as an isolated subject both during and beyond her lifetime, it is questionable why Forster decides to leave Gwen at a point at which, in her real life, she became intensely religious, culminating in her eventual conversion to Catholicism. This confirms Nell Irvin Painter’s critique that one of the blind spots of feminist biography, and I would argue of contemporary feminist theory and of neo-Victorian fiction, is its inability to negotiate a secular representation of their subject while also adopting a serious (rather than dismissive) approach of its subjects’ religious faiths.¹⁷³

The gap created by this lack of attention to religion is, in the case of neo-Victorian fiction, often filled with explorations of Victorian spiritualism, magic and manifestations of the supernatural, including – to name but a few examples – Barbara Ewing’s *The Mesmerist* (2007), John Harwood’s *The Séance* (2008), Christopher Priest’s *The Prestige* (1995) and Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* (1999). As Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham note, the evocation of spirits, spectres and illusions suits the neo-Victorian genre on a metafictional level as it enables authors to reflect (on) ‘Victorianism [...] as a revenant or a ghostly visitor from the past’ whose

¹⁷³ Painter, ‘Writing Biographies of Women’, p.163.

‘textual/spectral traces’ haunt contemporary literature and culture.¹⁷⁴ However, religion, whose destabilisation by Darwinism was such a central concern in the mid and late-nineteenth century, remains left behind, perhaps because it seems to offer little ground for reflection to a secular Western readership in the twenty-first century, particularly one which currently defines itself so strongly against the stereotype of a unanimously religious East through exactly this secularism. Third-wave feminists, in an equal move of avoidance, have engaged extensively with questions of multiculturalism, race and ethnicity as gendered issues which are central to women’s lives today. Yet, to date, it has largely failed to visibly accommodate or provide new approaches to women’s relationships with various faiths.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

As Painter points out, ‘sadly, much feminist biography, like much academic writing, sacrifices a general readership to habits of scholarship’,¹⁷⁶ a discrepancy which neo-Victorian biographical fiction can bridge through its inherent concern with matters of sex/uality and its openly fictional narratives, both of which facilitate the gendered approach and innovative methods of feminist biography while at the same time adding to the appeal of feminist life writing in the literary marketplace. Arnold’s *Girl in a Blue Dress* and Forster’s *Keeping the World Away* thus successfully combine postmodern identity politics with a distinctly gendered and feminist view on their female subjects. Yet, despite their careful constructions of their subjects and the narrative benefits the

¹⁷⁴ Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.xi-xxvi (pp.xv-xvi).

¹⁷⁵ Sarah Page. ‘Feminism and the Third Wave: Politicising the Sociology of Religion’, paper presented at *Thinking Gender: The Next Generation*, University of Leeds (21-22 June 2006), Accessed: 1 August 2011, <http://www.gender-studies.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/epapers/epaper17-sarah-page.pdf>. A notable exception, here, is Carolyn D. Riswold’s *Feminism and Christianity: Questions and Answers in the Third Wave* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), and at the time this thesis is being finalised, it remains yet to be seen whether France’s recent banning of the burqa and the uprisings of the Arab Spring will engender more rigorous third-wave engagements with issues surrounding feminism and religion.

¹⁷⁶ Nell Irvin Painter, ‘Writing Biographies of Women’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 9:2 (Summer 1997), pp.154-163 (p.163).

genre of neo-Victorian fictions offers, these texts also reveal further questions regarding our readerly desires for the Victorians and how these expectations shape the representations of the biographical subjects in these novels. While I have critiqued Elsna's early biography of Catherine for its victimisation of Dickens' wife, we also must ask whether Arnold's text would be as appealing to and successful with a twenty-first century audience had Arnold chosen to omit the fiction details of Dodo's love life with Dickens or had she rendered their conjugal visits less passionate. Similarly, Forster's narrative of Gwen John omits an aspect so essential to its subject's life in favour exploring, perhaps, themes which a secular readership can identify with more easily. As with non-biographical neo-Victorian fiction, then, the characters of these neo-Victorian biographies remain affected by the sexual and secular reputation of the genre, that is, they are subjects to be consumed and, as such, reveal some of the blind spots of neo-Victorian fiction as well as of contemporary feminism.

CONCLUSIONS

The feminist politics of neo-Victorian fiction: reflections and blind spots

We all belong to our own time, and there is nothing that we can do to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age.

Robertson Davies, *The Merry Heart* (1997)¹⁷⁷

I began this thesis by proposing that neo-Victorian fiction's portrayal of the nineteenth century functions as a textual mirror in which, as contemporary beholders, we can discern the features of our present more clearly. This function is not reserved for the works of ambitious authors of literarily sophisticated historiographic metafiction; rather, as Robertson Davies' comment highlights, any narrative is inevitably influenced by and always a direct product of the present in which it is written, regardless of its author's intentions. As such, neo-Victorian fiction and the ways in which it conceives of the Victorian past will always reveal as much, and often more, about the present in which it is produced as about the histories it reimagines.

The genre's contemporary perspectives and relevance are especially pronounced in its reflections of matters regarding women, gender and sexuality. Authors return to the nineteenth century as a narrative backdrop to investigate the period's significance in the development of such contemporary feminist concerns, be it through mid-Victorian beliefs surrounding female heredity, the legal and medical discourses of first attempts to regulate the pornography and prostitution trades, the forming of new disciplines and gendered theories in the mental health sciences during the *fin de siècle*, or the wider impact of a combination of these cultural contexts on specific historical female figures.

¹⁷⁷ Robertson Davies, *The Merry Heart: Reflections on Reading, Writing, and the World of Books* (New York: Viking, 1997), p.358.

Evoking and rewriting these histories from a twenty-first century perspective, the texts discussed in this thesis do not turn their backs on the present but, instead, prompt us to consider the ways in which the past compares to and shapes contemporary debates concerning the feminist issues its narratives thematise. Through this, they do not 'attempt to find resolution or to pass the blame', but 'return us to, develop us from, and connect us with our Victorian precursors'.¹⁷⁸ By contextualising specifically matrilinealism, mental health, pornography, prostitution and feminist biography in their respective histories as feminist issues and by considering their textual representations in light of current third-wave feminist theories, the chapters of this thesis have demonstrated that neo-Victorian fiction can act, in various ways and often to varying extents, as a means of highlighting and critically exploring the factors which shape and problematise contemporary feminist theory and practice as well as the processes and politics at work in contemporary revisitations of the Victorian past.

The use of third-wave feminist theory as an analytical framework for my readings, then, fulfils several crucial functions within this thesis. Firstly, it provides a twenty-first century context for twenty-first century fictions. That is, third-wave feminist theory has arisen out of, responds to and explores the same socio-cultural conditions as the novels discussed in this project, and demonstrates a concern with similar issues. Reading these texts within the context of current third-wave debates surrounding the mother-daughter relationship, power relations in psychotherapy, the oppressive and emancipatory potential of pornographic representations of women's sexualities, the gendered economics of sex work, and the application of postmodern gender and identity theories in feminist biography highlights both the contemporary nature of the texts in question by revealing their representations of and, frequently, complex engagement with contemporary feminist concerns.

¹⁷⁸ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.27 and p.32.

At the same time, however, the combination of third-wave feminist theory and neo-Victorian fiction also demonstrates that while certain critical perspectives on these particular feminist issues have shifted over time, the central problems and debates around which they revolve are by no means new. As the introductions to the previous chapters have demonstrated, neo-Victorian fiction's return to the nineteenth century lends itself to the exploration of contemporary feminist issues because so many of these debates and problems have their origins in the Victorian period and beg both comparison to as well as distinction from contemporary culture, defeating simplistic notions of either our similarity to the period or our drastic difference from it.

Like neo-Victorian fiction, third-wave feminism is inherently defined by its continued attempts to negotiate and define its relationship to its predecessors, specifically to the second wave but also to a longer feminist tradition more generally. As my discussion of matrilinealism in Chapter One illustrates, third-wave feminism and neo-Victorian fiction share this preoccupation with the connection between past and present, and indeed their genealogical conceptualisation of that connection. Third-wave analyses and utilisations of matrilinealism are indispensable to our understanding of the genre's continuing representations of the mother-daughter relationship, both within a feminist context and within the wider context of neo-Victorianism's construction of its relationship to the Victorian past, as they highlight the pitfalls as well as the potentials of such perceived genealogies for feminist theory and for historical notions of periodization.

Third-wave feminism's self-consciousness regarding its politics and practices applies not only to its historiographic methods but also to its stance toward sexualised consumer cultures, as I have demonstrated in the introduction to this thesis. The third wave acknowledges and even consciously explores the contradictions that arise from women's attempts to critique and subvert exploitative economic structures, popular

images of female beauty and oppressive sexual norms while at the same time participating in those very practices and structures. Together with its historiographic self-consciousness, third-wave theory therefore provides a fitting framework for the exploration of neo-Victorian fiction's own representations of gender and sex/uality in a historical setting. It enables us to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of neo-Victorian fiction as a literary avenue of feminist enquiry, including the contradictions and ambiguities which result from the genre's sensational appeal on the literary marketplace and, thus, of its status as a product and beneficiary of the very culture it so often seeks to critique.

While the texts discussed in this thesis vary in their formal executions, they diverge also, and more importantly, both in terms of the nature of the relationship between past and present which they propose and in their revisionary potentials and politics. For example, Faulks' *Human Traces* and Holeman's *A Linnet Bird*, like Elsna's much earlier *Unwanted Wife*, in focusing on Victorian madwomen, prostitutes, colonialism, and the dysfunctional marriage of Catherine Dickens respectively, clearly aim to highlight and 'rectify certain historical wrongs' by attempting to provide fictional voices for these female figures who largely have remained overlooked or silenced in historical records.¹⁷⁹ These texts suggest a positivist understanding of history and, consequently, a degree of superiority by approaching their subjects from an ethical and intellectual viewpoint supposedly superior to and more developed than the Victorians', therefore 'inscribing an insurmountable difference' not only in sexual but also in moral 'knowledge and competence between the Victorians – "them" –and us'.¹⁸⁰ Yet, the critical eye with which these narratives approach nineteenth-century culture and

¹⁷⁹ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p.7.

¹⁸⁰ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic', *Probing the Problematics: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008), pp.345-356 (p.350).

convention is not turned upon the politics at work in their own construction of their historical subjects. Rather than subverting the historical discourses and practices they critique, these novels create contemporary reinscriptions of them, be it in the form of Faulks' overwriting of his madwoman protagonist, Holeman's reinstatement of Western (feminist) superiority or Elsna's repetition of the victimisation and marginalisation of Catherine Dickens. In cases such as these, the fictional evocation of 'the voices of ethnically, socially or sexually underprivileged characters' becomes indeed a form of Gutleben's inherently conservative 'nostalgic postmodernism', a shallow trope rather than a subversive strategy. Neo-Victorian fiction's attempts to illustrate the distance between the nineteenth and late-twentieth or twenty-first centuries can, then, inadvertently and paradoxically draw attention to the very proximity between past and present literary and feminist practices.

Other texts, however, purposely suggest similarities and parallels between Victorian and contemporary periods and explicitly challenge positivist notions of the past. It is in these self-conscious and metafictional examples of the genre that we find not only a questioning of the relationship between past and present but also comments on neo-Victorian fiction's and feminism's own politics. As Heilmann and Llewellyn have noted,

as a form of historical fiction, the neo-Victorian is partly driven by illusion and fabrication, but when working at the highest levels of sophistication, it also serves a self-conscious purpose of highlighting the nature of the 'trick' or game being played with readers, viewers, and critics.¹⁸¹

Accordingly, works such as Walbert's *A Short History of Women* and Waters' *Fingersmith*, through their focus on matrilineal narratives, highlight both the inescapability of history, be it feminist, literary or both, and the performative nature of generational and historical acts of identification and rejection. In their hands, the past becomes something which should neither be denied nor unquestioningly emulated;

¹⁸¹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p.31.

rather, progress – personal as well as social – can only be achieved through a productive union between history and the present which remains conscious and critical of its own complexities and flaws. At the same time, these texts emphasise the restrictions of and attempt to destabilise generational conceptualisations of that relationship; nevertheless, they also acknowledge that their own narratives, and, indeed, third-wave feminism and neo-Victorianism, are, however involuntarily, caught up within a problematic (and often artificially linear) genealogical paradigm.

A third category of novels, such as Chance's *Inconvenient Wife*, Faber's *The Crimson Petal* or Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* take issue with contemporary constructions of particular Victorian figures, including the madwoman, the prostitute and the wife. These texts introduce characters who challenge the doubly victimising stereotypes of the mentally unstable and powerless female patient perpetually at the mercy of her doctor, the poverty-stricken fallen woman who involuntarily succumbs to walking the streets, and the mistreated, clueless and hopeless wife of a publicly beloved but privately cruel and irrational husband. All of these texts highlight the unknowability of the past and the paradoxical effects of certain feminist conceptualisations of its female figures, issues which are perhaps most prominently addressed in Forster's *Keeping the World Away* through the novel's challenge of conventional biographical modes and its emphasis on the processes of historical translation and interpretation at work in life writing.

Yet, while Forster's fictional biography both highlights and successfully circumnavigates some of the traps of the historical imagination, its refusal to engage with its subject's religious beliefs and experiences is demonstrative of an absence which is prevalent in much, if not most, neo-Victorian fiction and, indeed, third-wave feminist theory. This absence is perhaps not surprising since, 'grounded as they are in a post-religious age, many contemporary novels pay little attention to the dominance of

religious modes in the nineteenth century and instead focus on the more spiritualist concerns of the later Victorian period'.¹⁸² Faber's *The Crimson Petal* is arguably an exception here, but no serious intentions are palpable in its portrayal of Agnes as a religious fanatic and of Henry as a sexually and spiritually confused man who eventually dies from the suppression of his feelings for Emmeline Fox, the only religious figure in the novel who does not pass away or disappear, a fate that may result from her practicing a very rational and worldly version of Christianity. As Burstein notes in her 'Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels', other authors frequently resort to illustrating Christians as 'good, as long as they are *not* evangelicals' and evangelicals as 'bad, and frequently hypocritical',¹⁸³ rather than engaging in any significant depth with faith questions in either their Victorian or contemporary contexts.

It is also Faber's *The Crimson Petal* which highlights further shortcomings of neo-Victorian fiction as well as of literary (and) feminist scholarship. As much as scholars have devoted time to discussing the novel's sexual politics and its historical practices, little work has been done on its adaptation of Victorian masculinities, particularly in the form of William Rackham, who, while certainly a comical and despicable character, is clearly also the pitiable product of a culturally and historically specific set of patrilineal pressures and expectations. Despite the growing area of masculinity studies in Victorianist scholarship as well as in other disciplinary fields, this gap is also apparent in work on the sex industry, where the majority of attention is focused on women's roles within the trade.¹⁸⁴ As O'Neill highlights, research into men's roles in the industry is essential to the feminist project since 'in order to develop a clearer understanding and analysis of the gendered organization of prostitution we

¹⁸² Heilmann and Llewellyn, p.30.

¹⁸³ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, 'Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels', *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic* (15 March 2006), Accessed: 1 October 2010, http://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2006/03/rules_for_writi.html.

¹⁸⁴ Maggie O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001), p.154.

must turn out attention to the men involved in prostitution and the organization of the wider sex industry'.¹⁸⁵ The apparent neglect of masculinity in historical fiction more generally and in the area of sex work specifically are thus both palpable in neo-Victorianist as well as wider feminist and gender scholarship.

In turn, women's involvement in not only the sex industry but also in a wider, sexualised consumer culture clearly presents one of the most popular stimuli for neo-Victorian fiction. As becomes clear in Faber's novel as well as in Waters' and Starlings' texts, these works are concerned as much with the gendered politics and economies of the sex trade as they are with the ethics of their own textual and sexual appropriations. Although these novels reflect upon the oppressive as well as emancipator aspects of pornography and prostitution in particular, they raise much wider issues regarding the subversive potential of the neo-Victorian sexsation and the sexual politics of third-wave feminism. No matter how self-conscious and/or metafictional, these examples of neo-Victorian fiction cater for and benefit from the same readerly desires for a sexualised Victorian past as their less sophisticated and more conservative counterparts. Like third-wave feminists, these novels participate in the sexualised consumerism which they set out to explore and critique.

Yet, rather than discarding any of these subversive efforts as inherently flawed or 'unfeminist', we should perhaps consider them as contributions to the increasing critical inquiries into the sexualisation of culture which critics such as Brian McNair and Feona Attwood rightly advocate.¹⁸⁶ If third-wave feminists are to be both self-reflective and non-judgmental about their (sexual) practices, then, like neo-Victorian fiction, they must continue to investigate – rather than blindly accept – the sometimes uncomfortable ambiguities and contradictions with which, according to Gamble, they

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁸⁶ See: Feona Attwood (ed.) 'Introduction: The Sexualization of Culture', *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp.xiii-xxiv; Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1996) and *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002).

are so at ease.¹⁸⁷ Neo-Victorian fiction, then, is neither innately progressive nor inherently conservative in its reimagining of the nineteenth century and its representations of the feminist issues discussed in this thesis. Reading the genre through a contemporary feminist lens reveals that its illustrations of the past reflect and interrogate current social and cultural concerns regarding women, sex and gender as much as they exemplify and question the genre's politics and practices. Despite as well as because of its obsessive return to history, neo-Victorian fiction, as a contemporary textual mirror, can therefore divulge as much, if not more, about the blind spots of the present as about the past.

¹⁸⁷ Sarah Gamble (ed.) 'Postfeminism', *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.43-54.

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