Perversion and Preservation: Subverting Patriarchy in Victorian Sexuality and Pornography

Sexuality in Victorian England is a highly ambiguous topic and the subject of much debate, as some argue that the upper classes were completely repressed, while others argue that “Victorians… had a far more positive view of sexuality than has been supposed” (Gay 377). This positivity is evinced by the writings of Dr. James C. Jackson, a firm believer in the spreading of sexual education who even condoned “erotic activity for its own sake” (Gay 376). This is not to say, of course, that all Victorians were completely free and open about their sexuality; the majority were more straight-laced and conformed to the propriety that society and religion dictated, at least in public. But the view of completely sexually repressed Victorians and their resultant wild and secret perversions has been substantially exaggerated. Works such as the anonymously published My Secret Life, and Steven Marcus’ The Other Victorians – which relies heavily on the former – have resulted in wide generalizations that cast “the eccentric as typical” and conflate all sexual perspectives into this notion of the repressed, sex-crazed man being touted as the Victorian standard (Gay 373). Sarah Waters harnesses this generalization in her novel Fingersmith to sensationalize her narrative. Through her portrayal of Mr. Lilly, his work and his associates, Waters casts Victorian sexuality and pornography culture not only as a game of power and perversion, but also of preservation and political radicalism. Mr. Lilly’s bibliography is a preservation of the dark and the decadent, just as Marcus’ “caricature of Victorian erotic life… is mythmaking or, rather, myth preserving” (Gay 373). Waters’ nostalgic, romanticized portrait of perverse Victorian sexuality preserves but also subverts the
generalization by approaching sexuality from a female perspective and reclaiming Victorian eroticism and pornography for a twenty-first century audience.

Carl N. Degler draws attention to the belief that “sexual passion became associated almost exclusively with the male, with prostitutes, and women of the lower classes” (1468). In this view, also made popular by the physician Dr. William Acton, any respectable upper or middle class woman would have no sexual appetite whatsoever. In fact, sexual desire in a woman was seen as abnormal and in some cases was viewed as a disease. Acton taught that wives were expected to submit to their husbands, perform their conjugal duty and “confine their passions to motherhood” (Gay 376). In contrast, men were thought of as “incorrigible beasts” whose desire was so strong and undeniable that sexual gratification was unachievable in the home with an asexual wife (Gay 374). As a result, men would turn to prostitutes and pornography to slake their lust. This is the basis of Waters’ portrayal of Mr. Lilly and his pornography ring. Fleeing the banality of chaste married life, Mr. Lilly’s associates gather to revel in the warped sexual adventures that they produce, distribute and curate. Waters is tapping into the nostalgic heritage of a perceived golden age of debauchery. She sets up the sexuality of men as an escapist fantasy, rooted in power dynamics and warped by its secret nature. As it is not subject to public scrutiny, male desire, particularly its expression in pornography, is unbound by any set of rules or limits. Mens’ hedonistic pursuits may delve into bestiality and violence as the only limit is the imagination.

At the core of these dark sexual fantasies is the desire to exert control and demonstrate power. Steven Marcus notes that in flagellation literature, “stories about life at school occur frequently, girls’ schools, surprisingly, appearing with greater frequency” (Marcus 255). This points to a preference for young girls and a desire to exert control through discipline and reform. Indeed the
school setting hints at a perverted mode of education: an unruly girl is taught to behave, but the method of teaching in itself is a form of pleasurable gratification for the perpetrator. Sexual violence and whipping in particular is a recurring motif in the novel, as Mr. Lilly remarks to a young Maud that should she step beyond the brass marker on the floor, he “shall whip [her] eyes until they bleed” (Waters 188). Mr. Lilly plays out the flagellation fantasy with Maud, acting as the stern schoolmaster: “though he claims to be free of a desire to harm me, he harms me pretty often” (Waters 195). Mr. Lilly furthers the fantasy by dressing her up in girlish clothing and having her read aloud to his compatriots. The act of exposing her to his pornography can be seen as a form of correctional education: To pay for the crime of being an uncouth rambunctious girl with dirt under her fingernails, Mr. Lilly reforms her, shaping her into a perfect, idealized female, like the women in his pornography. It is an exercise in complete dominance and control, as Maud is made to conform to Mr. Lilly’s vision of woman as Galatea the beautiful, obedient sex doll shaped by male sexuality and brought to life through his handiwork. Maud then turns around and abuses her maid Agnes, because “she reminds me of myself as I once was and… I hate her for it” (Waters 203). Maud has become entangled in a sexual hierarchy of control and she finds an outlet in Agnes and the other servants.

However, later, while trying to secure the aid of Mr. Hawtrey, Maud reads an excerpt of an unfinished book: “‘–and I shall whip… your backside till the blood runs down your heels–’”, and fixates on the passage, but can only think of the technical aspects (Waters 381). She tries to recall the name of the font and ruminates over the cheap quality of the paper, showing that she is becoming numb towards male sexuality. She is neither horrified nor aroused by the explicit descriptions and as a result, the influence of her uncle and his pornographic indoctrination are evaporating. Friendless and alone in Mr. Hawtrey’s office, Maud has already begun the process
of reclaiming pornography and sexuality from the male power-dominated structure, to reappropriate it for a female audience.

Mr. Hawtrey’s printing operation and connection to Mr. Lilly is kept separate from his public, married life; a fact that Maud learns the hard way when she goes to him seeking help. The world of pornography and male pleasure must be fantastical in nature and it cannot come into contact with reality, for fear of shattering the illusion. While she is isolated from society and locked away in Mr. Lilly’s house, Maud is Galatea, the nubile personification of male desire. But when she crosses over into the real world, the desire vanishes and she presents nothing but a problem to Mr. Hawtrey. Mr. Lilly imprisons Maud to keep her separate from the real world and to retain her purity, so to speak. Almost as if she is confined to a chaste convent, Maud is kept removed from the world, as a fantasy onto which Mr. Lilly and his friends project their desires. Mr. Lilly’s insistence that Maud only wear girlish clothing does not merely cast her as the innocent prepubescent object of male desire, it is also an attempt to prevent her from growing up and gaining independence. He handicaps her by refusing to acknowledge her as a grown woman and impedes her mobility by imprisoning her. By confining her hands to gloves, he furthers the imprisonment, and places her sexual initiative under his command as Maud’s hands are literally not her own to use. These handicaps prove to be quite severe when Maud does venture into the world beyond Briar. She reflects that “I understood my uncle’s books to be filled with falsehoods, and I despised myself for having supposed them truths”, but in London, she continues to comport herself as the Galatea-doll into which Mr. Lilly has made her (Waters 201). To the man on the bridge she appears to be a prostitute, and she unconsciously plays out the role without cluing in to his less than noble intentions. Having been raised in the warped tradition of male fantasy, Maud’s connection to reality is skewed and she cannot clearly define the boundary
between public and private. She attempts to remain Galatea in the public sphere, but she endangers herself on the streets, and Mr. Hawtrey wants nothing to do with a fantasy in the public world of London.

Scholars such as Gay and Degler reveal the ambiguity of Victorian sexuality, showing that there were those in the medical community who advocated much more liberal approaches, such as Orson S. Fowler who states “[t]hat female passion exists, is as obvious as that the sun shines” (Degler 1469). Another example is Dr. Charles Taylor who believed that women suffer “if the generative organs are not used,” and that ”some other demand for the unemployed functions, must be established” (Degler 1469). Thus, Waters’ descriptions of female sexuality may not be as starkly twenty-first century as the reader may think, as ideas such as Fowler’s and Taylor’s were circulating at the same time as those of Acton.

In Fingersmith, Maud’s abuse of Agnes can be read in the context of Fowler’s comments as sexual frustration, channelled through a sadistic male sexual lens. Indeed, after being exposed to pornography for a while, Maud’s horror gives way to curiosity and she “put[s] back the blanket to study the curve of her [maid’s] breast” (Waters 200). Thus, the reader becomes acquainted with the dark realm of male sexuality through a female lens, as Maud is initiated into pornography by her uncle. She is a spy who has infiltrated the secret back room fantasies of the male sexual psyche, offering it up for dissection. Waters shows both sides of the debate over female sexuality as she echoes the Victorian physician Theophilus Parvin when describing Maud’s exposure to pornography as “fill[ing] [her] at first, with a kind of horror” (Waters 200). In Parvin’s view, when a woman “thinks of [sex] at all, it is with shrinking, or even with horror, rather than with desire” (Degler 1468). But like a scientist, Maud absorbs and studies male sexuality and, rather than becoming completely desensitized, she channels it and makes it her
own. Maud reverses the model of initiation into heterosexuality through homosexual experimentation, an idea which was not publicly acknowledged, but was generally accepted in the Victorian era. This involved girls discovering sexuality through the exploration of their own sex and sometimes even homosexual play, but it was understood that this would prepare them for heterosexuality and marriage. Maud however, is initiated into sexuality through exposure to heterosexual pornographic material, which sparks in her a curiosity and interest in her own sex. This awakens in her a desire for women and culminates in her relationship with Sue.

Mr. Lilly’s bibliography is an attempt at preservation and Maud is the physical extension of this. Mr. Lilly as curator does not participate directly in sexuality; rather, he approaches it from the outside, cataloguing, studying and living it through his books. This, along with his poor state of health, suggests that he is impotent and incapable of carrying out his sexual desires. Thus, the bibliography is at once a preservation of and an outlet for his sexuality. He jealously hoards it and meticulously studies it, as only a deprived man can. But his fascination is more than merely the preservation of masculinity and an attempt to combat impotence, for he shares his passion for passion with a close group of associates. There is something inherently radical and political about Mr. Lilly’s meetings, indeed, the whole situation is grounded in counter-culture and rebellion. Iain McCalman points out that many well-known radicals and freethinkers of the nineteenth century were also connoisseurs or producers of pornographic materials. George Cannon, “an active… radical and a prominent infidel, or popular radical freethinker,” was found to be in possession of over two thousand “obscene” prints, books, and other publications, revealing him to be a “fully professional pornographer” (McCalman 76). Although Mr. Lilly’s adult book club does not display any overtly political agenda, McCalman conjectures that “purely pornographic literature… could nevertheless be ‘subversive’ through its assault on
orthodox Victorian sexual values and taboos” (108). Yet, as subversive as it may be, the pornography circulated by Cannon and catalogued in Fingersmith by Mr. Lilly still upholds the oppressive values of patriarchy and exhibits “an aggressive desire to dominate women” which conforms quite nicely to Victorian patriarchal standards (McCalman 108).

Sarah Waters takes the subversive, radical potential of pornography and develops it a step further, by reclaiming it for a female cause. Similarly, the feminist art movement of the 1980s and artists such as Carolee Schneeman sought to reclaim pornography and the female body from patriarchy. Her work “Fuses”, heralded as a “classical piece of feminist erotica” depicts Schneeman having sex with a man and presents the female perspective of the sexual experience rather than “providing voyeuristic pleasure to the male spectator” (Chilvers and Glaves-Smith). Similarly, Waters reclaims Victorian pornography through Maud’s repossess of the medium at the end of the novel. First of all, Maud makes her living by writing pornography, and inhabits the space where Mr. Lilly used to work: "the paint had all been scraped from the windows, the finger of brass prised from the floor" (541). Maud is no longer the secretary, she is the master and she has done away with the stifling conditions that defined Mr. Lilly's control. She has stripped everything down to the frame and undergone a purging catharsis to reverse and subvert the oppressive agenda of pornography. Maud redefines pornography by turning it into a vehicle not for the objectification of women, but for the celebration of women and one woman specifically: Sue. Maud’s pornographic writings are “filled with all the words for how [she] want[s] [Sue]” and while her writing is undoubtedly objectifying women at some level – it does need to sell after all – it is mediated by a woman, for a woman (Waters 547). Thus, Maud is able to take something that has oppressed and damaged her, and re-appropriate it to make her
stronger, but also to literally rewrite a negative history and make her voice heard in a male-dominated world.

Waters plays with the stereotypically defined gender roles of Victorian sexuality in Fingersmith, dabbling in myth preservation, but also subverting modern generalizations of the period by providing both a female and a lesbian perspective on patriarchal male sexuality and pornography. She takes the politically radical potential of pornographic materials one step further by using it to subvert patriarchy and reclaim the female body.

**Bibliography**


